

Gratitude from the Torah

By Rebbetzin Chana Bracha

Parashat Nitzavim-Vayelech

How Do We Reveal Hashem's Presence Within the Darkest Darkness?

What blocks the Divine Light from illuminating my Life and making it fruitful?

This morning, as I examined my vegetable patch in my back garden, I noticed that the pepper plants I had planted a while back were all alive and growing, but none sprouted a single pepper fruit. In the past, I was able to grow an abundance of cherry tomatoes and pepper fruits in that same spot. What had changed? I lifted my face upward and noticed how both the mulberry and the pecan trees had grown to become humongous, overhanging and shading my little vegetable patch. These trees were hiding all the light from my poor vegetables, preventing them from truly flourishing. At times we can all identify with my unproductive pepper plants. We may be working hard to grow and let grow, trying many different avenues, but something is blocked. We may bump into one iron barricade after the other, each one seemingly more impenetrable. "Why? Why is this happening to me?" We ask ourselves. "What does Hashem want from me?" It all comes down to bringing more light into our lives. Light is the most essential element for all growth. Just as my pepper plants need light to produce fruits, we also need to unblock all the iron barricades that block the light from shining through. "Yes," I'm thinking to myself, "I will need to have the trees pruned to let in the light." But what are 'the trees' in my life that block the light from entering my personal path? Now before Rosh Hashana is the time to reflect on our lives and return to Hashem, to allow His Divine Light to penetrate our mind, body, and soul. Especially at this time, we all need to ask ourselves, How can I open the physical, emotional, and spiritual blocks that prevent me from letting Hashem's light enter? Which thoughts, speech, or actions block the Divine Light from illuminating my life and making it fruitful?

Can We Temper Our Desire for the Revelation of the Final Redemption?

With the war in Israel lingering on, it is easy to lose hope. Never in the history of the State of Israel have we undergone such an extended war. Although we experience glimpses of Hashem's light shining through the miracles He performs and the victories He generates for us, it is still hard to stay connected to the Light of Hashem through all the pain of accumulated burials of young life before yielding fruit. How can we bear the increasing number of widows, orphans, and soldiers wounded for life? It is like the pressure is building up, and we are almost exploding in our yearning for Hashem to reveal ALL His light and bring us Geulah (the final redemption) already. Little glimpses of light are not enough. "We want Mashiach now, we don't want to wait!" In the past, I didn't connect to this song, as Rambam clearly states that we patiently must await the Mashiach, so how could we demand him to come now?

"Anyone who does not believe in him, or does not await his coming, denies not only the statements of the other prophets but those of the Torah and Moshe, our teacher. The Torah testified to his coming, as it states:

"G-d will bring back your captivity and have mercy upon you. He will again gather you from among the nations... Even if your Diaspora is at the ends of the heavens, G-d will gather you up from there... and bring you to the land..." (*Devarim* 30-3-5). These explicit words of the Torah include all the statements made by all the prophets Rambam, *Mishnah Torah, Hilchot Melachim* 11:1).

I understood these laws of the Rambam to refer to the B'nei Efraim who met their early death because they left Egypt before its time, as Rashi explains based on the Mechilta: "...They slew the children of

comprises a dividing wall blocking us from reaching our Blessed Creator. Yet, none of these dividing partitions are as troublesome as the partition implanted in a Jew's heart making him believe he is far from Hashem. Falling prey to despair that there is no healing for feeling separated from Hashem, G-d forbid, results in truly moving away and disconnecting from Hashem's presence. This faulty belief is the hardest dividing wall, worse than the separations caused by lust or confusion. We must strengthen our belief that all the dividing walls are only illusions. We do have the ability to skip over them all and reveal the King. "From the depths of the husks we can call out to Hashem, as it states, "From the depths I have called You, O Hashem." (*Tehillim* 130:1). Even an iron barricade cannot separate between Israel and our Heavenly Father. "But Hashem took you and brought you out of the iron pot, out of Egypt, to be His people" (*Devarim* 4:20). Even if a Jew sins, he always remains a Jew (*Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin* 44a). During the revelation at Sinai, there were three partitions of darkness hiding Hashem: חֹשֶׁךְ/*Chosheh* – "darkness," עָנָן/*anan* – "cloud," and אַרְפֶּל/*arafel* – "thick fog" or "thick darkness" (*Devarim* 4:11). The latter was the densest of all the separations. Nevertheless, "Moshe drew near to the thick darkness where G-d was" (*Shemot* 20:18). In order to come close to Hashem we need to go through each of the three dark partitions while believing with steadfast emunah that it is precisely within the darkest darkness that we can find Hashem. The numerical value of the Hebrew word הָאֲרַפֶּל/*ha'arafel* – 'thick fog' equals הַשְּׁכִינָה/*HaShechinah* – 'the Shechinah.' As King Shlomo proclaimed, "Hashem said that He would dwell in the אַרְפֶּל/*arafel* – 'thick darkness' (I *Melachim* 8:12). Likewise, Moshe revealed that it is specifically within the very darkest darkness that G-d resides! So instead of moaning over feeling separated from Hashem through iron barricades, we can be grateful for the dividing walls which can serve as portals to get even closer to the light of the Divine indwelling Presence hiding precisely within the darkest dividing wall. The more we strengthen our emunah that the Divine light is found within our darkness, the more we will be able to reveal the light!

Gratitude Focus for the Week of *Parashat Vayelech* –

Tips on Unblocking the Dark Dividing Walls that Separate Between Us and G-d

Hashem incorporated in creation, day and night – light and darkness. It is natural to experience ups and downs – ebbs and flows of closeness and separation from Hashem. The lows help us appreciate the highs so much more. While it is challenging to experience the hiding of Hashem's Face in our lives, it helps when we remember that this spiritual darkness is part of a movement toward the light, without night we wouldn't even notice the break of day. Like the waves in the ocean, at times we rise to our peak, and at other times we fall down in a thunderous crash. Life is about riding the waves, not allowing ourselves to go under – by being swallowed by the darkest sea-bed in a bone-breaking crash. Rather we must keep riding the waves as the cycle continues until the tide changes in gloaming light. Below are some practical tips for riding the waves, to reveal His light even within the darkest dark.

- **When You Open Your Eyes in the Morning, Recite Modeh Ani With Thankful Intentions** – that Hashem woke you up from the darkness of night, to offer you a new delightful day. Awake with belief in G-d, for He believes in you and grants you another day to search for and discover His light. Hashem is playing the hide-and-seek game we used to play as kids. Let's tackle the challenge with childish playfulness and gratitude.
- **Amplify and Spread Hashem's Light by Reaching out to Others** – There is no sweeter medicine

for a bitter soul than to do a mitzvah and kindness for others. Visiting a sick person, helping take care of her needs, welcoming a new neighbor with a fruit basket, baking a cake for a simcha (happy occasion), and supporting a needy person. These are just a few examples of how you can elevate yourself through raising others.

- **Count Your Blessings and be Thankful for Being in a Better Place** – Recalling even the little drops of goodness in your life will help you feel closer to Hashem, the Source of your blessings. I love this story of Rachel and Rabbi Akiva: When the daughter of Kalba Shavu'a betrothed herself to Rabbi Akiva, her father vowed to dispossess her. The young couple were so poor they had to sleep on straw, and Rabbi Akiva had to pick out the straw from his hair... Later Eliyahu came to them in the guise of a beggar who cried out at the door: "Give me some straw, for my wife in her confinement. I have nothing for her to lie on." "See!" Rabbi Akiva observed to his wife, "There is even someone poorer than us, this man who lacks even straw" (*Babylonian Talmud, Nedarim 50a*).
- **Speak to Hashem and Call Him to Come out of His Hiding** – If you feel far from Hashem, and are stumbling over walls of division, cry out from the depth of your desperation. Your yearning for Divine revelation will draw the Divine presence to you and uncover His hiding. Use your darkest moments as a springboard to bring about the greatest revelations in your life!