**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT NITZAVIM**

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Motzaei Shabbat

In Parashat Nitzavim, Moshe makes the famous pronouncement, “For this law which I command you this day…it is not in the heavens, such that you would say, ‘If only somebody would go to the heavens for us and bring it to us and teach it to us, we would then observe it’; and it is not across the sea, such that you would say: ‘If only somebody would cross the sea for us and bring it to us and teach it to us, we would then observe it’” (30:11-14).

Several commentators, including the Ramban and Seforno, interpret these verses as referring to the *mitzva* of repentance, which Moshe described at length in the previous section. After Moshe urged the people that they should repent after being punished for breaching their covenant with God, he now emphasizes that repentance and change is possible. Seforno adds that the people might think of repentance as impossible in the conditions of exile, when they are left without prophets, and when their dispersion results in communities without knowledgeable Torah scholars. Moshe assures them that repentance requires neither going to the heavens – access to prophecy – nor crossing the seas – to find great scholars – for it is well within the reach of every individual under any circumstance.

Others, however, understood these verses as referring to the Torah generally, and emphasizing that Torah observance is something we are capable of. According to this interpretation, Moshe is impressing upon the people that performing the *mitzvot* does not require impossible measures, such as climbing to the heavens or swimming across the sea.

Rabbi Yisroel Shapira of Grodzhisk, in *Binat Yisrael*, adds that these verses may also convey the message that Torah observance is not limited to grand achievements. Some might make the mistake in their pursuit of greatness of overlooking opportunities for relatively small and minor good deeds which so frequently present themselves. The Rebbe of Grodzhisk gives the example of a person who works hard to save money so he could make a significant charitable donation, and in his desire to save, he ignores the requests from destitute paupers for the small sums they desperately need to support themselves. A person’s noble ambition for outstanding achievement can sometimes blind him to the countless opportunities to perform small acts of goodness. And thus Moshe urges that we must not wait until we can “climb to the heavens” or “cross the sea” to fulfill *mitzvot*. Certainly, we must exert ourselves to the best of our ability and maximize our potential to the very fullest, trying to reach as high and far as we can in our achievements. But our lofty aspirations must not lead us to forget that, as the Torah here concludes, “for the matter is very close to you” – *mitzva* opportunities present themselves at all times and in countless different forms, and we always have at least some small, valuable *mitzva* we can perform. Even as we strive to reach the “heavens” and achieve lofty goals, we must remember the *mitzvot* that are “very close” to us, the small but precious opportunities that are always available.

Sunday

In one of the more famous passages in the *Selichot* service, we proclaim to God, “The soul is Yours, and the body is Your creation – have pity on Your handiwork; the soul is Yours, and the body is Yours – O Lord, act for Your Name’s sake!”

To explain the meaning of these seemingly redundant clauses, *Chatam Sofer* suggests that they refer to two different types of people. For most people, “The soul is Yours, and the body is Your creation” – the soul is God’s, but the body, though created by God, is now “theirs.” Their soul is pristine and heavenly, but the body has been “seized” by the person, in that he uses it for physical gratification and enjoyment. We nevertheless ask, “have pity on Your handiwork” – that God should have compassion on these individuals, because the body is, after all, God’s “handiwork.” Even if it has been misused, the very fact that the body is God’s special creation is a reason for God to treat it compassionately. We then pray on behalf of those whose both body and soul “belong” to God, in the sense that they devote themselves entirely to His service. With regard to such people, we pray, “…act for Your Name’s sake.” Since these righteous individuals live with pure devotion, assisting them and granting them continued life and success is beneficial, so-to-speak, for God’s “Name,” bringing Him honor and glory.

As we stand before God in prayer begging for forgiveness, we humbly recognize that we have misused our “body,” our strengths, our capabilities, our talents, our energy, and our very existence. We have been granted all this “for Your Name’s sake” – to serve the Almighty and enhance His world, but we have not always utilized these gifts properly, for the right purposes. But we ask that God nevertheless protect and help us because we are, after all His “handiwork.” He created us and gave us our strengths, our capabilities and our very lives so we can contribute to His world. Each and every individual is God’s “handiwork” – especially crafted to fulfill a certain mission, or numerous missions, during his or her lifetime. In this prayer, we “remind” God that we are His “handiwork,” we are here for a purpose, and even if we have to this point not fully achieved that purpose, we still want the opportunity to do so. We approach the new year with a firm resolve to redouble our efforts to live the lives we are meant to live, to use our God-given strengths and opportunities to achieve and contribute, so that the entirety of our beings, both body and soul, will truly “belong” to the Almighty.

Monday

In Parashat Nitzavim, Moshe makes the famous pronouncement, “*Lo va-shamayim hi*” – that the Torah “is not in the heavens” (30:12). As he proceeds to explain, one might have thought that the Torah is relevant and practical only if somebody were able to ascend to the heavens to find out for us how it can be studied and observed. But in truth, Moshe insists, “the matter is very near to you – in your mouth and in your heart, to observe” (30:14).

Rashi, commenting on the words “it is not in the heavens,” cites the Gemara’s remark in Masekhet Eiruvin (55a), “For were it to be in the heavens, you would have to ascend to it to study it.” What might be the Gemara’s intent in conveying this theoretical lesson, which will never need to be put into practice?

The simplest explanation, perhaps, is that the Gemara seeks to impress upon us the inherently binding nature of Torah, that our obligation towards it is unconditional. Although it will never happen that we would need to ascend to the heavens to study Torah or obey its laws, we are to feel unconditionally and unlimitedly bound to the Torah’s authority that in theory, were this to be necessary, we would have no choice but to ascend to the heavens.

Additionally, however, the Gemara might be directing our attention to the opposite side of the coin, so-to-speak, to those occasions when the Torah might indeed appear to be “in the heavens.” Certainly, as Moshe teaches, the Torah is not and will never be “in the heavens,” beyond our reach. It is practical and directly relevant to each and every one of us at all times. However, there are times when we might feel as though it is in the heavens. The Torah’s obligations are challenging and demanding, requiring a great deal of self-discipline, self-restraint, hard work, and personal sacrifice – and this is precisely why Moshe needed to impress upon us that we are capable of meeting these demanding obligations. However, the Gemara perhaps speaks here of the not-at-all-hypothetical situation when we feel that the Torah is beyond our reach. There will be time when we find ourselves overwhelmed by the Torah’s demands, when we simply feel that they are too difficult to us. The Gemara teaches us that when this happens, we need to start climbing, one step at a time. Rather than absolve ourselves, we should instead do what we can. Even if we are certain that the Torah is “in the heavens,” we have to try. We simply need to reach as high as we can. At those times when the Torah appears beyond our reach, we have to take a step towards it.

Moshe tells us that the Torah “is not in the heavens,” but the Gemara acknowledges the reality that sometimes it might, in some sense, appear to be “in the heavens.” And the Gemara urges us at those times not to give up, to reach higher, to always inch closer to “the heavens” even if we are certain we can never get there.

Tuesday

In the introductory section to our *Selichot* prayers, we cry, “It is not with kindness or with deeds that we have come before You; we have knocked on Your doors like paupers and mendicants.” We confess right from the outset that we do not approach God to ask for something we feel we deserve. We stand before God like a helpless beggar knocking on the door pleading for mercy and compassion, desperately asking for money without offering anything in return. Like the pauper, we are desperate for the assistance that only God can provide us, and we do not have the merit through which to earn it.

Rav Menachem Bentzion Sacks, in his *Menachem Tziyon* (*Yerach Ha-eitanim*), finds it significant that we use here specifically the terms “*dalim*” and “*rashim*” in comparing ourselves to impoverished beggars, as opposed to the Hebrew words for paupers (such as “*aniyim*” or “*evyonim*”). He explains that these terms are used because they have the specific connotation of a pauper who was once wealthy. The word “*dal*” is associated to the verb *d.l.d.l.*, which means “dwindle,” “shrink” or “diminish.” Likewise, the word “*rash*” is derived from the verb *r.sh.sh.*, which means “impoverish,” to drive someone into poverty. The image we depict is not simply of a penniless beggar, but of an individual who had irresponsibly and inexcusably driven himself into poverty, who is forced to knock on doors because of his own mistakes, by destroying his own fortune.

“It is more precious than pearls, and all your assets cannot compare to it” (Mishlei 3:15). Nothing is more valuable than living a life of Torah commitment, than faithfully devoting oneself to the service of his Creator. As we recite *Selichot*, we humbly acknowledge that we are “*ke-dalim u-kh’rashim*” – like people who destroyed their own fortune and must now beg for compassion. We had the incomparable fortune of Godliness, but we forfeited it in exchange for the pursuit of the vain pleasures of the world. During this period of the year, we beg for God’s help in our effort to rebuild our spiritual fortune, to regain what we lost by committing to correct our mistakes, reverse our bad habits, and live the lives of the spiritual “wealth” that we must try to live.

Wednesday

In Parashat Nitzavim, Moshe assures *Benei Yisrael* that even if they are exiled from their homeland as punishment for breaching their covenant with God, they will be brought back to the Land of Israel if they repent: “You shall return unto the Lord your God and heed His voice… The Lord shall then return your exiles and have compassion on you, and shall again gather you from among all the nations to where the Lord your God had dispersed you” (30:2-3). Moshe promises the people that no matter how distant from *Eretz Yisrael* they might find themselves, God will bring them back: “If your exile is at the edge of the heavens, from there the Lord your God shall gather you…” (30:4).

Rav Menachem Bentzion Sacks, in his *Menachem Tziyon* (*Yerach Ha-eitanim*), notes that the Torah here uses the expression “*bi-ktzei ha-shamayim*” (“the edge of the heavens”) to refer to the remotest locations, as opposed to the term “*ketzei ha-aretz*” which we find elsewhere (such as in Parashat Ki-Tavo, 28:49). He boldly suggests that these two expressions refer, allegorically, to two different kinds of “remoteness,” of distance from the kind of life that the Torah expects us to live. “*Ketzei ha-aretz*” alludes to those who have strayed to the extremes of “the earth” – of worldliness, of overindulgence in physical enjoyment and material luxury, and have no connection to the lofty teachings, values and ideals of the Torah. But there are also those who have strayed to “*ketzei ha-shamayim*,” to the extremes of the “heavens,” to spirituality that is disconnected from the realities of the world within which the Torah is to be practiced. This extreme could lead people to neglect their basic physical and material needs, to try – in vain – to lead a spiritual lifestyle that ignores the realities of human life, and to look with contempt upon those who do not seek to lead such a lifestyle. Rav Sacks writes that as Moshe assures the people of the possibility of even the remotest exiles returning, he speaks specifically of those who have strayed to “*ketzei ha-shamayim*” – because their return is more difficult and unlikely than the return of those who have strayed to the opposite extreme. Those entrenched in misguided piety are convinced that their piety is authentic, making it exceedingly unlikely for them to return to the balanced, worldly existence that the Torah envisions and expects. And so Moshe emphasizes that God is willing and able to bring back even those who have strayed to “the edge of the heavens,” who reacted to the challenges of exile by trying to disconnect from the “earth” and live a purely “heavenly” existence which does not take into account the realities of human life.

Later, Moshe famously pronounces, “*Lo ba-shamayim hi*” – that the Torah “is not in the heavens” (30:12). The implications of this pronouncement are numerous and wide-ranging, but one is that the Torah is meant to be applied to, and take into account, the earthly, mundane realities of our world. One does not have to “ascend to the heavens” – disconnect himself from the realities of human life – in order to follow the Torah’s laws and values, and any such effort is, necessarily, doomed to fail.

The Gemara in Masekhet Shabbat (88b) depicts Moshe as having to confront and debate the heavenly angels at the time he ascended to the heavens to receive the Torah. The angels demanded that the sacred Torah must remain in the heavens, but Moshe pointed to the fact that the Torah’s laws address themselves to the human condition. The Torah forbids stealing because humans are naturally greedy; the Torah forbids adultery because humans experience sexual desire; the Torah requires observing Shabbat because humans must work to sustain themselves and need a day for physical and spiritual rejuvenation. The Torah is heavenly, but it is to applied to the complex realities of the earth. And thus just as we must avoid plummeting to the “*ketzei ha-aretz*,” to extreme preoccupation with the vain pleasures of the world, so must we be avoid soaring to “*ketzei ha-shamayim*,” to unrealistic extremes of piety, seeking in vain to free ourselves from the constraints of the human condition.

Thursday

Our *Selichot* prayer service revolves around the “thirteen attributes of mercy” which God pronounced to Moshe after the sin of the golden calf. Moshe returned to the top of Mount Sinai after *Benei Yisrael* worshipped the calf to plead to God on their behalf, and God proclaimed to Moshe the list of His “attributes of mercy,” which we recite repeatedly during *Selichot*, a service built mainly around these verses.

The source for this practice is the Gemara’s remark in Masekhet Rosh Hashanah (17b) that at the time when God proclaimed the thirteen attributes, He “wrapped Himself as the leader of the congregation and showed Moshe the arrangement of the prayer. He said to him: Whenever Israel sins, they shall perform this arrangement before Me, and I will forgive them.” The Gemara here teaches that God Himself established this procedure of reciting the thirteen attributes in order to earn forgiveness and atonement.

Much has been written about the precise meaning of this passage, and how we earn expiation for our sins by performing this service. Leaving this question aside, it is also noteworthy that the Gemara depicts God as actually leading the service. He did not just instruct Moshe to teach *Benei Yisrael* to perform this service, but modeled it for us, by appearing as a *chazan* in the synagogue leading the prayers.

Rav Yehuda Amital suggested that the meaning of this image is that as we pray to the Almighty, He in a sense participates in the prayers with us. We introduce our *Selichot* service by reciting a long series of verses (beginning with “*Shomei’a tefila adekha kol basar yavo’u*”) that speak of God’s unlimited power and authority. A prerequisite to *Selichot*, to expressing remorse and begging for forgiveness, is to recognize God’s absolute control and authority over us and the universe, so we understand the full extent of the magnitude of the audacity and betrayal that sinning involves. However, these thoughts can leave us feeling too distant from God to turn to Him in prayer. The more we focus on God’s transcendence, the more difficult it is to experience immanence. Reflecting on His infinite power creates a vast gulf between us and Him that could discourage us from speaking to Him. And so the Gemara depicts God as a *sheli’ach tzibur* praying along with us. *Chazal* here seek to remind us that God takes interest in us, and He even joins us in our lowest moments, when we have betrayed Him and humbly seek forgiveness. He is not distant, but is standing, as it were, alongside us, accompanying us when we feel broken and vulnerable, eagerly anticipating our repentance and intently listening to our heartfelt prayers.

Friday

The *musaf* service on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur is introduced with the *chazan*’s chanting of “*Hineni He-ani*,” a solemn prayer expressing the *chazan*’s feelings of inadequacy as he embarks on the mission of leading the congregation in prayer on this day of judgment. The *chazan* begs God to help him succeed in properly praying on the congregation’s behalf, pleading that his misdeeds should not sabotage his efforts, and that his prayers should be lovingly accepted. “*Hineni He-ani*” is traditionally chanted in a somber, haunting melody, with a great deal of emotion.

When the *chazan* turns to God in the latter section of “*Hineni He-ani*,” he refers to the Almighty as “God of Avraham, God of Yitzchak and God of Yaakov, the great, powerful and awesome Deity, the Supreme Deity” – the precise text which we use in the introduction to the daily *Shemona Esrei* prayer. Interestingly, however, the *chazan* then adds a different reference to God: “*Eheyeh asher Eheyeh*” – “I am that I am.” This reference to God, which is not used elsewhere in our prayers, is familiar to us from Sefer Shemot (3:14), specifically, from God’s initial prophecy to Moshe at the burning bush. After God commanded Moshe to return to Egypt and approach Pharaoh to demand that he release *Benei Yisrael*, Moshe asked several questions, wondering how he could possibly succeed in such a mission. Among other things, he asked what he could answer to *Benei Yisrael* when they would demand to know the Name of the God who he would claim spoke to him. God replied, “*Eheyeh asher Eheyeh*.” Rashi, based on the Gemara (Berakhot 9b), explains this Name to mean that God promised to accompany *Benei Yisrael* both in their current state of suffering, in Egypt, as well as in all future situations of crisis. This is the Name which Moshe was to use in informing *Benei Yisrael* of their imminent redemption – and this Name, intriguingly, is added to the *chazan*’s emotional plea to God before he begins the *musaf* service on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

The Rosh Yeshiva, Rav Yaakov Meidan, suggested that this Name is included in the “*Hineni He-ani*” prayer to indicate that the *chazan* on these days of judgment must feel like Moshe felt at the burning bush. Having fled from Egypt years earlier to escape Pharaoh’s death sentence, and building a new life for himself in Midyan, Moshe is suddenly summoned to return to Egypt and undertake what seemed like an impossible task, to lead a multitude of downtrodden slaves to freedom out of the powerful Egyptian Empire. Moshe, understandably, responded to God’s command by exclaiming, “Who am I that I shall go to Pharaoh, and that I shall lead the Israelites from Egypt?!” (Shemot 3:11). The task seemed wholly impractical, and Moshe – a fugitive who was condemned to execution for murdering an Egyptian official, and who had left Egypt many years earlier – appeared as the least likely person to succeed in persuading Pharaoh to release the slaves. Rav Meidan suggested that the *chazan* is to feel the same way as he reluctantly accepts the mission of representing the congregation before God. He should see himself as unworthy and incapable of such a vitally important task, and should acknowledge that he can succeed only because “*Eheyeh asher Eheyeh*” – God has promised to accompany His beloved nation throughout their travails. The *chazan* is to approach this task confident not in his own credentials, but rather only in God’s limitless compassion and grace, and His eternal promise to assist us when we cry for His help.

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