

Va'etchanan-Eikev-Re'eh 5778

BS"D Parshiot Va'etchanan-Eikev-Re'eh 5778

Rabbi Nachman Kahana

Am Yisrael, Torat Yisrael, Eretz Yisrael

Questions:

1. Why is the first paragraph of kri'at shema (the standardized recitation of Shema Yisrael) worded in the singular, while the second is in the plural?
2. Why did HaShem not give the Torah to the Patriarchs – Avraham, Yitzchak and Ya'akov?
3. Why must a Gentile convert in order to be obligated to keep the Torah? Why is there no option for him to voluntarily obligate himself to keep the Torah? Quite the contrary, a Gentile who keeps the Shabbat is liable for the death penalty.
4. On the verse (Devarim 4:9)

אָנאָם אַלעס וואָס איר זענט געווען
און איר זענט געווען און איר זענט געווען:
און איר זענט געווען און איר זענט געווען:

"Only give heed to yourself and keep your soul diligently, so that you do not forget the things which your eyes have seen, and they do not depart from your heart all the days of your life; but make them known to your sons and your grandsons".

Rashi comments:

אם אנו לא נשכח (את התורה) ונאמץ אותה באמת, נהיה נחשבים כחכמים ונבונים; אבל אם נשכח אותה (את התורה), נהיה נחשבים כטיפשים.

“When you will not forget (the Torah) and will abide truthfully, you shall be perceived (as) clever and wise; but if you corrupt them (the Torah), you will be perceived as being fools”.

Why are we perceived as fools if we “forget” Shabbat or kashrut? What does it matter to the non-Jews?

I submit:

A schematic breakdown of the three parshiot, Va’etchanan-Eikev-Re’ei discloses the only authentic “Holy Trinity”: The Torah, Am Yisrael and Eretz Yisrael – the law as revealed by HaShem at Mount Sinai, the Nation of Israel and the Land of Israel. These three components are repeatedly emphasized as the sides of the triangle representing God’s interest in this world.

The substance of this emphasis is that we, the Jewish people, are not a “religion” in the accepted sense. We are a nation. One can be a Christian while his nationality is American or Russian. They can go to war and kill each other and still be considered “good” Christians.

Not so for the Jewish people.

We began as a family and were forged into nationhood by virtue of our numbers, and through a common historical experience of suffering and miraculous freedom from bondage, when HaShem selected us to be His Chosen People. Our nationality preceded

our spiritual encounter with the Creator.

At Mount Sinai, HaShem revealed and commanded the Torah to a NATION standing at the foot of the Mount – not to the 600,000 or several million individuals present at that singular event; but to all Jews, even those who were destined to be born 3000 years later, anywhere on the globe, by virtue of being a part of the Jewish nation.

This understanding forms the basis for the answer to the questions posed above.

1. The reason the first paragraph of kri'at shema is formulated in the singular and the second paragraph in the plural is stated in Tractate Brachot: the first paragraph proclaims one's acceptance of ol malchut shamayim, "the yoke of the heavenly kingdom", which is the obligation of every human being, Jew or Gentile, by virtue of one's recognition that he is a creation of God. Hence, it is a personal, individual proclamation between man and his Maker and as such is worded in the singular. By contrast, the second paragraph of kri'at shema is the acceptance of the "yoke of mitzvot" which is a parochial, particular Jewish matter, and hence is worded in the plural to express the fact that the Torah and mitzvot were not given by HaShem to individuals, but to the collective nation of Israel.
2. The Torah was not commanded to Avraham, Yitzchak and Ya'akov, because, notwithstanding the greatness of our forefathers, they were individuals; whereas HaShem desired to make the Torah the essence of the Jewish nation, and therefore, binding upon every individual Jew by virtue of his or her being a part of the Jewish nation.
3. A Gentile cannot voluntarily obligate himself to keep the 613 mitzvot of the Torah, because the Torah is the sole obligation of the Nation of Israel; and without adherence to the Nation through halachic conversion, the

Torah has no relevance to the Gentile. And, indeed, a Gentile who keeps the Shabbat is punishable in the same manner that a Jew who is a non-Kohen is punishable for entering an area of the Temple which is off limits to him.

4. We are perceived as fools by the other nations when we, in Eretz Yisrael, feel our “nationhood” but “forget” the spiritual obligations of that nationhood when we relinquish parts of God’s Holy Land. The Jews in the galut are perceived as fools by knowledgeable non-Jews who read the Bible and know that Jews belong IN the Holy Land.

There are essential conclusions that beg to be drawn from the vectors of Am Yisrael, Torat Yisrael, Eretz Yisrael. I submit three, but there are many more:

1. The success of any generation is not measured by the relatively minute number of great ga’onim (geniuses) that the generation produces. The two Temples were destroyed in the presence of the great Sanhedrin, and the Shoah enveloped us in areas where great talmidei chachamim lived. The Torah was presented to Am Yisrael, and not to individuals, and God told Moshe that through the Torah He wished to create a mamlechet kohanim ve’goi kadosh— a kingdom of kohanim and a holy nation – and thus the Torah is obligatory upon us by virtue of our belonging to Am Yisrael. HaShem essentially told Moshe that what He wanted is not a few great Torah Olympic gold medalists, but a whole nation of observant Torah Jews. This changes the way we should view yeshiva and kollel education. The Olympus of the Jew’s world is not to sit in a yeshivishe ivory tower, but to answer the call of the spiritual needs of the rank and file of the nation. Yerushalayim and Bnei Brak are no panaceas for the ills of Am Yisrael, as long as Tel Aviv and Dimona

are lacking in yirat shamayim (the fear of Heaven). It is better to learn one page less and teach one more youngster how to live as a Jew.

2. Am Yisrael in Eretz Yisrael. Let us remember and never forget the teachings of the great RaMBaN (Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman) on the verse in Vayikra 18:25, where he states emphatically that the Torah was given to be kept in Eretz Yisrael. We are commanded to keep the Torah in the galut, not for its own sake, but rather to ensure that upon our return home, the laws of the Torah will not be unfamiliar to us. This is something on the order of a dress rehearsal in preparation for the real thing. All that you do and study and observe anywhere outside of Eretz Yisrael is a dress rehearsal, but never the real thing.
3. Am Yisrael, Torat Yisrael, Eretz Yisrael: all three are to be cherished, loved and defended. Just as it is sinful to sit idly by when a Jewish life is in danger, or to do nothing when the Torah is being defiled; so too is it sinful to stand aside when the Land of Israel is being threatened. I am referring not only to those who live in Eretz Yisrael and for insincere and unfathomable reasons shirk their military responsibilities; but also to every young, able bodied Jew wherever he may have been born or lives today. It is his responsibility as a member of Am Yisrael to view himself as a soldier in King David's army and to come here to serve in Tzahal in defense of our homeland.

Shabbat Shalom,

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