



## Accountability and Accessibility: Nitzavim- Vayelech

Based on a Naaleh.com shiur by Mrs. Shira Smiles  
Summary by Channie Koplowitz-Stein

Parshat Nitzavim contains a few verses that appear to be extremely reassuring while still providing tremendous room for interpretation and understanding. The passage reads:

For this commandment that I have commanded you today – it is not hidden from you and it is not distant. It is not in heaven [for you] to say, “Who can ascend to the heaven for us and take it for us, so that we can listen to it and perform it?” Nor is it across the sea [for you] to say, “Who can cross the sea for us and take it for us, so that we can listen to it and perform it?” Rather the matter is very near to you – in your mouth and in your heart to perform it.

Two questions arise. First, does this passage refer to the entire Torah or to the process of teshuvah? Perhaps even more frustrating, whichever it is referring to, if teshuvah or the entire Torah is really so close to us, why does it seem so far away from us?

Rabbi Asher Weiss deals with both these questions, referring both to Ramban and to Chassidic texts. Ramban first explains these verses as referring to the process of teshuvah comprised of three components. First, your mouth must confess it, then your heart must regret it, and finally, we must be faithful not to repeat the sin. Rabbenu Bechaya, based on the Ramban then continues to explain how these verses can apply to the entire Torah. The suggestion is that we have here an allusion to the three pillars upon which the world exists, Torah, avodah – service, and gemilat chassadim – acts of kindness. In your mouth refers to Torah whose words should always be on your mouth, in your heart refers to prayer, the service of the heart, while to perform it refers to acts of kindness.

The Chassidic texts extend these verses to apply to the performance of every mitzvah. Each mitzvah has a brachah, speech, associated with it, kavonoh, intent within the heart, and the performance of the act itself.

Now Rabbi Weiss turns his attention to the beginning of the passage. He posits that the main obstacles to mitzvah performance are lack of understanding of the mitzvah and the desire for instant gratification. To this the

Torah responds that you have the ability to understand, for it is not hidden from you, and with the proper mindset, rather than rote performance, we can bring the mitzvah close to us and find pleasure in the Torah and its mitzvot.

Rabbi Belsky in Einei Yisroel focuses on the intervening verses. While there were great men who crossed the seas for Torah, and Moshe Rabbenu even ascended to heaven, we each have the ability to acquire Torah and teshuvah ourselves. What the Torah is emphasizing is that we must take personal responsibility for achieving Torah on our own and do not require the presence of an intermediary, as do some other religions. Just as we cannot get our spirituality by proxy, so are we not judged by proxy but as individuals. We must work on achieving our own shleimus, our personal spiritual perfection and wholeness. Hashem is telling us it is achievable and close, so make no more excuses.

How can one begin the work of getting close to Hashem, as the Torah promises? The Mizkeinim Esbonan cites Rabbi Chaim Shmuelevitz in telling us that the first step is awareness and recognition of the Creator in the deepest recesses of our hearts and minds, for the yetzer horo uses constant distraction to deflect us from our goal. We tend to live our lives on automatic pilot, seldom aware of the moment and of our responsibility for our actions. We tend to practice our religion as a five year old, writes Rabbi Pincus in Moadei Hashanah. We have gotten into the rut of reciting brachot without thought, of praying without meaning, because we learned the formulas as a five year old in cheder. Every person is required to access holiness on his own level, and that remains his personal responsibility. Start with the awareness and responsibility. The period from Elul through Yom Kippur is a time designated for renewal. Return to the wonder of the five year old when you recite shehakol nihiyeh bidvaroh, that indeed everything, including the water I'm drinking, was created through His word.

Rabbi Frieman in Shaarei Derech starts with a Medrash where Eliyahu the Prophet meets a fisherman and asks the fisherman why he doesn't learn Torah. The fisherman replies that Hashem didn't give him brains for Torah study.

Eliyahu then asks him how he became a fisherman. He replies that Hashem gave him brains to learn to weave nets and to catch fish. The point is simple: If you have the brains for one, you have the brains for the other even if the level of expertise may be limited.

Rabbi Frieman continues with an analogy. There is a loaf of bread suspended in the air. The fool sees the loaf but automatically dismisses it as beyond his reach. The wise one sees the loaf and contemplates. Someone was able to get up there to put it there, so it is attainable. He brings a ladder and can now reach the loaf. Similarly, Torah and teshuvah are attainable, but they must be acquired step by step. Don't give up before you even begin. At least get a ladder and try. Learn just a few minutes. When you start feeling the joy, you'll want to learn more. It becomes closer to you. As Rav Egbi says in Chochmat Hamatzpun, when you take the first step, the rest evolves and takes shape. From learning just two halachot a day, for example, you'll have a large library of information after a relatively short time. If you have trouble greeting people, start by smiling at only one person a day. He will generally smile back, and you'll be encouraged to smile at more people you pass.

Once you've taken that first step, writes Rabbi Doniel Ochiun in Ohr Doniel, you'll find you have Hashem's help to continue. But it is important to take the correct first step. Don't look to the guru on the mountaintop. Looking in the wrong places will lead to faulty conclusions and disappointment. Rather look within yourself, for you carry within yourself, within your precious neshama, the spirit of God, writes Rav Chaim Hacohen the Talilei Chaim. Listen to your heart and access that godliness. Yes, others can help you and be mentors, but the first step begins with you.

Rabbi Wolbe gives us a beautiful perspective on how close the Torah and mitzvot are to us. He reminds us that all this knowledge was implanted within us prior to our birth. Every time you do a mitzvah, you access that flame that connects you once again to your spiritual essence, and you fan it. Each mitzvah fans the flame further until you approach your shleimus, your wholeness. Don't worship the foreign god of the yetzer horo who constantly tries to

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estrangle us from our spiritual essence until it seems impossible to bridge the gap.

Despair is another tool of the yetzer horo, for it is an obstacle to teshuvah. Rabbi Frand notes that there are two forms of achieving purification through water. Sometimes it was enough for the cohen to sprinkle a few drops of water on and individual and he would be purified. Other times, an individual needed to immerse completely in water to be purified. What Rabbi Frand tells us is that teshuvah

may be difficult to achieve completely, but start with a drop or two. It may be less complete, but over the years it builds up to a complete teshuvah. This was the lesson Cain taught his father Adam. He told Adam that he did teshuvah for killing his brother, and he and God arrived at a compromise. Certainly he couldn't do full teshuvah, those circumstances could never be repeated nor could he rectify the situation and bring Able back to life, but sincere regret was the step that Hashem accepted as a compromise, the single drop of

purifying water.

Put away the excuses. Both Torah and teshuvah are accessible to each of us, but first we must make ourselves aware of Hashem all around us and especially within ourselves. Embrace the world through one mitzvah, revel in its performance, and the released endorphins will spur you on to further spiritual growth. After all, holiness is accessible to each of us, for it is buried within our hearts and souls.

## Elul in our Times Part II

Based on a Naaleh.com shiur by Rebbetzin Tziporah Heller-Gottlieb

Summary by Devora Kaye

The third step of *teshuva* is having a plan how to avoid the sin in the future. Simply saying, "I'll always be grateful and pleasant and happy is not going to do it." You have to have a route mapped out how to uproot the negativity. Once we've come to grips with what's wrong, experienced regret as opposed to guilt, and figured out a plan of action, we've accomplished *teshuva*, returning to who we could be.

A way to draw close to Hashem in *Elul* is to take time every day to do a life review, to tap into one's true desire to be different and good. The main thing Hashem wants is for us to be who we can be. Once we've figured out where we went wrong, we shouldn't go back there again. Our focus should be on now and the future. That's *ani l'dodi*. The other side is *v'dodi li*. Hashem wants to help. He's there for us and understands our tests. The act of doing *teshuva* gets us closer to Hashem than we would've, had we not sinned. The Maharal explains this with an allegory.

Imagine two people bound together by a rope. Someone cuts the rope and makes a knot. Now they're closer. They cut it again and make another knot, now they're even closer. Similarly, when you sin and distance yourself from Hashem you cut the rope. When you do *teshuva*, you tie it and you're now closer than

you ever were before. However, the place of the knot is weaker than the rest. So, if you failed in the past, don't test yourself again. Don't put yourself in impossible situations. Be good to yourself. Hashem want you to succeed. Don't take steps that are too big for you. Don't put yourself in the face of temptation.

Another way to get closer to Hashem is through *tefilah*. The beginning of *shemone esrei* tells us that Hashem is the source of everything and the one who is bringing us to where we need to go. The end tells us what he's done for us and gives us a chance to express our thanks. The middle blessings are about requests. We tell Hashem, "This is what I need and only you can give it to me." It can come through people but not from people. We ask Hashem for *daat*- the ability to know and to take what we know and let it touch our hearts. You cannot buy *chochma* or *binah* and if you don't have it, life is worthless. We ask Hashem for *teshuva*. Otherwise, we'd be locked into our mistakes. We ask Hashem to see our pain and our enslavement and that of the whole Jewish people. We ask Him for healing which can never be guaranteed or bought. It's all dependent on Him. We ask Him for sustenance. If we're not begging in the streets, it's because He's sustaining us. We ask Him to give us national redemption so that we can all come back to Him. We ask for true

judges to defeat evil and to count us among the *tzadikim* because their stories are a part of our heart. The more we let ourselves be inspired by the *tzadikim*, the more our merit and their merit are joined. The more we know who we're talking to, what Hashem has given us, and the more we express our reliance and dependence on Him, the closer we get to Him.

How does *tzedaka* change a person? *Tzedek* means justice. Hashem gives us the resources, energy, insight, and opportunities to use our money. A rich person must act as a teller in the bank. He needs some of the money, so do other people. People get attached to money because they see it as a representative and a reflection of their energy and capacity. They also have this fear that if they don't have money, they won't be able to get by. You should recognize that Hashem gave you what you need by your making the efforts to get it. He wants you to have the satisfaction, self-expression, and development of creativity and giving, that earning a living necessitates. If you think this way, you'll find yourself deglamorizing money. You'll recognize that it's good for you to make your efforts, but you could take it a step further and participate with Hashem in ruling His world by giving *tzedakah* which draws you close to Him. There are real *baalei tzedakah* who enjoy giving and that's something to aim towards.



Dedicated in memory of Rachel Leah bat R' Chaim Tzvi

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## Elul & Rosh Hashana-Merciful Judgement #9

Based on a Naaleh.com shiur by Rabbi Avishai David

One of the most beautiful and powerful *piyutim* on Rosh Hashana is the prayer of *Unesaneh Tokef*. The first part of the hymn is imbued with tension. Hashem sits on the throne of judgment and we are passive and forced to watch while our deeds pass before Him, and our verdict is determined.

Then a lifeline is thrown out to us and the tone of the *piyut* is transformed to mercy. The Chazan intones, "*Uteshuva, u'tefillah, u'tzedakah...*, repentance, prayer, and charity annul the evil decree." We become active. Our ability to do *teshuva*, to pray, and to give *tzedaka* can turn Hashem's *din* easily to *rachamim*. In fact, the Rambam in Hilchot Teshuva writes that even a *rasha* on the day of his death can do *teshuva* and Hashem will

accept it.

After this injection of hope, the *piyut* portrays Hashem as the architect of man who is privy to his weaknesses. Ultimately, life is like a passing dream and man's existence on this earth is fleeting. The Chayei Adam, in Tefila Zaka, gives expression to this concept. Man confesses that he did not sin to provoke Hashem but rather the *yetzer hara* ensnared him and the travails of life combined with the innate failings of man led him off the proper path.

There is a dialectic tensile balance between judgment and mercy, which is essentially at the heart of what Rosh Hashana is all about. It is a day of *din* tinged on both sides with *rachamim*. Before *tekiat shofar*, we say,

"*Ashrei h'aam yodei teruah*. Happy is the nation that knows *teruah*," the secret of taking *midat hadin* and engulfing it with *rachamim*. The Ramban terms this *hamtakat hadin*, sweetening the judgment.

In the prayers of Rosh Hashana, there is a recurrent theme of transforming judgment to mercy. On the first day of Rosh Hashana, the Torah reading is about the birth of Yitzchak who represents *din*. On the second day, we read about *akeidat Yitzchak*, the binding of *din* replaced by *rachamim*. Anyone who recites the *piyut* of *Unesaneh Tokef* with proper concentration can sense the atmosphere change from tense truth to joyful mercy which breaks through the barriers of nature. May we merit Hashem's *rachamim* and be inscribed in

