

נִצְּטָוִים

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Parashat Nitzavim is always read on the *Shabbat* before *Rosh Hashanah*. R' Moshe Avigdor Amiel z"l (1883-1945; Chief Rabbi of Antwerp and Tel Aviv) writes: *Nitzavim* comes after *Parashot Ki Tetze* / "When you will go out" and *Ki Tavo* / "When you will come in." The Torah is teaching us that one can change his own place, but he can never change G-d, who is referred to as "*Mekomo Shel Olam*" / "The Place of the World," because He is omnipresent. One's body can go out of its present place and into a different place, but one's soul is always standing before *Hashem*. One cannot go away from before *Hashem* because (*Yeshayah* 6:3), "The whole world is filled with His glory."

R' Amiel continues: We stand at the end of the year and we make an accounting. Some people focus on *Ki Tetze* / what has gone out--i.e., their expenses that exceeded their incomes. Others focus on *Ki Tavo* / what has come in--i.e., their profits. Both are missing the main thing, which is what remains constant: "*Atem Nitzavim*" / "You are standing today, all of you, before *Hashem*, your *Elokim*."

R' Moshe Chaim Luzzato z"l (*Ramchal*; Italy and Eretz Yisrael; 1707-1747) writes (*Mesilat Yesarim*, ch.1), "The foundation of piety and the root of perfect service [of G-d] is in man's seeing clearly and recognizing as the truth the nature of his duty in this world." It is obvious that man is here to accomplish a mission, R' Amiel observes, for otherwise he is no different from an animal. Unfortunately, not only do we forget that this recognition is the foundation of our service, we often are oblivious to it altogether such that it plays no role in our lives. The reason is that we are too busy with our "comings" and "goings." Now, before *Rosh Hashanah*, we read this *Parashah* to remind us to slow down and feel that we are standing, all of us, before *Hashem*. (*Derashot El Ami*)

The Ten Days of Teshuvah

"Seek *Hashem* when He can be found; call Him when He is near." (*Yeshayah* 55:6)

Our Sages apply this verse to the *Aseret Yemei Teshuvah*, the ten days from *Rosh Hashanah* through *Yom Kippur*. But are there really days when *Hashem* is nearer than on other days? asks R' Moshe Yitzchak Ashkenazi z"l (1821-1898; Trieste, Italy). *Hashem* is perfect in every possible way and is not subject to moods--sometimes angry and sometimes approachable, R' Ashkenazi notes. Any good person practices *Chessed* / kindness all of the time--on his bad days as on his good days; even on days when people repay his kindness with evil. At the same time, such a person does not overdo his *Chessed*, for all extremes are undesirable, as our Sages have taught. Certainly, then, *Hashem* is not subject to changing moods or extremes!

R' Ashkenazi explains: Specific days were established as days of *Teshuvah*, and *Hashem* promised that He will be available to us on those days, so that when those days come, a person will take note, will examine his deeds, will seek forgiveness, and will vow not to repeat his mistakes. (If there was not a special time for doing this, we would remain focused on our daily lives, would procrastinate, or would forget, and we would never take the time to repent.)

It is true, R' Ashkenazi continues, that we often repeat the same mistakes despite having repented. Nevertheless, repenting year after year does have a positive effect, so long as the repentance is sincere. Little by little, our souls are purified. To what can this be compared? R' Ashkenazi asks. To an ink spot on a garment. The first laundering may not whiten the garment, but every time that the garment is washed, the spot becomes fainter and fainter.

(*Simchat Ha'regel* #7)

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"See--I have placed before you today the life and the good, and the death and the evil . . . I have placed life and death before you, blessing and curse; and you shall choose life, so that you will live, you and your offspring." (30:15, 19)

Our Sages explain that G-d is telling us, "This thing--life--is the good portion. Choose it!"

If G-d has made the choice so clear, asks R' Yehuda Ashlag z"l (1886-1954), do we really have a choice? He explains:

Often, we are too harried to make good choices. When, as in our verse, *Hashem* directs us toward the correct choice, it is teaching that, from time-to-time, *Hashem* will give us a break from the "rat race" and allow us the peace of mind to see clearly what is right. However, it still remains up to us to use those opportunities to make good choices.

(*Hakdamah L'Talmud Eser Sefirot*)

There are two holidays mentioned in the Torah whose primary significance is not described there. Nowhere in the Torah is *Rosh Hashanah* described as the Day of Judgment. Likewise, *Shavuot* is not referred to in the Torah as the Day of the Giving of the Torah. Why?

R' Shlomo Ephraim z"l of Lunschitz (17th century; author of the Torah commentary *Kli Yakar*) answers by noting that there are two other dates that are hidden as well: the date of one's eventual death and the date of the arrival of *Mashiach*. The reason for all of these is the same, says R' Shlomo Ephraim. Being in doubt forces us to think differently. Not knowing the date of the Giving of the Torah allows us to feel every day as if the Torah is new. Not knowing when *Mashiach* will come can drive us to repent constantly in order to merit his arrival. Not knowing when we will die also can lead us to repent constantly in preparation for the Great Judgment. Finally, not knowing when the Day of Judgment (*Rosh Hashanah*) is prevents us from sinning all year long, when it is seemingly safe to do so, and planning to repent at the last moment. (*Olelot Ephraim* II 33)

Of course, we do know when the Day of Judgment (*Rosh Hashanah*) and the Day of the Giving of the Torah (*Shavuot*) are because the Oral Tradition teaches us these facts. Perhaps, suggests R' Menachem Simcha Katz *shlita* (Brooklyn, NY), the Torah is teaching us a second lesson: that without complete loyalty to the Oral Tradition and meticulous adherence to the laws found in it (i.e., in the Talmud), *teshuvah* is impossible or meaningless. This is alluded to in the blessing of the daily *Shemoneh Esrei* which speaks of *teshuvah*: "Return us, our Father, to Your Torah; draw us close, our King, to Your service, and [then] return us in complete repentance before You." (*Simcha L'ish* p. 406)

"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 of 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 in your heart--to perform it." (30:12-14)

Rashi z"l understands these verses to be referring to the entire Torah. In contrast, R' Moshe ben Nachman z"l (*Ramban*; 1194-1270; Spain and *Eretz Yisrael*) interprets these verses as speaking specifically about the *Mitzvah* of *Teshuvah*.

R' Simcha Bunim Alter z"l (1898-1992; *Gerrer Rebbe*) notes that this is just one of many references to *Teshuvah* in our *Parashah*. He observes that the *Gematria* of the *Parashah*'s opening words, "*Atem nitzavim ha'yom*" / "You are standing today" (adding 12 for the number of letters in the Hebrew phrase) equals the *Gematria* of "*Shabbat*" (adding four for the number of letters in the word plus the word itself). The next words of the *Parashah* are "*Kulchem lifnei Hashem Elokeichem*" / "all of you, before Hashem, your *Elokim*." The Torah is alluding to the following, the *Gerrer Rebbe* writes:

Our Sages say that a person who observes *Shabbat* is forgiven for his sins. However, our Sages also teach that even *Yom Kippur* does not atone for sins between man and his fellow man unless one appeases his friend. Thus, even after *Shabbat*, one is completely forgiven only if "*Kulchem*"--if we stand as one because we have appeased each other. Only then are we "*Lifnei Hashem*." It may be that the custom to begin *Selichot* on *Motzai Shabbat* is to remind us that observing *Shabbat* has not completed our atonement process, the *Gerrer Rebbe* writes. (In most years, *Ashkenazim* begin *Selichot* on *Motzai Shabbat Parashat Nitzavim*, but we begin them a week earlier when, as this year, the first day of *Rosh Hashanah* falls on Monday or Tuesday.) (*Lev Simcha*)

Many find *Teshuvah* to be an uncomfortable subject, notes R' Reuven Sasson *shlita* (*Rosh Yeshiva* of Yeshivat Hesder Ramat Ha'sharon)--as if talking about repentance brands us as bad people. However, R' Sasson writes, this reflects a superficial understanding of *Teshuvah*.

R' Avraham Yitzchak Hakohen Kook z"l (1865-1935; first *Ashkenazic* Chief Rabbi of *Eretz Yisrael*) writes: "*Teshuvah* does not come to embitter a person's life, but to make it more pleasant." R' Sasson explains: Of course, *Teshuvah* includes facing up to one's sins. The word "*Chet*" / "sin" means "to stray" off the proper path. And the literal meaning of "*Teshuvah*" is not "repentance," but rather "return." Doing *Teshuvah* means returning to mankind's normal, healthy state, from which Adam strayed when he sinned, and from which we strayed further. *Teshuvah* is not creating a new reality; it is returning to what should be our normal condition. That, in turn, should bring a person happiness, not bitterness. (*Be'or Panecha: Hashiveni V'ashuvah* p.15)