

JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

Nitzavim Vayeilech

In this week's Parsha (Deuteronomy 30:11-14), the Torah says "For this mitzvah that I command you today is not distant from you. It is not in the heavens above nor on the other side of the ocean... rather, it is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart to do it." While Rashi explains that the "mitzvah" here refers to the Torah, Nachmanides argues "this mitzvah" refers to returning to Hashem (teshuva). It is no coincidence that we read about the mitzvah of teshuva in the month of Elul as we prepare for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur and anticipate days of encounter with G-d. Nachmanides elaborates on the Torah's message, saying that teshuva can be accomplished no matter the time and place. Even if we are cast all over the world and governed by secular rulers, we can always return to G-d. Neither difficult nor unrealistic, teshuva is "very close to you."

Yet we know changing our ways or outlook can be very daunting and sometimes overwhelming. How can we attain the level of teshuva that we really want? The very name of this month of teshuva preparation, Elul, can help guide us.

Elul is an Aramaic word. When Moshe commanded the spies to scout out, explore and discover the land of Israel (Numbers 13:2), Onkelos (Aramaic translation, 2nd century CE) uses Elul to explain exploration and discovery. In the work of teshuva, we try to get in touch with the part of our being that yearns for a connection with the infinite. We all have a spiritual component that craves a relationship with G-d, and we need to explore our inner conscience to discover that part of our self. Ultimately, teshuva revolves around self-discovery.

Elul is also used as an acronym for "ani ledodi vedodi li", a line taken from Song of Songs, which means "I am to my Beloved and my Beloved is to me." Consistent with the theme of the month, this line speaks of the desire to draw oneself closer to G-d and strengthen that relationship. But the Arizal (R' Isaac Luria, 16th century CE) says Elul stands for another line taken from the Writings, namely "ish lerayayhu umatanot la'evyonim." This refers to the gifts we give to friends and the charity given to the poor on Purim day. Now what does this have to do with preparing for the days of Awe and an encounter with G-d? In what way do interpersonal mitzvot capture the spirit of the time?

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Human beings we still have a hard time relating to a transcendent G-d, a Being we neither hear nor see. The Sefer Hachinuch (13th century CE) suggests a way that we can try to develop this relationship. In describing the roots of the mitzvah to honor one's parents, he explains that developing a sense of gratitude to one's parents can enable one to deepen his sense of gratitude to Hashem. He says, "A person ought to recognize and be kind to someone who did him a favor...He should realize that he exists in the world because of his father and mother, and therefore he ought to honor them and help them in any way he can. They brought him into the world and worked very hard to raise him...When he sets this virtue in himself, he will rise from it to recognize the good that G-d does to him. He is the cause of his existence and that of his parents and all his ancestors. He brought him into the world, provided him with all of his needs, and gave him a complete body and an enlightened soul. He should think how much he ought to care to serve Him."

This idea applies not just to the mitzvah of honoring one's parents and being grateful to them, but to all interpersonal relationships. If we treat our spouses, friends, and co-workers with respect and recognize the good they do for us, it will engender within us the virtue of gratitude and can help us be grateful to G-d. This can in turn trigger a teshuva mindset, helping us desire to give back to the Creator. So when the Arizal says Elul stands for giving food to others and giving charity to the poor, he is giving us a real practical way to develop sensitivities which will help us do teshuva and enter the days of Awe in the appropriate manner.

Shabbat Shalom!

