

JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

Parshat Nitzavim

As we near the High Holy Days, we are instructed by our tradition to pursue avenues of change, to do teshuva. It is a three-step process that begins with introspection. We look deeply into ourselves, trying to identify our character strengths and defects objectively. We then create and revisit our goals for improving our character traits, and, as a third step, conceive a path that leads us from where we are to where we'd like to be. Many of us are good at the first step, being critical of ourselves, as our flaws are easily discovered. And most of us can do the second step, dreaming of who we would like to be. The problem is that key piece in the teshuva process, the final step, determining the path by which to change. A common roadblock to reaching our desired destination is that terrible statement we say inwardly and often openly--"I can't!" And with that short bitter phrase, our place for the year is sealed at the sad place of... complacency.

So what can we do? Well, fortunately we can look to our parsha for some insight. The Torah teaches us this week a section quite apropos for this time of year:

"For this mitzvah which I command you today – it is not hidden from you and it is not distant. It is not in heaven, [for you] to say, 'Who can ascend to the heaven for us and take it for us, so that we can listen to it and perform it?' Nor is it across the sea, [for you] to say, 'Who can cross to the other side off the sea for us and take it for us, so that we can listen to it and perform it?' Rather, the matter is very near to you – in your mouth and your heart – to perform it." (Devarim 30:11 – 14)

There are those amongst the great commentators who understand "this mitzvah" to refer to teshuva, repentance. It is very reassuring to learn from the Torah that teshuva is not beyond our reach. There is another interpretation of "this mitzvah" that gives us an even more profound insight into our dilemma to doing teshuva. This reading originates with Rashi, and is expounded upon by the Kli Yakar. Rashi, the great 11th century French Torah scholar Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki, understands "this mitzvah" to refer to studying Torah. The Kli Yakar, Rabbi Shlomo Efraim Luntschitz of 16th century Prague, extends this reading to say the phrase refers to carrying out and comprehending every mitzvah in the Torah. So how does this help us?

The Kli Yakar explains that there are two aspects to every mitzvah – an external behavioral act and an internal, i.e. emotional & intellectual, component. The Torah addresses a person's "I can't!" through both of those components.

With regard to the latter, internal, component, the Torah says, "it is not hidden from you." The concepts of the Torah are available to you. You have the ability and opportunity to have a deep and



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continued ...

profound relationship with your Creator which manifests itself through the conduit of the mitzvot. Do not think it is something beyond your capacity to accomplish.

Responding to the former component, the “I can’t!” of the behavioral act, the Torah says, “it is not distant.” Do not accept a substandard way of life, lacking the ability to behave in a righteous lifestyle. You have full operating potential to be a righteous individual. As stated recently by a well-run political campaign, “Yes, you can.”

Now that we understand the Torah’s response to our, “I can’t!”, let’s continue in the Kli Yakar to see how he understands the continuation of this section of the Torah. The Kli Yakar points out that the Torah repeats itself regarding these two aspects. The phrase beginning “It is not in heaven...” refers back to the internal component again. And “Nor is it across the sea...” refers to the external component again. Why does the Torah repeat itself regarding this?

Perhaps the Torah is further clarifying our perspective on “this mitzvah.” When a person wants to accomplish something, there must be parity between their perception of self, and their perception of the goal. If they perceive the goal as too lofty, it is not doable. On the other hand, if the perception of self is too lowly, the goal will also not be doable. But if they are on par--the perception of one’s capabilities and the task at hand--then it is doable. This idea underlies the Torah’s concern. Let’s say one could actually convince himself that he can do “this mitzvah.” The Torah here is concerned that a person will perceive himself as lowly, yet he will also accept that he can practice the Torah fully. How could that be? Well, Heaven forbid, he may think the Torah is not as lofty as originally perceived. To that, the Torah responds – do not think it is in the Heavens beyond your reach, and do not think it is across the sea. But also, don’t think that it is any less holy for its availability to you. Rather, the reason it is so available, is because you are holy. You must not think of yourself as lowly. It is in your mouth and your heart, the holy vessels of communication and emotions. It is for you to rise up to the occasion, utilize the deep tools from within you to accomplish this great feat. But it is doable. You can!

Every mitzvah is a golden gem. Every opportunity to do teshuva, to truly change, is a diamond. And it’s right there waiting for you. Now is the time. Use your holy vessels that you’ve been blessed with to pray, to feel, and to connect in a profound way with your Creator this Rosh Hashana. And may we all be blessed with a sweet and good new year.

Shana Tovah!

Shabbat Shalom!

