

United We Stand

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Parshas Nitzavim / Rosh Hashanah

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The Parsha's Path

For this mitzvah which I command you today is not hidden from you, nor is it far. It is not in the heavens, that you should say, "Who can go up for us to the heavens and take it for us and teach it to us that we will do it." Neither is it beyond the sea that you should say, "Who can cross the sea for us and take it for us, and teach it to us that we will do it." Rather, the thing is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to observe it. (30:11-14)

This famous passage follows immediately from a description of how B'nei Yisrael will ultimately do *teshuva*; we will all *return to Hashem, our G-d, with all our heart and soul* (v. 10), and how then G-d will take us out of exile, give us peace and prosperity, and even circumcise our hearts to love Him fully, *so that you will live* (v. 6).

It seems striking that the above verses never explicate what it is they are talking about. What is "this thing" that is very close to us? What is "this mitzvah" which G-d commands us today?

Indeed, the commentators actually dispute what the above verses are referring to. Some say that it refers to all the mitzvot, while others say it refers to Torah learning. Ramban and Seforno, however, say it refers to the mitzvah of *teshuva*. After all, the preceding verse and the whole context of the passage is referring to *teshuva*.

Nevertheless, the fact that the Torah never spells out "this mitzvah of *teshuva*" or that "the matter of *teshuva* is very close to you" seems surprising. If it's ambiguous enough to be interpreted differently by different commentators, then one would expect more clarification. The elusive expression of "this thing" (*hadavar*) is not a term the Torah usually uses to describe things.

Perhaps we can suggest that the lack of formulation is precisely because the essence of *teshuva* defies formulation. To say "this mitzvah of *teshuva*" or "*teshuva* is very close to you" would only detract from the whole idea of *teshuva*. *Teshuva*, at its core, transcends traditional categorizations of *mitzvos* and that is exactly why it is so uniquely accessible.

Other mitzvos are all about actions, behaviors, and rules. They are the guidelines for how we serve G-d and build a relationship with Him. *Teshuva*, on the other hand, is the raw idea that animates all mitzvah observance and beyond - the desire to come close to G-d. While classical *teshuva* naturally entails recommitting ourselves to the mitzvos to the best of our ability, it transcends that. Even if someone

doesn't know any Torah and lacks anyone who can teach him, he can still yearn to come closer to G-d and try to be better.

We might posit that it would even be vulgar for the Torah to spell out, "this thing - *teshuva* - is very close to you." How can we put a label on *teshuva*? It is too basic, too all-encompassing, and too intimate. It is not merely something that one must do; it is a mindset, a direction, a desire. It is not something that, as Seforno explains, we need a prophet to reach to the Heavens to make accessible for us, nor a teacher from across the sea. It is an innate yearning in every Jew - and that is precisely why the Torah guarantees that everyone will ultimately do *teshuva*. It is returning to our nature.

The Gemara (Avoda Zara 17a) relates the story of Rabbi Elazar ben Dordaya:

They said about Rabbi Elazar ben Dordaya that he did not leave one prostitute in the world with whom he was not intimate. Once, he heard that there was one prostitute in one of the cities overseas who would take a purse full of dinars as her payment. He took a purse full of dinars and went and crossed seven rivers to reach her. When they were engaged in the matters to which they were accustomed, she passed wind and said: Just as this passed wind will not return to its place, so too Elazar ben Dordaya will not be accepted in repentance.

Elazar ben Dordaya went and sat between two mountains and hills and said: Mountains and hills, pray for mercy on my behalf. They said to him: Before we pray for mercy on your behalf, we must pray for mercy on our own behalf, as it is stated: "For the mountains may depart, and the hills be removed" (Isaiah 54:10). He said: Heaven and earth, pray for mercy on my behalf. They said to him: Before we pray for mercy on your behalf, we must pray for mercy on our own behalf, as it is stated: "For the heavens shall vanish away like smoke, and the earth shall wax old like a garment" (Isaiah 51:6). He said: Sun and moon, pray for mercy on my behalf. They said to him: Before we pray for mercy on your behalf, we must pray for mercy on our own behalf, as it is stated: "Then the moon shall be confounded, and the sun ashamed" (Isaiah 24:23). He said: Stars and constellations, pray for mercy on my behalf. They said to him: Before we pray for mercy on your behalf, we must pray for mercy on our own behalf, as it is stated: "And all the hosts of heaven shall molder away" (Isaiah 34:4).

Elazar ben Dordaya said: Clearly the matter depends on nothing other than myself. He placed his head between his knees and cried loudly until his soul left his body. A Divine Voice emerged and said: Rabbi Elazar ben Dordaya is destined for life in the World-to-Come.

Why was Rabbi Elazar ben Dordaya asking the mountains, the Earth and the Heavens, the sun and moon, and the stars and constellations to pray for him? What does that even mean?

Perhaps we can explain his call in light of our verses - *It is not in heaven ... neither is it beyond the sea*. Sometimes we feel so distant from G-d that we feel that we are simply unable to return to Him; how can we approach our Creator when we are so defiled? We need forces greater than ourselves to intercede for us, whether literally or in the sense of holding our hand to guide us to a better place. "After all, that's what the Rabbi's for. And if the Rabbi can't save me, then that's what the Moshiach's for. Until then, whatever state I'm in is what will have to do." Rabbi Elazar ben Dordaya said, "I can't possibly fix myself. But maybe somewhere in heaven or beyond the sea there is a force that can make things right. That's the best I can hope for." But Rabbi Elazar soon realized that those were empty excuses; ultimately, only he, of his own initiative, could repent and return.

May we all learn from the example of our Rabbi Elazar ben Dordaya and the lesson of this week's Parsha that returning to G-d is entirely in our hands, and with our return may we all merit a *kesiva vichasima tova, yeshuos and nechamos, and geulah* for all of Klal Yisrael.

Deeper Meanings

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Perchance there is among you a man or woman, or family or tribe, whose heart is turning him away today from Hashem, our G-d, to go and serve the gods of these nations - perchance there is among you a root sprouting poison weed and wormwood, and when such a one hears the words of these sanctions, he may bless himself in his heart, saying, "peace will be with me, though I follow my own willful heart" - in order to add the quenched unto the thirsty (29:17-18).

In last week's Parsha, Moshe brought the nation of Israel into a new covenant with G-d centered around a list of terrible curses that will befall it if they fail to follow the Torah properly. This week's Parsha features a reinforcement of that covenant, with Moshe beseeching the people to be honest with themselves to ensure that they are fully committed to G-d. Here, Moshe warns the people that if their heart turns them away from listening to the covenant, thinking themselves immune to the implications for disobedience, and pursues their desires, G-d will not forgive him and obliterate his name.

Rabbeinu Bachya notes that Moshe emphasizes a person's heart: ... *whose heart is turning him away ... He may bless himself in his heart, saying, "peace will be with me, though I follow my own willful heart."* He explains that it is one thing to sin spontaneously out of impulse, but actually

thinking in one's heart to pursue one's desires leaves a much deeper mark. This helps us appreciate the expression *in order to add the quenched unto the thirsty*. When a person contemplates following his desires, even and especially when he acts on them, he increases his desires even more. He thinks that he will be able to quench his thirst for sin, but in reality parts of him which were already quenched become even more thirsty. As the Mishna in Avos tells us, *Three things drive a person from the world ... desire*.

Rabbeinu Bachya alludes to the concept that a person is compared to a tree; one's thoughts are compared to its leaves and his deeds are to its fruit. A tree's leaves absorb sunlight that is vital to the flourishing of the tree and the production of quality fruit. If a tree's leaves are bad, the fruit will be bad. It's the same way with a person; if he thinks properly, he will produce good deeds, but if his mind is on what he wants to eat or what he's going to watch on TV or any other desires, his deeds will putrefy as well.

In order for a leaf to work properly, it just needs to absorb the light that's all around it. The only way a leaf could malfunction is if it somehow is not receptive to what's around it. Perhaps Moshe's telling us the same thing. We are surrounded by the light of G-d. G-d is always shining down on us with blessings and goodness - our lives, our health, our family, our liberty, our Torah, and on and on. If we see and appreciate what's in front of us, then we cannot help but be overwhelmed with gratitude for what we have and filled with desire to reciprocate. It's only when we turn ourselves away from what's in front of us, ignoring the light, that we become subject to the illusion of desire. Desire turns us further away from G-d, as it is incompatible with the contentment that comes from perceiving our blessings, and the more we feed it, the bigger the void we make in our lives, until we're consumed by it.

Moshe warns us that it's impossible to lead a truly upright life, even in our actions, if we do not have the right thoughts. The key to success in overcoming our desires and living a life full of spiritual accomplishments begins by focusing our mind on G-d. As we enter into Rosh HaShana, it's particularly appropriate that we strengthen ourselves in appreciating the glory of G-d's kingship and show that we don't take the good life that He gives us for granted, and in that merit may G-d see fit to put us in the Book of Good Life in the year to come.

Have A Great Shabbos !!

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