

Parshat Nitzavim
Grit vs. Gift
Rabba Dina Brawer - Class of 2018

*"...the human individual thus lives usually far within his limits;
he possesses powers of various sorts which he habitually fails to use.
He energizes below his maximum, and he behaves below his optimum".*

William James, *The Energies of Men* (1914)

Nitzavim opens with a scene reminiscent of *ma'amad Har Sinai*. God is addressing the entirety of the Jewish people, men, women and children.

Rabbi Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter of Ger (1847–1905), known as the Sefat Emet, points to one notable difference in the status of the Jewish people. At Sinai, they stood ready to become a nation and enter into a new relationship with God. They were receiving the Torah with a clean slate, as *tzadikim*, righteous people, and were poised to maintain that status.

Here in parshat Nitzavim, they are about to re-enter the covenant with God as a group of *baalei teshuva*, repentants, having marred the relationship in the golden calf incident.

The *tzadik* and *baal teshuva* reflect two modalities for achievement.

The straightforward trajectory of the righteous is akin to the success of the talented, gifted and genius, who do well almost naturally. The penitent's success in overcoming pitfalls is due to struggle and hard work above all.

In her book about grit, Wharton professor Angela Duckworth notes that, while studies show that Americans say they favor 'hard work' five times as much as 'talent' in employees, we all get distracted by talent. In fact, in a follow-up study, people rated a piece of music played and an entrepreneur's sales pitch much higher when the originator was labelled a 'natural' than when rated a 'striver', even though they actually all listened to the same music or pitch. Duckworth concludes we are biased to favor natural talent, but this bias is so deeply rooted we don't consciously admit it. It is important to expose this bias because in consistently praising natural genius and talent, we not only devalue the striving and hard work accessible to all, but we place achievement on a pedestal accessible to select few.

As the Jewish people stand to renew the covenant, they may feel discouraged by the memory of their previous failure. This is why, according to the Sefat Emet, Moshe opens his message with: *'You stand here this day, all of you, before the Lord your God, your heads, your elders and your officials, every man of Israel. Your little ones, your wives, and even your sojourner in the midst of your camp, from wood-chopper to water-drawer, for you to enter into the covenant of the Lord your God ...'* listing every class and category as equally entering the covenant (Devarim 29:9-11).

Only then does Moshe proceed to exhort them to pursue Teshuva and resume their relationship with God: *'And you shall turn back to the Lord your God..'* (Devarim 30:2)

With these words he communicates that, while they had aspired to sail through the covenantal relationship in the mode of *tzaddik*, their stance of *baalei teshuvah* hasn't diminished them, they are all deserving of standing before God. Quite the contrary, as struggling penitents they have an advantage over the perfectly

righteous. As R' Abahu stated: *'The place the penitent occupy, the perfectly righteous are unable to occupy'* (Berachot 34b). In terms of achievement, according to Duckworth, effort counts twice. First in our struggle to develop a seed of talent into a recognizable skill, and then again in sustaining our skilled work to attain our end goal. The advantage of the *baal teshuva* is acquired in sustained endeavor, or *grit*.

We read Nitzavim as the month of Elul winds down, on the Shabbat just before Rosh Hashana. It is perhaps the last call, exhorting us to complete the process of Teshuva, while encouraging us and giving us the practical tools to succeed at it.

The Sefat Emet reads this encouragement in the words:

כִּי הַמְצִיחַ הַזֶּה אֵשֶׁר אֲנִי מְצִיחַ הַיּוֹם לֹא-נִפְלֵאת הוּא מִמָּוֶה וְלֹא רְחֹקָה הוּא:

*For this command which I charge you today is **not too wondrous for you, nor is it distant.*** (Devarim 30:11)

When we set our eyes on a goal, we may feel unable to accomplish it.

לֹא-נִפְלֵאת, is not wondrous, meaning it doesn't require extraordinary genius or talent. And as we work towards our goal, we may encounter setbacks and lose any confidence we gained. To this end the verse reminds us לֹא רְחֹקָה הוּא, it is not distant. Even when we fall and fail, our past attainment is not in the far-off distance, the struggle we endure leaves its mark and transforms us.

In the opening quote above, William James, the founder of American psychology, asserts that although we have a variety of talents, we generally tend to underachieve. In his essay *The Energies of Men*, he continues to consider how to explain variations in achievement:

*'...to what do the better men owe their escape?
 ...to what are the improvements due, when they occur?..
 Either some unusual stimulus fills them with emotional excitement,
 or some unusual idea of necessity induces them to make an extra effort of will.
 Excitements, ideas, and efforts, in a word, are what carry us over the dam.*

For James, achievement is a direct result of inspiration and effort rather than gifts or talents alone.

With a few days left to Rosh Hashana, when Teshuva becomes a necessity, may we find inspiration in God's invitation to renew our covenant, and the resolve to dedicate the necessary effort. For while we may not all possess the natural spiritual gifts of a *tzaddik*, the path of the *baal teshuva* is open to us all and leads to a place that even *'the perfectly righteous'* are unable to occupy.



Rabba Dina Brawer was born and raised in Milan, Italy and studied in Jerusalem, New York and London. She holds a BA in Hebrew and Jewish Studies from the University of London and an MA in Education and Psychology from the Institute of Education, London, and Semikha from Yeshivat Maharat. She is the founder of [JOFA UK](#), and the producer of [#YourTorah](#) podcast, a journey to discovering Mishnah. Her work has been [featured](#) in '10 Women, 10 Decades' a short film produced by Chocolate Films. She has recently been appointed Director of Recruitment and Admissions for Yeshivat Maharat.