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Nitzavim 5781

What It Means To Live

Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm z"l (Originally delivered September 6, 1969)

Our Biblical portion of this morning contains one of the most eloquent and inspiring passages in a series of such magnificent verses delivered by Moses at the end of his life.

The old leader speaks to his people, assembled about the Holy Ark, calling to witness heaven and earth, he says to them: "I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse; therefore choose life, that thou mayest live, thou and thy children; to love the Lord thy God, to hearken to His voice, and to cleave unto Him, for that is thy life and the length of thy days.*. (Dt. 30:19,20).

"Choose life, that thou mayest live." But what does that mean? People often say, colloquially, "he doesn't know what it means to live," or, "he really knows what it means to live." So, what indeed does it mean "to live?"

The Jerusalem Talmud (Kid. 1:7) offers us interpretations of these terms by two of the greatest Tannaim, Rabbi Ishmael and Rabbi Akiva. However, on first blush, they seem devastatingly disappointing, and apparently bring us down from the sublime to the ridiculous.

Rabbi Ishmael says, *zu umanut*, "that thou mayest live" refers to a trade or a craft. "From this the Sages learned that a man is obligated to teach his son a trade or craft." Rabbi Akiva says that from this we learn that a man is required to teach his son the water-arts, how to swim and how to row.

What a let-down! How pedestrian the rabbinic interpretation sounds when compared with the majestic Biblical cadences which it purports to interpret! Is that really what Moses had in mind at the dusk of his life, at the climax of his Prophetic career, as he bade farewell to this people whom he had shepherded through forty years of the great wilderness? -- that heaven and earth are his witnesses that he sets before them the way of life, in the sense of how to make a living, how to be a real estate manager or insurance salesman or shoemaker or tailor or cloak-and-

suiter or stockbroker or diamond cutter, or -- according to Rabbi Akiva -- a senior life guard licensed by the Red Cross?

The answer, I submit, is: indeed yes! Moses had in mind to call heaven and earth to witness that the way of God, the way of Torah, is the way of life, which finds expression in the way a man makes a living, in how he buys and sells and serves and swims. For the ancient and the medieval world knew of the monastic ideal, according to which true life, in its most exquisite spiritual essence, can be lived not in the hurly-burly of daily prosaic routine, not in the rot and the corruption and the competition of the marketplace or attention to the material development of the world, but rather in renouncing the active world, in retreating to a place of peace in which one can realize the ideal of contemplation as opposed to action.

Real, full, authentic life could be achieved only by the abandoning of the *vita activa* in favor of the *vita contemplativa*, the life of contemplation. And it is against this conception that Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Ishmael offered their interpretation of the Biblical ideal: life in its spiritual essence can be distilled only out of life in the making, in the marketplace, in the office and the factory and the laboratory. To live and to choose life can be realized not at the edge of the silent and brooding pond, but in the middle of the river, swimming with the tide, or sometimes directly against it, but caught up in the currents of events. This is what Judaism understood as the blessing of "life" offered by the Torah.

All this having been said, I confess to the irrelevance of this polemic to this particular congregation. After a decade of service in this community, I have yet to come across the first case where my services were desperately needed to dissuade some noble soul in this congregation who was ready to liquidate his business and abandon his wife and children because he was gripped by an

irresistible passion to go off into the wilderness, there broodingly to contemplate the glory of God in splendid isolation. If anything, we sin in the opposite direction. We are, especially in the way we raise our children, too vocation-oriented, too materialistic. Our major concern is with providing the child with the means to make a living, to make a lot of money, to be a success, to grow in his profession. We are extreme in ignoring the development of the art of contemplation, which alone, added to the active life, can bestow upon a person the grace of wholeness, of perfection, of a complete life.

However, if these words are not germane to the members of a well-established, middle-class, successful, “square” congregation, who are leaders in the business and professions, in society in general and in the Jewish community in particular, this Talmudic passage is immediately relevant to the members of the New Generation, often called the “Now Generation,” whose representatives -- some 400,000 of them -- met several weeks ago at that ecclesiastical assembly in Woodstock in the Catskills. There, in this massive congregation of the youthful, the devout swayed (or, better, “rocked”) in the presence of a new liturgical music, inhaled deeply of a new incense, and witnessed to a new faith and the greater glory of Hippiedom.

It is true that the rest of society learned a surprising and happy lesson about the Hippies: that they are not all evil, not harmful, not dangerous. Indeed, they were less ill-behaved and far more courteous than the same number of adults gathered to attend one of their typical silly conventions. Adult society, always unsure of its own achievements, has always been aghast at the innovations of the young who question the premises upon which society is established. We have been too extravagant in making demons of them, and therefore we were ever so pleasantly astonished at their civilized conduct.

Now, these are children of the affluent society, usually well-educated, and in their new culture and new style is a “way of life” — the original meaning of the term halakhah. Therefore, we must consider them seriously (although it is my feeling that ultimately, in the judgment of history, they will not be taken seriously at all). This new quasi-religion does have enormous zeal, and, in addition, some lovely ideals: love, unity, fellowship, freedom, gentleness -- although some members of this generation may be amazed to learn that they did not invent them.

But ignoring whatever may be personally distasteful to us -- and who is to say that their clothing or lack of hygiene

or strange idiom or rock-and-roll music is any worse than our life style? and who is to say that a decent youngster who is unkempt is any worse than a well-scrubbed rogue? -- and leaving aside for the minute their shocking amorality, Judaism must judge their fundamental claim: that the way to love and communion and fellowship in this stiflingly complex and enormously complicated society is by way of narcotics. The Now Generation has inverted the old Marxist formula, and its slogan might well be: “opium (or marijuana) is the religion of the masses.” It is a religion in which theology has been replaced by pharmacology, duty by euphoria, truth by trance, action by feeling, the vision of the present as a continuation of the past and leading to the future by a vision of the present in and of itself without past and regardless of the consequences, a religion in which the only duty or commandment is to “do your own thing*” In this popular, blossoming new culture, “therefore choose life” and “that thou mayest live” bear a new interpretation: what does it mean to live? — to live it up! My pot and my acid, they shall comfort me. The easy fellowship of the stoned and the stupefied is the way to *לאהבה את ה' אלוךך* and *ולדבקה בו*, to love and communion, with fellow man if not with God.

And it is to this conception that Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Ishmael direct their hard-nosed, clear-eyed, prosaic interpretations: to live means to make a living, to earn your own bread, to learn to swim in the tide of events, to effectuate your ideals within the course of life rather than idealizing the escape from life. There are no easy solutions! Life, living, love, communion can take place not through pills but through perseverance, not through the pursuit of phantasmagoric visions, but through the hard grind of work and achievement, and even intelligence. It is only when a man must earn his bread by the sweat of his brow that he can appreciate the value of ideals that take him one step beyond himself, that lead him on to transcendence. It is only when one struggles in the currents of life, and slips on the hard edges of the rocks underfoot, that he can value the gift of life that the Lord above gives him. “For that is thy life and the length of thy days.”

I know that certainly, for the greatest part, I preach to the converted. But in the presence of a new conception, which we must not dismiss offhand, it is important to reinforce and to deepen our own understanding of Judaism's message. Judaism agrees neither with ancient monasticism nor with its modern reincarnation. Sinai cannot conform with this aspect of the teaching of Woodstock.

So we reaffirm to ourselves and to our children: to appreciate life you must make a living and involve yourself in living. And in the course of so doing, you must not stifle the great ideals but, on the contrary, enhance and realize them. It is through life and living and struggling, through observance of the mitzvot and the unceasing and arduous study of Torah, that we ultimately achieve genuine love of God and love of man, cleaving to Him and enjoying

Looks Good to Me

Rabbi Joshua (The Hoffer) Hoffman z"l

Moshe, after gathering the people together to enter a covenant with God, tells them, “You are standing today, all of you, before the Lord your God: your heads, your tribes, your officers ... your small children and your women..... the hewers of your wood and the carriers of your water” (Devarim 29:9-10). Who are these hewers of wood and carriers of water? Rashi says that they were Canaanites from Eretz Yisroel who came to Moshe to make a peace treaty, similar to the Givonites, who came to Yehoshua to do the same. In both cases, by the terms of the treaty, they were assigned to be hewers of wood and carriers of water.

There is a dispute amongst the commentators of Rashi whether Moshe was fooled by the Canaanites. In the case of Yehoshua, there was a clear prohibition against making a treaty, because regarding the Canaanites of Eretz Yisroel, the Torah tells us to wipe them all out in war. The Givonites fooled Yehoshua into thinking that they came from a distant land, and were thus able to make such a pact with him. It was only to avoid a desecration of God’s name by breaking the treaty that it was maintained after the ruse was discovered. According to Rav Eliyahu Mizrachi, this was also what happened in the time of Moshe. Rav Dovid Pardo, however, in his Maskil L’Dovid on Rashi, says that Moshe was not fooled, since the command to wipe out the indigenous Canaanites only took hold after the children of Israel entered Eretz Yisroel. Moshe made them into wood hewers and water carriers, because their conversion was not completely sincere, as they did it out of fear. Perhaps we can suggest, somewhat similarly, that the command only applied once the offer to peace was sent to the Canaanites and rejected, but not if they came on their own. This, indeed, is the opinion of the Rashbam, and according to my teacher, Rav Aharon Soloveitchik, zt”l, all authorities, including Rashi, would agree with this.

fellowship with His children*

On this last Sabbath of the year, as we enter the season when we pray constantly for hayyim, for life, it is good to remind ourselves once again what it means to live: “that thou mayest live, thou and thy children.” May it indeed be a year, followed by many more years, of life and living and love and communion, for us and all Israel and all mankind..

Read more at www.yu.edu/about/lamm-heritage.

In any case, the Maskil L’Dovid asks, why there is there a term of separation “ad” – “until” – between the mention of the hewers of stone and the carriers of water. Why aren’t they included in one phrase or category? He answers that the job of carrying water is of a lower status, relegated to women and children, and, therefore, distinguished from the role of the wood hewers. I would like to suggest a different answer, based on the nature of the covenant that the people were entering into.

The Ramban and others say that while the covenant in Parshas Ki Savo was in regard to observing the mitzvot, the covenant in Parshas Nitzovim was one that established “arvus”, or mutual responsibility. The Ritva on tractate Rosh Hashanah says that arvus reflects the concept that the Jewish nation represents one large collective body. In this sense, every member of the nation is viewed equally, as part of the collective. The particular status of any individual does not change this reality. Each person, in his own capacity, plays an integral role in this collective whole.

The midrash teaches that the maidservant saw, at the splitting of the Sea, a vision that was not seen by the great prophet Yechezkel. Reb Tzadok HaKohen of Lublin explains that everyone at some point in life is given a vision of the role that he is to play in this world. That moment came for the emerging nation, at the splitting of the Sea. Thus, the vision that the maidservant saw of her role was only seen by her, for only she, to the exclusion of even Yechezkel, could fulfill it. This idea may also be reflected in a statement in the Talmud (Brachos 34b) that every profession appears beautiful in the eyes of its practitioner. Perhaps, then, the roles of the wood hewers and water carriers are separated to indicate that each plays its own role in the collective of the nation, and should be recognized in this way.

The Special Covenant

Rabbi Assaf Bednarsh (Transcribed and adapted by a talmid from the YUTorah shiur originally given at Gruss Kollel in Yerushalayim on Sep 10, 2015)

This week's Parsha seems to flow very nicely. You are all nitzavim—you are all standing here to enter a special covenant with Hashem. However, it comes with sanctions. Why would a special covenant need to include sanctions? In case someone wants to go off the derech, worship Avoda Zarah, and do aveiros, etc., they should know that there will be certain repercussions. And someday, when you ask why we deserved all these punishments, it was because we did the wrong thing. Then, at the end of that paragraph, in the twentieth pasuk in the Parsha, the Torah says—*hanistaros la-Hashem Elokeinu*—hidden things are for Hashem. And it is not exactly clear what these words mean. *Ve-haniglos lanu u-le-vaneinu ad olam la'asos es kol divrei ha-Torah hazos*—and the revealed things are for us and our children, forever, to fulfill all the mitzvos in the Torah. What does this have to do with what we have been discussing until now? We haven't been discussing anything about the secret things or revealed things. We have been discussing the concept of Reward and Punishment. And Rashi has a very famous pshat there. But Netziv, in his Ha-Emek Davar, says a different pshat. Perhaps, it is even closer to the simplest reading of the pesukim. We are discussing Reward and Punishment. In this realm, people ask: Why were there certain types of punishment? They ask: Why did these things happen? We always look at history and try to analyze: why things happened the way they did? So Netziv says that even though there is a certain level that you perhaps can understand sometimes, don't think that we always have the answers. Don't think that we can always know why bad things happen. Sometimes bad things happen to good people. There is such a thing as Sefer Iyov; there are such things as mysteries. There is an incomprehensible death of Rabbi Akiva. And not everything in this world makes

such perfect sense that we can just look at what happened and say: Oh, that's exactly the explanation—it's pashut that Hashem was giving us Mussar because of this or that. That's why it says: *ha-nistaros la-Hashem Elokeinu*. Even though there is a principle of *s'char ve-onesh*, and even though we are supposed to try and learn from it and be inspired to be better. Don't think that we know all the answers, and don't come to some glib, simple judgments, and think that you know Hashem's ways. Ultimately, Hashem's ways are hidden, and things often happen for reasons that we don't understand. Nonetheless, don't say that since Hashem's ways are unfathomable, we should not look at history and learn anything from it. In those cases that we learn from history how to fix our mistakes, when we know there is room for improvement, then *haniglos lanu u-le-vaneinu ad olam*. We should examine history and admit that we don't have all the answers and that we don't know why good people suffer. We don't know why Hashem does everything. But when we can figure out what we need to fix, we should say that if we still don't have the Geula yet, we need to improve and use the history as a guide to inspire us—to say that we should always strive to be better if we want to reach the ultimate Geula. And therefore, this pasuk is a very fitting closing for the whole *bris of s'char ve-onesh* in the Torah because it's telling us how to look at events appropriately. And this is how Netziv and also Rav Soloveitchik, in a few places, explain this pasuk—*ve-haniglos lanu*. Those things we can fix, we should be inspired by history to fix. See how fixing our recurring mistakes might be metaken everything that happened to us, up to now. But ultimately, we don't know the full answers. We can't rush to final judgments, and we can't judge other people because Hashem's ways are *lo darkeichem derachai*—they are ultimately inscrutable.

The Eternity of Torah

Mrs. Michal Horowitz

In this week's moving, emotional and poetic parsha, Parshas Nitzavim - the final parsha of 5781 - Moshe Rabbeinu urges the nation to cling to a life of Torah and mitzvos.

In one of the most stirring and powerful passages in the Torah, Moshe encourages the Bnei Yisrael to live a committed life and says:

כִּי הַמִּצְוָה הַזֹּאת אֲשֶׁר אָנֹכִי מְצַוְךָ הַיּוֹם לֹא נִפְלְאָתָה הוּא מִמְּךָ וְלֹא

רחקה הוא.

For this commandment which I command you this day, is not concealed from you, nor is it far away

לֹא בְשִׁמִּים הוּא לֵאמֹר מִי יַעֲלֶה לָנוּ הַשְּׁמִימָה וַיִּקְחֶהָ לָנוּ וַיִּשְׁמַעֲנוּ אֹתָהּ וַיַּעֲשֶׂנָּה.

It is not in heaven, that you should say, "Who will go up to heaven for us and fetch it for us, to tell [it] to us, so that we can fulfill it?"

וְלֹא מֵעֵבֶר לַיָּם הוּא לֵאמֹר מִי יַעֲבֹר לָנוּ אֶל עֵבֶר הַיָּם וַיִּקְחֶהָ לָנוּ וַיִּשְׁמַעֲנוּ אֹתָהּ וַיַּעֲשֶׂנָּה.

Nor is it beyond the sea, that you should say, "Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us and fetch it for us, to tell [it] to us, so that we can fulfill it?"

כִּי קְרוֹב אֵלֶיךָ הַדְּבָר מְאֹד בְּפִיךָ וּבִלְבָבְךָ לַעֲשׂוֹתוֹ.

Rather, [this] thing is very close to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can fulfill it

While some commentators (like the Ramban) explain that this unnamed mitzvah is the mitzvah of Teshuva, repentance, others explain that these verses refer to the mitzvah of limud and asi'as ha'Torah - learning, practicing and living Torah.

"For it is very close to you," Rashi teaches: כִּי קְרוֹב אֵלֶיךָ. *The Torah, (which) was given to you in writing and orally.*

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, the Rav, zt'l, teaches, "We must formulate a fourteenth principle of faith, an ani ma'amin, which states that this Torah is given to be observed, realized and fully carried out in every place and at all times, within every social, economic and cultural framework, in every technological circumstance and every political condition. Actually, this ani ma'amin is intimated in the ninth of the thirteen principles of faith: That this Torah will never be changed.

"The Torah was given for realization in the simple society and homogenous economy of the ghetto as well as in modern, developed society with its scientifically planned technological economy. The Torah is given for realization both in galus (exile), where it relates to the private life of the individual, and to a Jewish State which must deal with communal issues. The Torah applies not only to those who eat manna and are protected by Clouds of Glory, but also those who enter the land, those who will have to organize society within the framework of independent statehood. This truism was formulated by Moshe during his last day on earth, when he took leave of the Children of Israel who were about to transition from a nomadic, desert existence into a government in Eretz Yisrael.

"This principle rejects all the efforts of those who would 'improve' religion, reformers who claim that the halacha is unsuitable for our social, scientific, industrial society, and that we must trim the branches in order to save the trunk. determines that the halacha is always actual and valid. We solemnly declare that the principle of eternity of Torah bestows upon us the promise that it is possible to study Torah and to observe it not only at home and in the ghetto, but everywhere in the world, be it the modern home, the laboratory, the campus or the industrial plant; in public as well as in private life" (Chumash Masores Ha'Rav, Devarim, p.243).

As we prepare to leave 5781 behind and enter into 5782, let us remember that the Torah is not over the seas, nor it is up in the heavens beyond our reach. Rather it is very, very close to us, attainable in the here and now, in every place and in every time. Let us recommit ourselves to living a Torah life and reaching ever higher heights in our avodas Hashem in the new year.

The Vilna Gaon (Rabbi Eliyahu of Vilna, d.1797) was an extremely devoted student of Torah and did not spend one unnecessary minute away from his Torah study. And if he had to be away from the Torah, he would mark down in his notebook when and for how long he had been away from Torah study.

On the eve of Yom Kippur, the holy Day of Atonement, he would calculate all the minutes that he was away from Torah study the entire year, and would cry and repent of his failure to study Torah during those times. It was said of him that when all the missed minutes were added up for a whole year, it never added up to more than three hours (Tales of the Righteous, p.180).

While we certainly are not the Vilna Gaon, the timeless words of Moshe Rabbeinu are a call to each and every one of us. No matter our current level of commitment to Torah and mitzvos, there are certainly areas in which we can all grow and improve. As for the closing words of our parsha:

רְאֵה נָתַתִּי לְפָנֶיךָ הַיּוֹם אֶת הַחַיִּים וְאֶת הַטּוֹב וְאֶת הַמָּוֶת וְאֶת הָרָע - *See, I have placed before you today life and good, and death and evil... and you shall choose life, so that you will live, you and your offspring... כִּי הוּא חַיֵּיךָ וְאֹרֶךְ יָמֶיךָ - for He is your life and the length of your days* (Devarim 30:15-20).

May we choose well and in that merit, may we all be inscribed in the book of life, for a shana tova u'mesuka - a year that is always good and only sweet.

G-d is Our Teshuva Partner

Rabbi Moshe Taragin

Teshuva is G-d's ultimate gift to all of humanity. The ability to invert our past, transmute our personality and rehabilitate our broken relationship with G-d is His exquisite gift to Man the pinnacle of His creation. Religiously sensitive people crave this process and greatly anticipate the "inflamed and fiery" days toward the end of summer.

Parshat Nizavim describes teshuva instigated by national distress; a wave of suffering triggers a moral and religious response and we rise to the opportunity of teshuva. Summarizing an effective teshuva, the Torah describes G-d "removing the covering" (literally the foreskin) surrounding our hearts. Evidently, teshuva entails a dual gift from G-d: He "enchants" the possibility of teshuva even to undeserving sinners. He also participates in the actual process of teshuva along with us. He grants us pardon but also helps us seek it. Conventionally, teshuva is viewed as an exclusively human process. As the greatest and boldest implementation of human liberty, it is fundamentally a human moment in which G-d, by design, has no "say". We seek G-d but we must seek him freely and through our own insight, inspiration and courage. Evidently as autonomously human as teshuva is, G-d assists us even as seek Him and His enchanting offer. How does G-d participate in the process of teshuva?

Firstly, G-d, knowing that we are frail and moral cowards, accepts our imperfect teshuva. Teshuva is not binary - all or nothing. There are various levels and versions of teshuva, peaking at the supreme or ultimate teshuva or "teshuva gemura" - a level which feels elusive for most of us. Often, we confess our sins with partial sincerity, lacking full and deep-seated conviction for change. Yet, despite our shallowness, the very act of facing our flaws and articulating them, demonstrates a degree of remorse which G-d accepts, though imperfect.

Even sincere teshuva is haunted by the inevitable failure of our most sincere promises. Experience demonstrates that we are likely to arrive to the very same situation next year. As life passes, we try to plug the never-ending leaks in our sinking ship and we find ourselves repeating teshuva for the sins we had forsworn a year earlier. Despite this inevitability and despite His knowing that we will ultimately fall short, G-d accepts us and our current sincerity. If we generate sincere conviction and desire for

change, G-d accepts our teshuva based on our current determination and does not reject us based on our ultimate failure. I annually ask myself the following question: if there were a magical pill that would "lock in" my current teshuva dreams and guarantee their implementation would I take that pill? Answering "yes" to this question reassures me of my deep desire for change and hopefully G-d acknowledges my sincerity and accepts my teshuva.

G-d doesn't only accept our flawed teshuva, He also pries open our locked hearts. The pasuk in Nizavim describes him removing the covering of our hearts. Sometimes these "heart shields" prevent important messages from entering our hearts. Many understand the mitzvah to remove our heart coverings as a commandment to listen to rebuke. Reproach and moral censure are difficult to handle as we prefer affirmation of who we are rather than whistle-blowers who call us to higher ground. The teshuva journey can only begin when we decide to listen- to events, to prophets, to people who challenge us, or to our own restless conscience. We ask G-d to help us open our hearts so that religious challenges can enter and stir us to change.

Conversely, the insulation around our hearts prevent emotion from flowing outward or being voiced. As my Rebbe Rav Lichtenstein wrote "... where do we stand in relation to crying? Our gut instinct is that crying is for the ignorant and the superstitious; but we are sophisticated and intellectual, and therefore decorous and restrained. Ribbono shel Olam! Amidst all this decorum and restraint, can't we, at least at Ne'ila, shed some genuine tears?... if not to be totally dissolved in tears, at least to open somewhat that "terrible dam" which inhibits ... our giving vent to our sense of shame and guilt.." We ask G-d to help us remove this "terrible dam" and allow our deepest and most vulnerable, but authentic emotions to flood our tefillot.

Interestingly, G-d doesn't only assist us in distilling a superior davening- he also davens right alongside us. The gemara in Rosh Hashanah portrays G-d donning a tallit and leading a tefilla of mercy, while Moshe listens and learns how to properly daven. Evidently, G-d Himself davens on our behalf and on behalf of His relationship with His people. I recall my Rebbe HaRav Yehuda Amital describing our desperation to open the gates of prayer during the closing crushing moments of nei'lah. This

mirrors G-d's desperate attempts to force open the gates of our hearts and enter the precinct which he doesn't possess the keys to. Just as we seek G-d, he seeks us and our sensing this "partnership of prayer" should embolden and impassion our teshuva.

Often times though, we need even more Divine assistance. Unquestionably, G-d empowers Man with absolute and unlimited freedom of choice. Yet despite the autonomy of choice He invested in us, G-d compassionately helps us make better decisions. In the end of the Parsha, G-d outlines, our absolute freedom of choice but encourages us to make the proper choice- "U'vacharta ba'chaim". Even though, throughout life, we are "tested" to render proper decisions we are provided a "cheatsheet" with the correct answers. As Dovid writes in Tehillim (25) G-d is just as He instructs sinners toward repentance.

However, G-d doesn't just educate us toward better life-decisions but He also shades our free will. Pharo in Egypt, was always free to release the Jewish people; absolutely abolishing his free will was inconceivable. However, his lifestyle along with G-d's intervening in his inner emotional world made his reversal extremely unlikely. We

dig very deep "ruts" in life and sometimes G-d's digs them even deeper into pits.

Well, if G-d can punish Paro by tilting his free will, he can, as an act of compassion, calibrate our free will by sending us powerful signals: external events and inner murmurings which goad us to teshuva. Ultimately, we remain entirely free to resist this goading, but G-d's prodding can become very powerful and almost too powerful to avoid.

Living through our current crisis, it isn't difficult to hear and feel G-d goading us to teshuva. The global sweep of the pandemic deludes us into shirking personal responsibility. How can one individual possibly be responsible for a global pandemic which is indiscriminately affecting millions? Yet, despite this global feel, it is crucial to personalize the pandemic and collect individual messages. G-d is currently speaking to each person just as He is speaking to all of humanity. His message and His goading resonates more loudly this year than in past years. How we respond to this amplified message is entirely our choice as free men.

Striving to Reach Heaven During the Days of Awe

Rabbi Ephraim Z. Buchwald

This past Saturday night, August 28th, or early Sunday morning to be more exact, Ashkenazic Jews the world over began reciting selichot—the penitential prayers, in preparation for the High Holy Days. The imminent arrival of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur is palpable.

On this Shabbat, parashat Nitzavim will be read. The parasha is one of the final four parashiot of the Book of Deuteronomy in which Moses, on the last day of his life, talks with the People of Israel concerning the renewal of the Covenant. It is a stirring and moving message, the tenor of which corresponds perfectly to that of the High Holidays and the Days of Awe.

Moses gathers all the people of Israel, young and old, men and women, from the lowest to the most exalted, and, for the last time, initiates them into the covenant of G-d. Moses predicts (Deuteronomy 30:3), that eventually the Jewish people will return to G-d: וְשָׁב הַשֵּׁם אֶל־לִקְיָהּ אֶת שְׁבוּתָהּ, וְרַחֲמָהּ, *And the L-rd, your G-d will bring back from your captivity, and have mercy on you.* וְקִבְּצָהּ מִכָּל הָעַמִּים, אֲשֶׁר הִפְיָצָה הַשֵּׁם אֶל־לִקְיָהּ, *And G-d will gather you in from all the peoples to which*

He, the L-rd, your G-d has scattered you. No matter how far you've strayed, says Moses, G-d will gather you in. Even though your dispersed be in the far corners of heaven, from there G-d will gather you, and from there He will take you.

So, just how do the people of Israel qualify for redemption and regathering? Simple! The formula is clear. Just keep G-d's Torah!

And, you know, it's not that difficult! Deuteronomy 30:12 states: לֹא בַשָּׁמַיִם, הוּא, לְאֹמֶר, מִי יַעֲלֶה לָנוּ הַשָּׁמַיִמָה וְיִקְחֶהָ, *The Torah 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 of the sea for us to 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.

With so little time left before the High Holidays, how can we hope to transform ourselves into a people who deserve redemption? We have so much to do, and so little time to do what needs to be done!

The story is told, that in the town of Nemirov there

lived a great Tzaddik. Although he was renowned for his righteousness throughout the Jewish world, but, you know, among Jews, there are always doubters and skeptics. To be sure, there were even some sceptics to be found in the town of Nemirov, who questioned their rabbi's greatness.

Before the High Holidays, the Jews of Nemirov would awaken well before the earliest signs of dawn to recite the selichot prayers, the penitential prayers, petitioning G-d for forgiveness, so that they may be found worthy of forgiveness and redemption. Even those Jews who did not normally come to synagogue, would show up for selichot prayers.

For some unknown reason, the Tzaddik of Nemirov, never attended the early morning selichot prayers, giving his critics reason to claim that, after all, he was not so righteous, especially if he couldn't get up early enough to say selichot! When the Tzaddik's followers heard the demeaning words of his critics who demanded to know where the Tzaddik of Nemirov was, they would proudly say, "The Tzaddik of Nemirov is in heaven, petitioning G-d to grant forgiveness to the people of Israel."

One of the skeptics decided that he was going to put an end to these absurd inflated claims of the rabbi's righteousness, and prove, once-and-for-all, that the Tzaddik was a fraud.

One night, he audaciously slipped into the rabbi's house and lay under the rabbi's bed to find out exactly what the Tzaddik of Nemirov did during the time he was absent from the selichot prayers. Before the crack of dawn, the

Tzaddik awoke, and rose from his bed. But he didn't dress in his rabbinic garb. Instead, he dressed in the clothes of a lumberjack, went out into the cold, deserted woods, with an ax over his shoulder, and began to chop firewood.

After he completed chopping, the Tzaddik dragged the load to a little isolated house in the forest. He knocked on the door, which was answered by a little old lady. Announcing himself as the wood-chopper, he said that he had a delivery of wood. The old lady protested that she had no money to pay for the wood. The wood-chopper-Tzaddik ignored her protests, setting the wood in the fireplace and lighting a fire, all the while assuring the little old lady that she could pay later. Only then did the Tzaddik change his clothes and set off for the synagogue—late, of course, for the early selichot services.

When the skeptics asked their friend who had hidden under the rabbi's bed whether it was true that the rabbi had indeed gone to heaven, all he could say was, "Heaven? Perhaps even higher!"

During this period of selichot the Jewish people have a unique opportunity to ascend—to grow morally and religiously, to improve our attitudes and our behaviors, to work on our relationships with both humans and with G-d. We surely cannot expect to reach higher than heaven, but we can certainly strive to reach heaven.

And, as long as we strive to reach heaven, we can rest assured that we will be blessed, because we are on the right track.

The Right of Return

Rabbi Chaim Metzger

Standing between the scathing rebuke of the Tochachah in Ki Tavo, and the covenantal song of Haazinu, is Parshat Netzavim. All of Bnei Yisrael stand attentively, listening while Moshe explains all of the potential consequences for not following the various mitzvot in the Torah. At this precise moment, Moshe tells them how to return to G-d. No fewer than seven times over ten verses (30:1-10), Moshe emphasizes their ability to return to G-d, utilizing the root shuv, meaning "return". This frequency of the word shuv is by far the highest in all of the Torah. The word is the root of teshuvah, repentance, but why is this word included so many times here? Is it really necessary?

When the relationship between G-d and us looks irreparable, that is precisely when we need to know that

G-d is right there and waiting. Not only that, but Moshe continues in Devarim 30:11 by informing the Jews that not only is G-d waiting for them to return, but this return is actually a mitzvah. Understanding precisely how Bnei Yisrael must be feeling right now, Moshe continues that this mitzvah isn't something wondrous or distant. Teshuvah isn't hiding in the heavens, such that someone would need to go up to heavens and bring it down for us and show us how to do it. Nor is it on the far side of the sea, such that someone else would need to be brave in order to deliver and instruct us about it. It is close to you; it is within the grasp of your mouth and hearts to do it.

Our prophets have also taken teshuvah as a given. On the afternoon of every fast day, we read the words of Yeshaya-hu as the haftorah, wherein G-d explains that

His ways and thoughts are unlike those of humanity, and even the wicked can leave their ways and return to G-d. (Yeshayah 55:6-8) Yechezkel expresses a Divine declaration that the Jews claim that G-d's path of mitzvot is impossible, but G-d responds that the path of sin and rebellion is the impossible one. Returning to G-d is in our grasp. (Yechezkel 18:29)

[It is worth noting that the promise of Devarim 30:3 that "G-d will return you" may also offer a physical version of teshuvah. Our return is not only spir-itual; G-d's Divine Presence is always with Bnei Yisrael, no matter where we are, even in Exile. G-d is there to help us return whenever we are ready. See Rashi's commentary to Devarim 30:3, based on Megillah 29a.]

At the same time, our Sages have acknowledged a miraculous aspect of teshuvah. The Talmud Yerushalmi (Makkot 2:6) presents the following parable:

They [the Sages] asked Wisdom, "What is the punishment for the sinner?" Wisdom re-sponded, "Misfortune pursues the sinner." (Mishlei 13:21).

They asked Prophecy, "What is the punishment for the sin-ner?" Prophecy responded, "The person who sins, he alone shall die." (Yechezkel 18:12).

Can the Jews become Sedom?

Rabbi Jonathan Ziring

And later generations will ask—the children who succeed you, and foreigners who come from distant lands and see the plagues and diseases that the LORD has inflicted upon that land, all its soil devastated by sulfur and salt, beyond sowing and producing, no grass growing in it, just like the upheaval of Sodom and Gomorrah, Admah and Zeboim, which the LORD overthrew in His fierce anger— all nations will ask, "Why did the LORD do thus to this land? Wherefore that awful wrath?" They will be told, "Because they forsook the covenant that the LORD, God of their fathers, made with them when He freed them from the land of Egypt;" (Devarim 29:21-24)

As Moshe nears the end of his life, he establishes a covenant between God and the Jewish people. In a terrifying description, he declares that if God will punish the Jewish people, it would look like the destruction of Sedom and Amorah. These images bring to mind the paradigmatic case of God's deconstruction of evil, absolute evil. Why invoke these images? Are the Jews really going to reach that level?

They then asked G-d, "What is the punishment for a sinner?" G-d replied, "The sinner should repent and receive atonement. That is why the verse says, 'Therefore He shows sinners the way.' (Tehillim 25:8) This is the path of repentance."

This parable illustrates the perspective that the concept of Teshuvah is beyond all reason. We should not be able to erase the ill effects of our actions. If it wasn't for G-d Himself saying that it works and is a mitzvah, not even the wisest of men or the most inspired prophet could make heads or tails of it.

As we saw above, this impossibly beau-tiful mitzvah, this unique opportunity, is bookended by the frightening cove-nant of the Tochachah and the harrow-ing treaty of Haazinu. We are given this chance to return, knowing just how great the divide between the reward for serving G-d, and punishment for failure, can be.

There is always a path to return ever closer to G-d. No matter where we stand right now, we are always before G-d. Whoever we are - from the loftiest of leaders to the weary woodcutters and water drawers - G-d is showing us the path. The only real question is whether we will take that first step in the right direction.

The Seforno suggests that the magnitude of the destruction must be such that no one will mistake it for chance. The message of the punishment would be lost if people could mistake the punishment for anything but the hand of God. For the Seforno, the invocation of this image seems almost accidental.

However, Yeshayahu employs similar rhetoric. When describing the destruction of Israel, he notes that God had almost destroyed the Jews totally, but held back in his mercy: "Had not the LORD of Hosts Left us some survivors, We should be like Sodom, another Amorah." (Yeshayahu 1:9) Yeshayahu, however, seems to use this language to indicate that the punishment would be similar because the sins were similar as well. Thus, in the next verse he warns them "Hear the word of the LORD, You chieftains of Sodom; Give ear to our God's instruction, You folk of Amorah!" (1:10)

In the case of Yeshayahu, the prophet emphasizes that the sins of the Jewish people paralleled those of Sedom. He accuses them of failing to pursue justice and taking

advantage of the poor, the widow, and the orphan. Thus, the connection between the punishment of the Jews and that of Sedom is understandable - they sinned similarly and thus faced the same consequences.

However, in our Parsha, the sins of the Jewish people are not universal crimes, they are particularistic. They are accused of rejecting the covenant with God, of worshiping idols, and the like. These are not the crimes attributed to Sedom, neither in the Torah itself nor the Midrashim. Why then, is the image of Sedom invoked?

It seems that the purpose of this image is to prevent the Jews from dangerously thinking in categories of privilege rather than responsibility. As the Jews enter the Land of Israel, as God promises to miraculously drive out other nations before them, the Jews run the risk of believing that the nations in the land are intrinsically unworthy, and they, the Jews, are inherently better. Thus, they might believe that even if they sin, God would never take the land away from them. However, in Moshe's speeches throughout Devarim, he constantly warns them not to fall into this trap. God will take them into the land to fulfil his promise to the avot (Devarim 7), not because of the greatness of the Jews. He warns them to not interpret their success as personal greatness devoid of God's aid. (Devarim 8:17)

Even if the Jewish people are indeed special, as Yeshayahu implies by saying that they deserve to be like Sedom, but God's relationship with the Jewish people will prevent Him from completely carrying out such extreme punishment, that is not the way the Jews should think. They should focus on their uniqueness being due to the responsibilities that they have accepted, the commitments Moshe outlines in our chapter. To drive this point home, God scares them by saying that they could become Sedom. Sedom was the example of people who did not deserve the blessings of the land of Israel and were thus expunged. By using this image, God is telling the Jews that in principle, if they fail to live up to their responsibilities, they could become as undeserving of their relationship with God as Sedom. They could also lose the land of Israel.

The image is harsh, but critical. By telling the Jewish people that they could become Sedom, Moshe is trying to ensure that they will never rest on their laurels. While not denying their uniqueness, he tries to remind them that if they are not careful, they could become as bad as the paradigmatic anti-Jewish cities. The challenge he lays before them, and us, is not to rely on our uniqueness, but to live lives in which we deserve that special status that we have been granted.