

Parshat Nitzavim: Human Repentance and Godly Return

Rabbi Dr. Erin Leib Smokler

Director of Spiritual Development, Maharat

Advanced Kollel: Executive Ordination Track Class of 2018

The speeches that comprise the book of Devarim are Moshe's final words to *Bnei Yisrael*, as he contemplates his end and their national beginning. He knows that he will not cross the Jordan with them and enter into the Promised Land, that the mantle of leadership will imminently be passed on, and that he too will pass on. So what to say on the brink? What words, what ideas will Moshe choose to convey as he stands in the liminal zone between life and death? In this week's *parsha*, the speech of *Nitzavim*, he offers one particularly powerful message, one both radical and relevant

Chapter 30, verses 1-30 read as follows:

1 And it shall come to pass, when all these things are come upon you, the blessing and the curse, which I have set before you, that you will return ("v'*hashevota*") to your heart amidst the various nations to which the Lord your God has banished you. 2 And you shall return ("v'*shavta*") to the Lord your God, and you shall obey His voice according to all that I command you today, you and your children, with all of your heart and soul. 3 Then the Lord your God will return ("v'*shav*") your captivity ("*shevutcha*") and have compassion upon you, and will return ("v'*shav*") and gather you from all the nations, amongst whom the Lord your God has scattered you. (Deuteronomy 30:1-3)

א וְהָיָה כִּי יָבֹאוּ עֲלֵיךָ כָּל-הַדְּבָרִים
הָאֵלֶּה הַבְּרָכָה וְהַקְּלָלָה אֲשֶׁר נָתַתִּי
לְפָנֶיךָ וְהִשְׁבַּתְתָּ אֶל-לְבָבְךָ בְּכָל-הַגּוֹיִם
אֲשֶׁר הִדִּיחֲךָ ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ שָׁמָּה: ב וּשְׁבַתְתָּ
עַד-ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ וְשָׁמַעְתָּ בְּקוֹלוֹ כְּכֹל
אֲשֶׁר-אֲנֹכִי מְצַוְךָ הַיּוֹם אַתָּה וּבְנֶיךָ
בְּכָל-לְבָבְךָ וּבְכָל-נַפְשְׁךָ: ג וְשָׁב ה'
אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֶת-שְׁבוּתְךָ וְרַחֲמֶךָ וְשָׁב וִקְבְּצֶךָ
מִכָּל-הָעַמִּים אֲשֶׁר הִפְצִיךָ ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ
(דברים ל:א-ג)

Notice here the repetition of the verb “to return,” or in Hebrew “*lashuv*.” In fact, the word is used in this unit no less than five times, indicating its thematic importance. Moshe predicts that a time will come when the people of Israel, having gone astray, will seek to return. “*Vehashevota el livavcha*.” Literally, they will return to their hearts, to themselves, to the principled people they wish to be. They will do *teshuvah*, repentance. They will disavow their previous ways and embrace God's commandments completely, with all of their heart and soul. The implication is that the return to self *is* the return to God. Returning *to* one's heart is returning *with* one's heart to God.

God's response to the people's effort will be immediate, says Moshe. “*V'shav Hashem Elokecha et shevutcha v'richamecha, v'shav v'kibetzcha mikol ha'amim...*” (Deut. 30:3). After showing His more punitive face for far too long, God will return His kindness, His blessing, and His people. God will ingather the exiles and restore Israel to its land in prosperity. He will take delight in them and renew His merciful ways with them. In a remarkable display of parallel action, indicated by the parallel language of *lashuv*, the human return to God will be met by the Godly return to humanity. Earthly initiative will yield powerful divine action, for humans, it seems, can stir the heavens.

This astonishing claim of the cosmic reverberations of human activity—a theme that would later become central to Jewish mysticism—can also be seen in last week's *parsha*, *Ki Tavo*. There, in Moshe's previous speech, in chapter 26, verses 17-18, he says:

17 You have affirmed ("he'emarta") this day that the Lord is your God, that you will walk in His ways, that you will observe His laws and commandments and rules, and that you will obey Him.
 18 And the Lord has affirmed ("he'emircha") this day that you are, as He promised you, His treasured people who shall observe all His commandments. (Deut. 26: 17-18)

זאת־ה' האמרת היום להיות לך לאלקים
 וללכת בדרכיו ולשמר חקיו ומצותיו
 ומשפטיו ולשמע בקלו: יח זה האמירך
 היום להיות לו לעם סגלה כאשר דבר־לך
 ולשמר כל־מצותיו: (דברים כו:ז-יח)

The verb in Hebrew, *l'he'emir*, used both for humans and for God (as was *lashuv* in our previous text), is a great challenge for translation. From the root for “to speak,” and of the causative grammatical form, it is a unique and oblique conjugation, not found again or before in Torah. Its form suggests something like “to cause to say,” but in context this remains obscure. So let us turn to Rashi. He writes:

We do not find any equivalent expression in the Scriptures [which might give us a clue to the meaning of these words]. However, it appears to me that [the expression האמיר] denotes separation and distinction. You have distinguished God from other gods to be your God, and God has separated you from among the nations to be to Him a treasured nation. (Rashi, Deut. 26:17)

האמרת והאמירך. אין להם עד מוכיח
 במקרא, ולי נראה שהוא לשון הפרשה
 והבדלה, הבדלת לך מאלהי עובדי כוכבים
 להיות לך לאלהים, והוא הפרישך אליו
 מעמי הארץ להיות לו לעם סגלה. (רש"י,
 דברים כו: ז)

L'he'emir, on this read, is a kind of performative language. It is to speak something into being through identification, through separation, through assertion of relationship.

But our problems do not end with a grammatical understanding, for a theological conundrum grows from it. What could it mean for humans to speak the Godly relation into existence and in what sense does God speak God's people into existence?

I think that these verses offer a radical insight into the core of the human-God relationship, an insight bolstered by our verses from *Nitzavim*. They claim that, yes, in fact we can, through language, through nuanced communication, effectuate our own relationships. Like God who brought a world into being with language, we declare and thereby create.

You have affirmed ("he'emarta") this day that the Lord is your God...And the Lord has affirmed ("he'emircha") this day that you are, as He promised you, His treasured people...

את־ה' האמרת היום להיות לך
 לאלקים ... זה האמירך היום להיות
 לו לעם סגלה...

In a beautiful synergistic way, we can constitute our own most foundational relationships. We can bring them into being when we articulate them to be so. For when we speak our commitments—and, importantly, live them—we are blessed in return with the greatest gift of all: reciprocity. In these verses we see that the God whom we've appropriated and, in some real sense, appointed to be our God, appoints us in turn to be God's people, an *am segulah*.

This awesome theme of parallel action, which maximizes our own responsibility in making real the Godly relationship, is central to the upcoming holiday of Rosh Hashana. In just a few days, when we stand solemnly and humbly before God, our liturgy surprisingly grants us tremendous audacity: we crown God king! "מלוך על כל העולם" we command. "Be king over the entire universe in Your glory" (*Machzor*). In the section of the *amidah* known as *malchuyot* or "kingship," we announce God's power and grandeur. We articulate God's reign and glory.

This is understood to be not merely descriptive, but prescriptive: We human beings reify God's kingship by declaring it so. Alas, the mighty king is anointed by his lowly subjects.

While this move might appear to be a display of arrogant self-empowerment on our parts, its placement at the core of Rosh Hashana prayers suggests that the rabbis had a different message in mind, perhaps a message about what it really takes to stand before God, what it really means to establish an honest, authentic relationship of presence and commitment, of full return. Taking a cue from *Nitzavim* and from *Ki Tavo*, it seems that the godly relationship *requires* human initiative. A king without subjects is no king and a God without God-conscious people is not meaningfully, relationally a God. To be in relation to God is to articulate *that* one is in relation to God, to designate and elevate God, and then to be open to all that that might mean. "*Et Hashem he'emarta hayom*"—we declare God a kingly God—and only then "*v'Hashem he'emircha hayom leheyot lo l'am segulah*"—only then do we truly become God's beloved subjects. Or, in the words of the prophet Malachi 3:7 (echoed in the words of Zecharia 1:3):

Return to me and I will return to you, said the Lord of hosts.

שׁוּבוּ אֵלַי וְאֶשׁוּבָה אֲלֵיכֶם אָמַר ה' צְבָאוֹת

It is only our nearness to God that spurs God's nearness to us.

The synergy at the heart of this most high relationship is no doubt also at the heart of our most important human relationships. During this time, in the run-up to Rosh Hashana and then Yom Kippur, we ought to take note. To truly connect to another person similarly requires designation, commitment, presence, the willingness to take the first step, to announce intentions, aspirations, and then the audacity to make them so. It requires an honesty with self, a reaching for an other, and an openness to their reciprocal response. We actively create the conditions for our authentic relationships, our *parsha* teaches, and we must bear that responsibility and revel in it too. For the deep message of human empowerment is the possibility for human repair. Perhaps we know all too well, especially in this season of self-reflection, the many ways that we might harm others. But we ought to know that we might equally heal them. Kindness breeds kindness. Trust breeds trust. And closeness breeds closeness. In the words of Rebbe Nachman of Breztlav:

If you believe that we can [profoundly] falter, believe that we can [profoundly] fix. (*Likkutei MoHaRaN, Tanina* 112).

אם אתה מאמין שיכולים לקלקל תאמין שיכולים לתקן. (ליקוטי מוהרן, תנינא קיב)

Surely if we can stir the heavens, we can shake the earth.

And so we see that Moshe's small discourse on *teshuva* has rather enormous implications, both theological and interpersonal. We are more powerful than we might ever have imagined and more responsible than we might ever have wished to be. A fine message for the end of Moshe's years and a provocative one for the start of ours.



Rabbi Dr. Erin Leib Smokler is the Director of Spiritual Development at Yeshivat Maharat, where she teaches Chassidut and Pastoral Torah. She is also a faculty fellow of the Shalom Hartman Institute of North America. She earned her PhD and MA from the University of Chicago's Committee on Social Thought and her BA from Harvard University. In 2018 she received semikha from Maharat's Advanced Kollel: Executive Ordination Track.