

# DIMENSIONS IN CHUMASH

## Parshas Nitzavim

### Between “Jewish People” and “The Jewish People”

#### Concept: The Torah’s Use of the Singular and Plural Form

פֶּן יֵשׁ בְּכֶם אִישׁ אוֹ אִשָּׁה... וְהָיָה בְּשִׁמְעוֹ אֶת דְּבָרֵי הָאֱלֹהִים הַזֹּאת וְהִתְבָּרַךְ בְּלִבּוֹ לֵאמֹר שְׁלוֹם  
וְהָיָה לִי כִּי בִשְׂרָרוֹת לִבִּי אֶלֶף

*Perhaps there is among you a man or a woman... and it will be, when he hears the words of this curse, he will bless himself in his heart, saying, “Peace will be with me, for I will go as my heart sees fit.”<sup>1</sup>*

#### INTRODUCTION: AN UNLIKELY REACTION

How are we to understand such a reaction on the part of one who hears the curse for those who abandon the Torah? Presumably, the verse is referring to one who, *in spite of* hearing the curse, nevertheless feels that peace will be with him even if he does as he pleases; although even then, it is not clear from where his sense of security derives.

However, the Vilna Gaon<sup>2</sup> explains that the person’s reaction may come specifically *as a result of* hearing the curse itself. How so? The verse refers to one who is hearing “this curse”, referring to the curses of the *tochachah* (rebuke) of Chumash Devarim. This is in contrast to the earlier *tochachah* in Chumash Vayikra. Why should this second curse, specifically, elicit such a reaction?

#### VILNA GAON: THE SINGULAR AND THE PLURAL FORM

One of the primary differences between the *tochachahs* is that while the first *tochachah* is written in the plural form, the second is phrased in the singular. What is the difference in connotation between these two? We might assume, on a straightforward level, that the difference is that the singular form addresses the individual while the plural form addresses the entire Jewish people. However, the Vilna Gaon explains that both of these forms address the entire people, with the difference being that the plural form addresses them as *a group of individuals*, while the singular form addresses them as *a single*

1 Devarim 29:17-18.

2 Aderes Eliyahu loc. cit.

entity, i.e. a community.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, when a person hears the first *tochachah*, which addresses every individual among the Jewish people directly, he could not possibly think that he could act as he pleases and evade the consequences. However, when he hears “this curse,” i.e. the second *tochachah* which addresses the Jewish people as one entity, this might give rise to the thought that he can “go as his heart sees fit.” For since the blessing or curse from heaven are based on the actions of the community as a unit, he may feel that as long as the greater community are doing mitzvos, thereby drawing forth blessing, he can act as he pleases while still partaking of the blessing that accrues to the Jewish people as a whole.

Having arrived at an understanding of this person’s thinking, we now need to understand wherein lies its flaw. The Vilna Gaon explains that by refusing to share in the way of life expected of the Jewish people, sectioning himself off instead to pursue his own agenda, such a person has effectively seceded from the community. As such, he is no longer eligible for the blessing that they enjoy. On the contrary, verse 20 states concerning him, “וְהַבְדִּיל ה' לְרָעָה – Hashem will separate him for bad.” This separation is essentially measure for measure, since the individual began by separating himself from the rest of the Jewish people.

### **SUPPORT FROM LULAV AND THE OMER COUNT**

What emerges from these words of the Vilna Gaon is a major principle concerning the difference in connotation between the Torah’s use of the singular and plural forms – whether they refer to the Jewish people as a whole or to each and every individual among them. This approach would appear to be supported by the Gemara in a number of places, as elucidated by Tosafos. Thus, for example, with regards to the mitzvah of *arba minim* (four species) on Sukkos, the Gemara<sup>4</sup> derives from the words “וּלְקַחְתֶּם לָכֶם – You shall take for yourselves”<sup>5</sup> that the mitzvah devolves on each and every individual. Tosafos<sup>6</sup> explain that the exposition is based on the fact that the Torah uses the plural form (וּלְקַחְתֶּם) and not the singular (וּלְקַחְתָּ). In other words, it is the use of the plural form that indicates that this mitzvah belongs to each individual within the community, and not to the community as a whole. Similarly, the Gemara<sup>7</sup> derives from the words regarding the counting of the omer, “וּסְפַרְתֶּם לָכֶם – You shall count for yourselves,”<sup>8</sup> that the mitzvah applies to every individual. Here, too, Tosafos<sup>9</sup> comment that this comes from the Torah phrasing the mitzvah in the plural as opposed to the singular (וּסְפַרְתָּ). What is of further interest in this case is that there is actually a parallel mitzvah involving counting that is phrased in the singular, namely, counting the *shemita* and *yovel* years, where the Torah states, “וּסְפַרְתָּ לְךָ שִׁבְעַת שָׁנִים – You shall count for yourself seven cycles of seven years.”<sup>10</sup> And indeed, the halachah states that that mitzvah does not devolve on each individual, but on the *beis din*. The explanation of this is as per the above. Since the Torah’s usage of the singular addresses the Jewish people as one community, a mitzvah addressed that way falls to the *beis din*, which is the body that represent

---

3 The Gemara (*Megillah* 31b) states that the idea that we do not interrupt in the middle of the *tochachah* (by calling someone to the Torah) refers only to the first *tochachah*, not to the second. One of the explanations provided there is that the first *tochachah* is stated in the plural while the second is in the singular. Seemingly, if the use of the singular form denotes the individual, it is easier to understand why the prohibition against interrupting does not apply, as the calamity of the individual is less than that of the community. However, according to the Vilna Gaon that the singular form refers to the community, one would need to explain further why the two *tochachahs* would be different in this respect.

4 Sukkah 41b.

5 Vayikra 23:40.

6 Ibid. s.v. *u’lekachtem*.

7 Menachos 65b.

8 Vayikra 23:15.

9 Menachos ibid. s.v. *u’sefartem*.

10 Vayikra 25:8.

the community.<sup>11</sup>

### COUNTERPOINT: THE PARAGRAPHS OF THE SHEMA

There are places, however, from which it is apparent that the verse uses the singular form to address an individual person. The second paragraph of Shema opens by mentioning the command to love Hashem “בְּכָל לְבַבְּכֶם וּבְכָל נַפְשְׁכֶם” – *with all your heart and soul.*” Rashi comments:<sup>12</sup>

*But it has already commanded us to love Hashem “בְּכָל לְבַבְּךָ וּבְכָל נַפְשְׁךָ” – with all your heart and your soul!”<sup>13</sup> Rather, there is a command for the individual and a command for the community.*

We see that Rashi has explained the command in the first paragraph of Shema, which is phrased in the singular, as referring to the individual, while the command in the second that is phrased in the plural refers to the community.

In a similar vein, the Gemara in Maseches Sotah<sup>14</sup> states that prior to the Jewish people sinning, the Divine presence would reside on each individual, citing as its source the verse, “כִּי ה' אֵלֵינוּ” – *For Hashem, your God, walks in the midst of your camp,*”<sup>15</sup> which is stated in the singular.

### WITH AN EYE ON CONTEXT

Apparently, there are times when the Torah’s use of the singular form clearly denotes the individual. Thus, with regards to the verse from the first paragraph of the Shema, it is presumably not meaningful to command the community as a whole to love Hashem, for that is something that depends on each individual. Likewise, the verse which states that “*Hashem walks within your camp*” is preceded by an instruction to the individual who is impure and has to leave the camp; hence, this phrase too is understood as addressing the individual.<sup>16</sup>

Indeed, we see that, in a different context, the Vilna Gaon himself explains the use of the singular as referring to the individual. Parshas Re’eh of Chumash Devarim begins:

רָאֵה אֲנִי נֹתֵן לְפָנֶיכֶם הַיּוֹם בְּרָכָה וּקְלָלָה

*See, I place before you today a blessing and a curse.*<sup>17</sup>

11 See Malbim to Vayikra loc. cit. [See also Sifrei to Devarim 16:9, with emendations of Vilna Gaon ibid.]

12 Devarim 11:13, s.v. *bechol*, citing the Sifrei.

13 Ibid. 6:5.

14 3b.

15 Devarim 23:15.

16 See further Gemara Maseches Taanis (9a) which states that sometimes rain can fall in the merit of a single individual, citing the verse, “יִפְתַּח ה' לְךָ אֶת אוֹצְרוֹ הַטּוֹב אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם לְתֵת מָטָר אֲרֻצְךָ” – Hashem shall open for you His storehouse of goodness, the heavens, to provide rain for your land.” (Devarim 28:12. It is noteworthy that this verse is actually stated in the blessing section of the second tochachah, upon which the Vilna Gaon originally commented.) See further Rosh Hashanah 18a where the Gemara cites two verses that deal with the power of teshuvah do rescind a decree (Devarim 4:7 and Yeshaya 55:6), both of which are phrased in the plural, and explains that one refers to the individual while the other refers to the community. See also Pesachim 23a where the Sages dispute R’ Yehuda regarding the question of whether the verse dealing with the prohibition of orlah, “וַיִּטְעֲתֶם כָּל עֵץ מֵאֵל” – and you plant any fruit tree” (Vayikra 19:23), written in the plural, refers to a tree planted specifically by the individual or also by the community.

17 Devarim 11:26.

The Vilna Gaon<sup>18</sup> notes that the verse begins by using the singular form (רֵאָה) and then immediately moves to the plural form (לְפָנֵיכֶם), explaining it as follows:

*A person should not say, "I can choose a good path if there are righteous people in the world, whom I can emulate and with whom I can associate. However, if it is only me by myself, can I still pursue the correct path? Who am I?" Therefore, the verse says רֵאָה (see) in the singular, as if to say, direct your attention forward, and pay no attention to the rest of the world.*

In this instance, presumably the abrupt shift from singular to plural indicates that the earlier word refers to an actual individual, and hence, the Vilna Gaon himself explains accordingly.

Ultimately, then, the question of how to relate to the singular form in the Torah requires vigilance and discernment – qualities which are always of utmost benefit when learning any section of Chumash.

בברכת כתיבה וחתימה טובה, לנו ולכל ישראל.

---

18 Likkutim at the end of Shenos Eliyahu on *Maseches Peah*.