

A Taste of Text: Source based learning for Shabbat

*This weekly sheet is a project of the United Synagogue
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PARSHAT NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

DVAR TORAH: FROM WOODCHOPPER TO WATER DRAWER

There's a strange sounding expression in the beginning of Parshat Nitzavim, "from the woodchopper to the water drawer". The Torah makes it very clear that every single Jew was gathered together before God to enter the covenant, and it lists the elders, the princes, the converts, the women, the children – every Jew. Then it adds, "Meichoteiv eitzecha ad shoeiv meimecha" – "From the wood chopper to the water drawer." Shouldn't it have said something like, "From the princes to the water drawers"? The present formulation of the verse sounds similar to, "every color of the spectrum – from turquoise to green."

Here are two suggestions, one straightforward, "al derech hapshat", and another "al derech hadrash", a drashic answer.

There is a similar expression in Megillat Esther. The Megillah says that Achashveirosh ruled over 127 provinces, "mei'Hodu v'ad Kush" – "from Hodu to Kush." Rav and Shmuel argue (Megilla 11a) about how to understand this. One of them explains it in the standard way: Hodu is on one side of the world and Kush on the other. [This is probably why we usually translate Hodu as India and Kush as Ethiopia.] But the other opinion says that Hodu and Kush were right next to each other. Just like Achashveirosh ruled over that pair of adjacent provinces, so he ruled over the whole inhabited world. Similarly, our verse might simply be saying that just like the woodchoppers and water carriers were there for the covenant, so were representatives of all professions.

But perhaps we can suggest another explanation "al derech hadrash", assuming that woodchoppers and water drawers are really polar opposites, two ends of the spectrum.

Torah is compared to trees - "Eitz Chayim hi", "It is a tree of life" – and Torah is also compared to water. The woodchoppers and water drawers represent two contrasting types of Torah scholars, talmidei chachamim.

The tree is above ground – open and exposed – and represents the revealed Torah. The woodchoppers cut the tree into pieces. They are the talmidei chachamim involved in analysis and categorization, breaking down the revealed Torah into its basic components.

But the water drawers are those who access the inner Torah, going deep beneath the surface. They have to draw the water, to bring down the Torah from the depths. In order to do that they perfect themselves and make themselves vessels that can hold the water.

In these weeks we're focusing on teshuvah, repentance. Of course, learning Torah is a powerful way to do teshuvah, to change ourselves in a fundamental way. But we must remember that teshuvah will also enhance our Torah study. If we want to gain a deeper understanding of Torah we have to perfect ourselves to become vessels that can draw the water.

SOURCE GUIDE WHAT IS “THIS MITZVAH”?

There is a small (4 verses) section in Parshat Netzavim (Devarim 30:11-14) that receives a lot of attention from our commentators.

<p>Devarim 30:11-14 11. For this commandment that I am commanding you today is not hidden from you, nor is it far from you. 12. It is not in heaven, that you should say, “Who will go up to the heaven and take it for us so that we will hear it and do it?” 13. It is also not beyond the sea, that you should say, “Who will go beyond the sea and take it for us that we may hear it and do it?” 14. For this matter is very close to you, in your mouth and heart so you should do it.</p>	<p>דברים ל:יא-יד (יא) כִּי הַמִּצְוָה הַזֹּאת אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי מְצַוְךָ הַיּוֹם לֹא נִפְלְאת הִוא מִמֶּךָ וְלֹא רְחֹקָה הִוא. (יב) לֹא בַשָּׁמַיִם הִוא לֵאמֹר מִי יַעֲלֶה לָנוּ הַשָּׁמַיִם וְיִקַּח לָנוּ וְיִשְׁמַעְנוּ אֹתָהּ וְנַעֲשֶׂנָּה: (יג) וְלֹא מֵעֵבֶר לַיָּם הִוא לֵאמֹר מִי יַעֲבֹר לָנוּ אֶל עֵבֶר הַיָּם וְיִקַּח לָנוּ וְיִשְׁמַעְנוּ אֹתָהּ וְנַעֲשֶׂנָּה: (יד) כִּי קָרוֹב אֵלֶיךָ הַדְּבָר מְאֹד בְּפִיךָ וּבְלִבְבְּךָ לַעֲשׂוֹתוֹ:</p>
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One of the challenges this section presents is determining which mitzvah the Torah is referring to when it says, “For this mitzvah that I command you today.” [What is “this mitzvah”?](#)

There are three main approaches taken by the commentators. The approach we will focus on views this section as referring to the mitzvah of Teshuvah, repentance.

1. What are the other two approaches to what “this mitzvah” refers to?

See Rashi on pasuk 14 – What are the strong points of his approach?

See the beginning of the Ramban’s comment, and the Kli Yakar’s second direction.

The **Ramban** is the author of the approach that “hamitzvah hazot” refers to the mitzvah of teshuvah. First try to read the section in the Chumash as referring to teshuvah and see what, if any, difficulties arise. Then learn the Ramban and see if he addresses them.

<p>Ramban on Devarim 30:11 Rather, “this mitzvah” refers to repentance, mentioned above. For “Internalize in your heart” (verse 1) and “Return to Hashem your God” (verse 2) are where He commands us to do so. It was mentioned in the future (vahasheivota and veshavta are not in the command form) because it hints at a promise that in the future we will repent. The meaning of “If your dispersed ones will be at the edge of the heaven” and you are in the hands of the nations you will still be able to return to God and do everything that I command you today. For it is not hidden or distant from you, but very close, at every time and in every place. The meaning of “in your mouth and heart to do it” is that they should verbally confess their sin and that of their fathers and return wholeheartedly to God. They should accept upon themselves to keep the Torah for all generations, as it mentioned above, “you and your children with all of your heart,” as I explained.</p>	<p>רמב"ן על דברים ל:יא אבל “המצוה הזאת” על התשובה הנזכרת, כי והשבות אל לבבך (בפסוק א) ושבת עד ה' אלהיך (בפסוק ב) מצוה שיצוה אותנו לעשות כן ונאמרה בלשון הבינוני לרמוז בהבטחה כי עתיד הדבר להיות כן והטעם, לאמר כי אם יהיה נדחך בקצה השמים ואתה ביד העמים תוכל לשוב אל ה' ולעשות ככל אשר אנכי מצוך היום, כי אין הדבר נפלא ורחוק ממך אבל קרוב אליך מאד לעשותו בכל עת ובכל מקום: וזה טעם בפסוק ובלבבך לעשותו, שיתודו את עונם ואת עון אבותם בפניהם, וישבו בלבם אל ה', ויקבלו עליהם היום התורה לעשותה לדורות כאשר הזכיר (לעיל פסוק ב) אתה ובניך ככל לבבך, כמו שפירשתי (שם):</p>
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2. What in the text supports the “teshuvah” approach? (see the immediately preceding section in the Torah)

3. The main thrust of this section in the Torah seems to be: You might think this is impossible, difficult, and unattainable — but it is not. Why might we have thought — reading between the lines of the Ramban — that teshuvah is not possible?

4. How does the Ramban explain the line, "beficha uvilvavecha laasoto" ("In your mouth and in your heart to do it") = what about teshuvah is in the mouth, what is in the heart, and what does "to do it" mean?

The Sforno similarly explains this section as referring to teshuva. Compare his comments with the Ramban's.

<p>Sforno on Devarim 30:11 The reason (for this section) is that I (Hashem) said that "You will internalize this in your heart in all the nations," that teshuvah will be done while you are in the exile so that you will be saved ... "It is not hidden from you," that you will need prophets. "It is not distant from you," that you will need distant wise men of the generation to explain it to you. You will be able to do it even if you are in exile. This is also the explanation of "It is not in heaven": It is telling you that it won't happen that the matter of repentance requires a prophetic message.</p>	<p>ספורנו על דברים ל:יא והטעם שאמרתי והשבות אל לבבך בכל הגוים, שצריך שהתשובה תהי' בעורך בגלות למען תושע הוא ... לא נפלאות היא ממך: שתצטרך לנביאים. לא רחוקה היא: שתצטרך לחכמי הדור הרחוקים שיפרשו לך. באופן שתוכל לעשותה אפי' בעורך בגלות. ובאר זה באמרו לא בשמים היא לאמר. לא יקרה לך בענין התשובה שתצטרך בה להגדת נביא:</p>
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5. Show how the Sforno translates the Ramban's basic direction into the following expressions: "Lo nifleit hi;" "Lo rechoka hi;" "Lo bashamayim hi;" "Lo mei'eiver layam hi;" "beficha uvilvavecha laasoto."

See also the Kli Yakar's second direction.

6. What is the sinner's excuse that this section rejects?

7. What is the sinner's worry that this section reassures him about?

FOR GOD'S SAKE BY RABBI SHAYA KARLINSKY

The Gemara in Yevamot (79a) teaches us that there are three qualities which identify the Jewish nation: we are rachmanim – merciful; bayshanim – capable of shame; and gomlei chasadim – bestowers of altruistic kindness. Each of these three qualities plays a major role in the outcome of the judgment that we should look forward to on Rosh Hashanah.

Rachmanim – Merciful

We will be praying many times for rachamim, for mercy from the Almighty. God's rachamim doesn't mean that He ignores our mistakes or that they have no consequences. Rachamim means being erekh apayim, slow to anger. God is patient. He gives us a chance before holding us fully accountable for our sins. And our rabbis teach that God judges us with the same attitude that we judge others. So we need to transform ourselves into merciful people. Rather than looking to extract the last ounce of justice when something goes wrong or someone wrongs us, we must look to help the other person improve, to fix what is broken, and to exhibit patience and understanding. The patience embodied in rachmanim also means not living simply for the moment. A characteristic of the Jewish people is always to be focused on the future, looking beyond the short term.

Bayshanim – Capable of Shame

The Gemara's source that bushah, shame, is one of the Jewish nation's characteristics is the verse: "Ba'avur t'hiyeh yirato al pneikhem" – "So that His fear should be on your face" (Shemot 20:16). And the rabbis teach (Nedarim 20a), "Yirato," His fear, "zu habushah," refers to one's shame.

At Sinai, God appeared in all His glory to instill within us constant fear and awe. A person naturally fears embarrassing situations and controls certain improper behavior to avoid that embarrassment. But one who lacks shame, is impervious to embarrassment, and has no awe of greatness, lacks the built-in restraints that might control that behavior.

During selichot, we repeatedly quote a verse in Ezra (9:6) in our confessions to God, "Boshti v'nechlamti" – "God, I am ashamed to lift my face to You, for our sins extend to the heavens." A sense of shame over improper actions is a quality that leads to improving those actions. And that very Jewish quality is one of the reasons why the Jewish people are so confident of good judgment on Rosh Hashanah.

Gomlei Chasadim, Bestowers of Altruistic Kindness:

The human quality that underlies this Jewish character trait is that of being a giving person. The Maharal provides an explanation of the greatness of teshuvah me'ahavah and avodah me'ahavah, repentance out of love and service out of love. True love is the pure desire to give to another, motivated by the giving nature of one's own personality. Serving God to receive a reward isn't true giving; it's really investing. And serving God out of appreciation, while a higher level, still lacks the purity of unconditional love. The highest level is to serve God out of love, motivated solely by the desire to fulfill our purpose, for G-d's sake, rather than ours.

Teshuvah out of love is motivated by nothing except the desire to repair the damaged relationship that created distance between us and God. Similarly, avodah me'ahavah is to serve God out of love, motivated solely by the desire to fulfill our purpose; for God's sake rather than ours.

We will be repeating the thirteen attributes of God's mercy numerous times during the coming days of selichot. The Talmud says we have a brit, a covenant with God that if we call upon God's mercy we will not return empty handed. The concept of brit, a covenant, is that each side gives something of himself. God forgoes the midat hadin, the strict justice upon which the world was to be formed. We forgo our selfishness and arrogance by manifesting the three unique qualities of the Jewish people.

When we present ourselves to God in such a way, we have, kiv'yakhol, left Him little "choice" but to inscribe us in the Book of Life, lema'an kha Elokim chaim, for Your eternal sake, God. If we focus on nurturing in ourselves the qualities that identify our Jewish nation: becoming rachmanim, bayshanim, and gomlei chasadim, we can have confidence that each of us and the entire Jewish nation will speedily merit being written and inscribed for a good year and for a good and peaceful life.

Leshanah tovah tikatevu vetechatemu, le'altar, lechaim tovim uleshalom.

*This publication is compiled by the staff and Rabbonim at **Shapells/Yeshivat Darché Noam** for men and **Midreshet Rachel v'Chaya Seminary** for women in Jerusalem. Find out more about the **married couples' programme** and the **Pathways Israel** and **Pathways Plus** programmes offered at www.darchenoam.org +972-2-651-1178, 5 Beit Hakerem Street, Jerusalem.*

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