

Parshat Nitzavim-Vayelech
It is Very Close to You
Dr. Tamar Marvin - Class of 2024

There are blockbuster *parashot*, like Ki Tisa, when the Revelation happens, and then the sin of the golden calf, and then the breaking of the *Luchot ha-Brit*, the tablets of the Ten Commandments. Then there are those *parashot* that we must struggle to connect with, like Tazria, which involves ritual impurity and a mysterious spiritual/physical skin ailment. Nitzavim is what I'd call a sleeper hit *parsha*. It starts off with blessings and curses, although it doesn't get the distinction of being The *Tochecha*, what we call the blessings and curses section of Parashat Bechukotai in Sefer Vayikra. You know, the "I call heaven and earth to witness" parts and "I lay before you life and death"—that language is also here. Nitzavim kind of flies under the wire, with a few memorable lines. But I'd like to make the case that Nitzavim is a *parsha* that speaks uniquely, if quietly, to the human condition.

As the *parsha* opens, Moshe continues his long farewell speech on Arvot Moav, the plains of Moab, across from where *Bnei Yisrael* are about to cross the Yarden River into the Promised Land. He calls the people to enter into a *brit*, a covenant. But he doesn't only call the people present before him. He emphasizes that everyone is included, from the tribal elders and elected officials all the way to young children (*tafchem*), and מְחַטֵּב מִיַּמִּיךָ עַד שֹׂאֵב מִיַּמִּיךָ, from the wood chopper to the water bearer (Devarim 29:10). For a text known for its economy of language, we're invited to reflect on the specificity of these terms, on the importance of inclusivity. But that's not all; the Torah continues:

וְלֹא אִתְּכֶם לְבַדְכֶם אֲנִי כֹרֵת אֶת־הַבְּרִית הַזֹּאת כִּי אֶת־אֲשֶׁר יִשְׁנוּ פֹה עִמָּנוּ עִמָּד הַיּוֹם
לִפְנֵי ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְאֶת אֲשֶׁר אֵינְנוּ פֹה עִמָּנוּ הַיּוֹם

Not with you alone am I establishing this covenant today, rather with those who are present today before Hashem our G-d **and those who are not here with us today.** (Devarim 29:13)



So what we're saying here is that this implicates all Jews for all times, all future generations.

Nitzavim also contains a passage of stunning power, one of the most radical set of verses, I'd submit, in our Torah:

כִּי הַמִּצְוָה הַזֹּאת אֲשֶׁר אֶנְכִי מְצַוֶּה הַיּוֹם לֹא-נִפְלֶאת הוּא מִמֶּךָ וְלֹא רְחוֹקָה הוּא: לֹא בַשָּׁמַיִם
הוּא לֵאמֹר מִי יַעֲלֶה-לָנוּ הַשָּׁמַיְמָה וְיִקְחֶהָ לָנוּ וְיִשְׁמַעְנוּ אֹתָהּ וְנַעֲשֶׂנָה: וְלֹא-מֵעֵבֶר לַיָּם הוּא
לֵאמֹר מִי יַעֲבֹר-לָנוּ אֶל-עֵבֶר הַיָּם וְיִקְחֶהָ לָנוּ וְיִשְׁמַעְנוּ אֹתָהּ וְנַעֲשֶׂנָה: כִּי-קְרוֹב אֵלֶיךָ הַדְּבָר
מְאֹד בְּפִיךָ וּבְלִבְבְּךָ לַעֲשׂוֹתוֹ:

This commandment which I am commanding you today is not too wonderful for you, nor far from you; **It is not in the heavens, so that you should say, 'Who will ascend skywards to get it for us, so we can hear it and do it?'** Nor is it across the ocean, so that you should say, 'Who will cross these waters and get it for us, so that we can hear it and do it?' **Because it is very close to you; it is in your mouth and your heart to do it.** (Devarim 20:11-14)

I was certain that the commentators would have a rich set of interpretations on these verses, unpacking the implication that Torah is within the reach of all, inside us, just as we are. But the commentaries fall largely silent. They allow these words to speak for themselves. Rashi only says that even if the Torah was in heaven, you'd actually have to climb up there and get it. Ibn Ezra laconically comments that "it's not in the heavens" is an example of "it's not too wonderful for you." So I turned to one of my favorites, Ralbag, to see if he had something for me. But Ralbag only makes the point, a salient one, that "not in the heavens" means we don't need prophets to act as intermediaries for us to access Torah. I heartily concur, but it wasn't quite what I was hoping for.



So I began to read through Ralbag on the *parsha* and I found something astonishing that speaks to this verse as much as it does to an equally powerful and radical verse that I hadn't noticed before:

הַנְּסֻתָּוֹת לַה' אֱלֹקֵינוּ וְהַנְּגִלוֹת לָנוּ וּלְבָנֵינוּ עַד-עוֹלָם לַעֲשׂוֹת אֶת-כָּל-דְּבָרֵי הַתּוֹרָה הַזֹּאת:

Nistarot—concealed things—concern Hashem our God, while
ha-niglot—the revealed things—concern us and our children to forever do them, all the words of this Torah (Devarim 29:28).

So the commandments of the Torah may be esoteric, but that's okay; we can still do the things. Torah is not in the heavens, but right here in our hearts. Now before I tell you what Ralbag says here, a few words about Ralbag. Ralbag, the acronym of R. Levi ben Gershom, lived in Provence in the 14th century. As far as we know, he lived his entire life in the community of Orange, the remnant of a once large and vibrant community in Southern France. Ralbag is often known by an epithet I've used already: radical, as in radical Aristotelian. What this means is that Ralbag was a rationalist, a person who placed great importance and honor upon the intellectual capacities of the human being. He wrote an absolutely enormous and brilliant work of Jewish theology, a large chunk of which is devoted entirely to astronomy. And with, that let's see what Ralbag comments here:

This is among the greatest principles before the Torah: that God did not command us only to perform the words of the Torah based on explicit things, which we are commanded to do in all generations and for all time, since there are also implicit things in the words of the Torah: namely, the reasons that...inspire the commandments.

So, on the one hand, we are commanded—all of us, through the generations—to perform certain commandments explicitly. We blow shofar. We say *kiddush*. We build a



sukkah. But there are also inner meanings, hidden reasons why we do these things. Ralbag continues:

These [reasons] are not something that it is possible to know in their entirety, except for G-d alone.

The reasons are there, but they are beyond our capacity to know, at least in their full, rich panoply of meaning. We shouldn't despair of the reasons, even as we accept that they are ultimately beyond our grasp. On this reading, the "hidden things" are beyond—higher than—the "revealed things." The implicit, inner meaning trumps the explicit, outer behavior. And yet, Ralbag says:

It is this [limitation] that protects the human being from transgression in a detail of the commandment, lest one think that they have already accomplished the point of the *mitzvah* according to the Torah and has no need to perform that particular commandment. (Comment on Devarim 29:28)

It is not enough to know; we must also, even against the existential gap of knowledge, continue to act. We must do. And, in this regard, the explicit—the action, the behavior—trumps the implicit, the reason or meaning behind it: in Ralbag's concluding words, "So that no one will say that the Torah's words are **merely** theoretical (implicit), and not accomplished by means of action (the explicit)."

I think that holding these two things in tension is crucial: the commitment to do, even in the face of unknown meaning, with the security that that meaning is real. To hold space for what we cannot know without losing ourselves in the void. The *nistarot*, the implicit or concealed things, can only be found on the way through the *niglot*, the explicit or revealed things, the *mitzvot* we, embodied beings, enact. We must act, do; only through the process and the experience can we proceed deeper into the secrets of the Torah. *It*



is not in the heavens...it is not across the sea...it is nistarot that concern God...it is the niglot that concern us...it is very close to you.



Born in Israel and raised in the United States, Dr. Tamar Marvin is a scholar, writer, and educator currently based in Los Angeles. She holds a Ph.D. in Medieval and Early Modern Jewish Studies from the Jewish Theological Seminary and a B.A. in Literature and Journalism from New York University. This year she looks forward to serving as the congregational intern at B'nai David Judea. As a 2022 Vaitchtov writing fellow, she is at work on a piece exploring core halachic concepts. Tamar is also a 2022-23 iCenter fellow pursuing a master's concentration in Israel education. Tamar's writing has appeared in academic and broader media, and she is active online promoting Jewish learning. She has developed virtual learning experiences since 2013, teaching and lecturing, both in person and online, in a number of university and Jewish settings, including American Jewish University, the Wexner Heritage Foundation, and the American Sephardi Federation.

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