

## **Parshas Nitzavim- Lessons in Giving a Mussar Shmooze by Rabbi Eliyahu Kirsh**

Parshas Nitzavim may well be the first mussar shmooze as we understand a mussar Shmooze to be. While it is true that the entire Sefer Devarim is one long drasha that Moshe gave before his passing and much mussar was given, nevertheless, Parshas Nitzavim stands out as a mussar drasha on its own. Perhaps we can see in this parsha a guide for future maggiddim from which to build their shmoozim.

The first fundamental principle is to realize that we are all standing before Hashem. Hashem knows all that we are doing whether openly or secretly. Also, we are all equal before Hashem whether we are rich or poor. This is so much unlike our world where wealth and financial status are so highly valued. We see much dispensation of all types being given to the wealthy. Regrettably, even in the so-called 'religious' circles, we see tremendous honor being bestowed upon the rich and wealthy regardless of religious or moral standing. Somehow, all religious and moral shortcomings become okay when the individual is known to have money, and especially if they give some of that money. Even rabbis who are great talmidei Chachmim and sincere often fall into this trap when they have to give tribute to those who support their yeshivas and institutions. Unfortunately for these wealthy individuals, all their wealth will be worthless when being judged by Hashem. While they certainly will be immeasurably rewarded for the support they gave for Torah causes, they will find that they will not be able to get away with everything simply by slipping money or using their status. It is not the amount of money Hashem gives us but the way we use whatever Hashem gives us. Did we use our riches for good causes such as supporting Torah Institutions or helping those less fortunate than ourselves or did we squander it for our own self-centered wishes and personal gain and pleasure? If one was poor what did he/she do with the little that Hashem gave?

Also, Moshe warned us not to fall into the traps of avodah zara. From here we see that the Rav giving mussar has to be well aware of the challenges to keeping the Torah in that time and place and be explicit about them just as Moshe Rabbeinu was explicit about avodah zara which was a tremendous temptation back in those days. [I still remember the shmooze of Rav Henschel Leibowitz, zt"l, about being quiet in the dormitories late at night when others were sleeping. He stressed how taking away someone's sleep was something one can never give back. Here we see a great Rosh Yeshivah tailoring his shmooze to issues relevant to bachorim living in a dormitory.]

The Shmooze should stress the need for *takanah*, fixing. Of course the first remedy is loyalty to the Torah. We need to work on being worthy of having the Torah protect us like salt and not destroy us like sulfur, Chas Veshalom. Moshe Rabeinu stressed this at the end of the Parsha when he told us how Hashem's Torah is accessible to all. It is not 'in the heavens or far-off at sea.' It is close to us and in our reach. Yes, it can be challenging. Yes, it is work to be an eved Hahsem. But it is doable and within our reach. Moshe Rabeinu assured us of that. When we do what we are supposed to do, we will have a productive and rewarding life. The choice is ours. Nevertheless, the Torah tells us *Uvacharta vachaim* which means, as Rashi explains, that we are given the ultimate recommendation of which way is indeed the better way. So let us use this time of the year to choose the better path for ourselves to go on in the year coming up.