

# OPEN SCROLL

An Undergraduate Parshah Sheet for the Harvard Hillel Community

Parshat Nitzavim-Vayeilech

September 11-12, 2009

Elul 22-23, 5769

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## Reytl Geselowitz

Every Wednesday at the Hebrew school where I teach, services begin with a song. One song that is used fairly often is inspired by this week's Torah portion, Nitzavim. The lyrics begin, "If you are 'atem,' then we're 'nitzavim.' We stand here today and remember the dream." At first glance, these words seem almost nonsensical: "if you are 'you,' then we're 'standing'?" Besides appropriating the first two words of the parsha, what is it about this portion that appealed to the creators of this song? Dan Nichols and Michael Moskowitz seem to be taking their inspiration from a passage just a few verses later where God says, "I make this covenant...not with you alone, but both with those who are standing here with us this day before the Lord our God and with those who are not with us here this day". This passage seems to me to be related to the concept that we modern Jews somehow actually experienced God's relationship with our ancestors, whether it was the exodus, as we recite at the Passover seder, or at Mount Sinai, where Jewish tradi-

tion tells us that the souls of all Jews, present and future, were there to receive the Torah from God. According to this interpretation, we contemporary Jews are the absent people with whom God made a covenant. But what does that mean practically for us today? The composers of my Wednesday song offer one explanation: it is this covenant that we all made with God that turned the Jewish people, past and present, into a Kehillah Kedoshah, a holy community, with responsibility not only to God, but to each other. As the song says, "Each one of us must play a part. Each one of us must heed the call." We have the opportunity each day to try and bring a little bit of holiness to the world. A lofty principal, perhaps, but one that is within each of our grasps.

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## Ariella Dagi

The first portion of this week's double parsha, Nitzavim-Vayeilech, restates the covenant of the Jewish people and describes the scattering exile they will face if they stray from their legal obligations and personal loyalty to God. Moshe's reiteration of the covenant is declarative and, to some extent, seemingly merely a formality. This is not an opportunity for individuals to choose to accept or reject the covenant or even for the group to respond in affirmation; rather, it is a time for the nation to be present and silently acknowledge their part in a long and still unfurling history of Jewish commitment to God and the Torah. In short, it is not an appeal to the nation but a statement of the basic terms of a contract to which they are already bound by their ancestors.

Thus, even if the Jewish people do not wish to derive the benefits of the covenant, such as inheriting Israel or maintaining God's protection, it is ultimately nonretractable. Not only can they not choose to be ignored but they will be severely punished for breaking with the terms of the agreement. If a man violates it by worshipping other gods, the Torah states that "God will never forgive him; rather will God's anger and passion rage against that man, till God blots out his name from under heaven" (29:19). According to this, by going astray the man permanently forfeits at the very least his nationhood, and likely also his life. However, just a few lines later, the Torah states, "when all these things have come upon you...you shall return to the Lord your God, and... heed His command with all your heart and soul...God will restore your fortunes and take you back in love" (30:1-4). Despite the finality of the preceding punishment, the Torah assumes that such finality will never come to completion, as at some later point the man

(or perhaps his descendants) will return to God.

How can the Jews be accountable for something to which they have not in their lifetime agreed? Why is it so certain that if they stray they shall return? A composite of answers work in tandem to tackle these questions. First of all, God recognizes the potential fear in such a weighty undertaking as the covenant, especially one that is immediate and nonnegotiable. However, God allays the worry of inadequacy and unfeasibility by telling the nation that "this commandment which I command thee this day, it is not too hard for you, neither is it distant" (30:11).

Additionally, the way in which idol worship is described explains that there is no rational or experiential basis upon which the Jewish people should feel connection to other gods. Unlike Hashem, who "brought them forth out of the land of Egypt," the other gods they may leave to worship are "gods that they knew not," recognize not, and in whom they have no particular reason to believe (29:24-25).

Lastly and most intriguingly, in between the description of punishment for idolatry and the foretelling of return, a short and mysterious little verse provides clarity. Chapter 29 line 28 states: "The secret things (nistarot) are for the Lord our God; but the revealed things (niglot) are for us and our children forever, that we may do all the words of this Torah." Many commentators interpret this verse to be discussing the communal human responsibility to address individual's overt incorrect actions but not to address bad thoughts in each individual's mind, which would be impossible to know.

There may be a more compelling albeit less traditional interpretation. Perhaps the topic is not the misguided ac-

## Ariella Dagi (continued)

tions of man but rather the Truth of God. "Secret things" may be pieces of God's yet-to-be-revealed knowledge. "Revealed things" would be the Truth that God has already shown. God must determine which things should be secret, but once a Godly Truth is revealed, the people are responsible for striving towards understanding it. Following this interpretation, this verse acts a corollary to the original Abrahamic covenant: The people must follow the brit, but God is responsible for providing them with the Truth of the covenant. Before this verse, God ensures the people's ability to follow the commanded brit (30:11) and, here, God ensures their access to the Truth

that will lead them to the correct life. Only once they have that access to Truth, and only when they can feel it with "all their heart and soul" can they be held accountable for choosing the life of mitzvot that accompanies the revelation (30:2). Only then can they be eternally punished if they choose to negate Truth by abandoning the deep, longstanding relationship they share with their loving God to pursue an empty dalliance with other gods. Eternally punished, that is, until they return.

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## Tristan Brown

When we think of great literature, we might define the "classics" as those books which, though written in a particular time and place, with a particular cultural context, remain able to speak to us now in the present. We often speak of an eternal "element" to these texts – that which ensures their immortality as long as there are humans to read them. Yet, it is difficult to say whether Homer felt he would or should be read over two thousand years after he penned his *Odyssey*. Some "classics," though beholding some universal truths, cannot make it out of the centuries of their birth, such as Diderot's *The Nun*, which remains too inexorably stuck in the rationalistic anti-Catholicism of the early French Enlightenment to truly speak to us now, when humanity has just seemed to have moved on and left tombs such as this to the desolation of the ivory tower rather than the living minds of avid readers on a New York subway.

But the text we have before us today not simply studied in an ivory tower nor read on a New York subway: it transcends the mundaneness of everyday existence as it enters the heart of its listeners. The text before us is unique: it remains confident in its own immortality - in the ability to transcend the present by always remaining present - as it remains dubious about its readers and followers readers ability to understand and follow it. (Deut. 30: 17) Intuitively, at first it does not seem like a recipe for immortality. It claims comprehensibility and within its listeners ability to properly observe, and in absolute terms equates such a success with "life" and "goodness", yet it acknowledges possible failure and struggle in the endeavor of following it. The question before us becomes therefore, how does this week's Torah portion succeed in this maintaining this challenging equilibrium: difficulty with the promise of success, success with the promise of difficulty – with the choice of life and death hanging in the balance?

I think the answer lies in what I perceive the text's motivation to be, or one of its motivations to be – to establish, in human terms, appealing to the both the human condition and the need for a homeland - an identity beyond doubt, as well as a written, not simply oral, history. Very representative

of Deuteronomy as a whole, the text "sums up" at least part of what this new "Law" means. This selection in particular draws from the entirety of Jewish history up until that point, or at least the imagined reality of it. In one reading, we have mentions of "Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" (Deut. 30: 20), with a commandant to "live and multiply" (Deut. 30: 16), which all harken back to the first book of this epic of epics, Genesis. The text then takes us to Moses' reception of the Torah, and Joshua's commission to lead the people of Israel. The journey of God's encounter with man – from walking to Abraham to talking to Moses – is coming to the close as is this final book of the Law. Conscious of this ending, which transcends the epic ideals of either tragedy or comedy (Neither Homer or Euripides would not know where to place this), the Lord tells Joshua, "Be strong and courageous, for you shall bring the people of Israel into the land that I swore to give them. I will be with you." (Deut.31: 23) A Law, once given, must be followed. But this particular section of text reads not as an ancient Near Eastern law code, laborious and meticulous in execution, but rather as a Law of love and a Law of promise. As we begin to embody this Law, we begin to walk with God, like God. Thus this is no literature, for though literature enriches and in some cases, imitates life, it neither creates or saves it. In the footsteps of the mystics from Palestine to Poland, we truly need to invent new words to describe these profound truths. In these passages we see not an imitation of life, but rather are instructed to imitate G-d.

But for now, we can settle for the beauty inherent in simplicity: This is a history, personal yet collective. This a law, divine yet written in human tongue, by human hand. This is life, shrouded on paper, sitting on the shelves of universities libraries and in the minds and hearts of simple subway riders, hidden under human flesh as Moses, Joshua, and Abraham remain hidden by Godly time.

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*If you would like to contribute to Open Scroll or have questions or comments, please email Nell Hawley '10-11 at [nshawley@fas.harvard.edu](mailto:nshawley@fas.harvard.edu).*