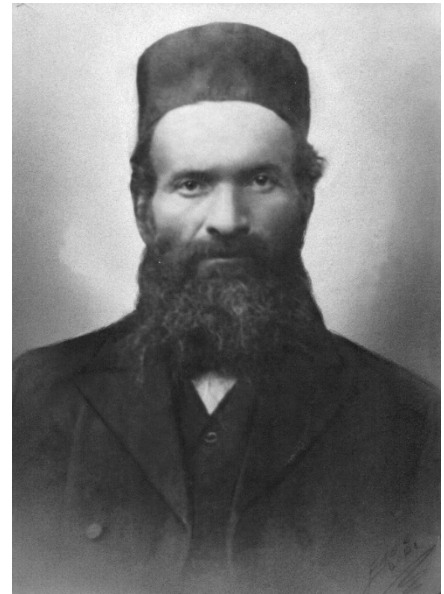


Parashat Ha'azinu

Why Did Our Parents Leave the Path?

Returning to the Path of Our Ancestors

In my father's memoirs, there is a photo of his great grandfather, which really struck me. He wears the same kind of yarmulke-hat as my husband, and I recognize the mild pious gaze in his holy eyes. I estimate the photo to be from the middle of the 19th century more than 150 years ago. Yet, he looks like he could be someone right out of Meah Shearim today. We don't have any information about him, except that he was from Russia. We don't even have a name, but as I gaze into this photo I feel a deep connection, and I wonder if he learned the same kind of Torah as my husband and I. Also on my mother's side, there is a photo of her father's grandfather, Berish. He was a Chassid with a long beard and peyes. He had a pious modest wife, Pessel, wrapped in a shawl with a simple scarf on her head. Most Jews, today, don't have to go back many generations to find ancestors devoted to the Torah. I'm grateful to my father for writing his memoirs and collecting photos of his ancestors. It certainly is a mitzvah to investigate our family roots as we learn from *Parashat Ha'azinu*:



ספר דברים פרק לב (ז)

זָכֹר יָמוֹת עוֹלָם בֵּינוֹ שָׁנוֹת דֶּר וְדָר שְׁאֵל אָבִיךָ וַיְגַדֶּךָ זְקֵנֶיךָ וַיֹּאמְרוּ לְךָ:

“Remember the days of old, reflect upon the years of many generations; ask your father, he will tell you, your elders, they will inform you” (*Devarim 32:7*).

When I look into the eyes of my great, great grandfather, the notion of the cyclical nature of history really hits home for me. How I long to tell him, “Grand-Zeideh! We have returned to your ways! And even more! We have returned to our homeland that you dreamed about and yearned for!” Yet, what happened to the three generations in between my grand Zeideh and I? How did it come to pass that they began to scorn the “old ways” and decided to ditch their head-coverings of subservience in order to make it in the modern secular world?

Forsaking Spirituality for the Sake of Material Pursuits

The answer is hinted at in *Parashat Ha'azinu*. Moshe leaves the people with a poem, which is to serve as a testament and warning to all future generations. The *Ha'azinu Song* contains a prophecy that our ancestors fulfilled when the opportunity to leave the shtetel of poverty presented itself:

ספר דברים פרק לב (טו)

וַיִּשְׁמַן יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּבְעַט שְׁמֹנֶת עֶבֶת כְּשִׁית וַיִּטַּשׁ אֱלֹהֵי עֲשָׂהוּ וַיִּנְבֵּל צוּר יִשְׁעוֹת:

“Jeshurun became fat and rebelled; you grew fat, thick and rotund; [Israel] forsook the G-d Who made them, and spurned the [Mighty] Rock of their salvation” (*Devarim 32:15*).

Throughout history, during exile and suffering, we proved ourselves resilient in our faith. Yet the blessings of abundance presented a greater challenge and temptation for our people to forsake the Torah for material pursuits. The leaders who were supposed to set an example for the nation

Life Lessons from Rebbetzin's Heart

regressed to materialistic lifestyles. Preoccupied with the pursuit of physical pleasures, they were no longer capable of maintaining a spiritual existence, as Sforno explained almost 500 years ago:

ספורנו עה"ת ספר דברים פרק לב פסוק טו

(טו) וישמן ישורון ויבעט. והנה גם בעלי העיון שבהם הנקראים ישורון מן אשורנו ולא קרוב עשו כמו הבהמות הבוטות בבני אדם שנותנים להם מזון: שמנת עבית כשית. הנה אתה ישורון קהל תופשי התורה ובעלי העיון פנית אל התענוגים הגשמיים ובזה עבית מחבין דקות האמת כאמרו וגם אלה ביין שגו ובשכר תעו כהן ונביא. כשית. כאמרו כי טח מראות עיניהם מהשכיל לבותם: ויטוש אלוה עשהו. ולפיכך נטש ההמון אלוה עשהו:

“Behold, even the scholars and philosophers among them, who are called Jeshurun from the root ‘shur,’ to see (*Bamidbar* 23:9), referring to the people of vision within the community, acted as animals that kick those who give them food. Behold, the congregation of Torah adherents and scholars, have turned to material pleasures and grown thick, (incapable) of understanding subtle truths, as it states, ‘But these also reel from wine and stagger through strong drink, the priest and the prophet’ (*Yeshu’ya* 28:7). [You are also] covered with fatness as it says, ‘for He has shut their eyes that they cannot see and their hearts that they cannot understand’ (ibid. 44:18).” Therefore, the multitude forsook the G-d that made them... (Sforno, *Devarim* 32:15).

Just as bribe blinds the eyes, so can materialism obscure the vision of even our greatest leaders.

The Abundance-Addiction Rehab Structure of the Sukkah

After tempting Eve to eat from the Tree, Hashem told the serpent: “Cursed are you above all livestock and all wild animals! You will crawl on your belly and you will eat dust all the days of your life” (*Bereishit* 3:14). Why was it a curse for the serpent to eat the dust of the ground? Having our food readily available can be a curse that makes us forget Hashem, since we do not need to turn to Heaven to pray for our sustenance. Likewise, living within solid stonewalls can be isolating and separate us from Hashem’s protection. No matter how affluent and independent we may have grown, the simple Sukkah returns us to Hashem’s bosom. It takes an entire week after moving out of our comfort zone and into the shelter of the Cloud of Glory to return to our pure faith. Therefore, Hashem commands us— at the very beginning of the New Virgin Year – to dwell for seven days under the shelter of His wings as it states:

ספר ויקרא פרק כג (מב)

בְּסֹכֹת תֵּשְׁבוּ שִׁבְעַת יָמִים כָּל הָאֶזְרָח בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל יֵשְׁבוּ בְּסֹכֹת:

“You shall dwell in booths for seven days; all that are Yisraelites shall dwell in booths” (*Vayikra* 23:42).

Some people may think it is enough to eat the main holiday and Shabbat meals in the Sukkah, and reside, the remainder of the week, in the comfort of their homes. Yet, this defeats the main purpose of the Sukkah to recharge our emunah by enveloping us with Hashem’s presence, and letting us get a glimpse of the stars from the apertures of its fragrant roof. A full seven-day dwelling in the Sukkah is what it takes to de-escalate the fat of rebellion caused by the comforts of abundance. Therefore, the Talmud insists:

תלמוד בבלי מסכת סוכה דף ב/א

רבא אמר מהכא בסכת תשבו שבעת ימים אמרה תורה כל שבעת הימים צא מדירת קבע ושב בדירת עראי...

What does it mean, “You shall dwell in booths for seven days”? The Torah said, the entire seven days you must leave your permanent home and live in a temporary dwelling (*Sukkah* 2:1).

'Kicking' Themselves Upwards in Society

It is human nature to always aspire towards progress. I do not blame our grandparents – who after generations of excruciating poverty – took advantage of the opportunity to advance their families by integrating into higher society. More comfortable, safe living conditions are conducive to better physical health. Access to cultural resources, provide opportunities for the advancement of children. When the doors of higher education opened for the European Jews, it is no wonder that the majority embraced the prospect of integrating into general society and procuring a higher living standard for their families. During this era of 'enlightenment,' Jews rose to become the cream of the crop, harvesting multiple Nobel prizes as well as amassing prestige and material goods. Serving Hashem gradually became relegated to the background. Even the Jewish holidays took on less and less significance. Our parents were raised to 'kick' themselves upwards in society, yet, their material blessings did not lead to a higher level of morality and fear of G-d. It soon became apparent that materialism without spiritual content is an empty shell. The divergence of overflowing abundance and Divine service can be compared to the intake of high calorie rich foods without exercise. The surplus material is stored in the body, becoming a gross layer of excess corpulent obese fat.

Filling Our Plate with Spiritual Content

Recent generations that grew up with material abundance seek to fill their plate with spiritual content. We are no longer so hungry for food or thirsty for water, but rather for hearing the words of Hashem" (Based on *Amos 8:11*). We aspire to engage the natural desire for advancement into spiritual elevation and character refinement. However, spirituality does not negate material wealth, so long as we remember the true Source of our blessings. The Tishrei Holidays come to remind us that everything we have emanates from G-d. May we always remember to turn to Hashem for our needs, whether physical or spiritual and may we always be aware of how Hashem "opens His hand and satisfies the desire of every living thing!"