

Do Not Cast Us Off – Parashat Nitzavim-Vayelech

Chinese tradition tells the parable of an old man who becomes too weak to work in the garden or help out with household chores, who sits idly on the porch all day while his family tills the soil and pulls up weeds. One day, the man's son looks up and thinks, "What good is my father now that he's so old? All he does is eat up my food! I have a wife and children to think about; it's time for him to be done with life!" The son makes a large wooden box and places it on a wheelbarrow, rolls it up to the porch, and asks the man to get in. His father lies down as a cover is placed on top of him and the entire contraption wheeled towards the edge of a steep cliff. As they arrive at the precipice, a muffled knock can be heard from inside the ersatz coffin. "Yes, father?" the son asks. "Why don't you just throw me down and save the box?" the old man suggests. "After all, your own children are going to need it one day for you."

-From Rabbi Edward Friedman, as cited in Ram Dass' book, Still Here

Al tashlicheinu l'et ziknah, kichlot kochenu al taazvenu. These words, made famous from the *Sh'ma Kolenu* prayer which we will recite again this evening at *Selichot*, can move us to tears – "Do not cast us off in old age; when our strength fails do not forsake us!" For many, the story just shared captures some of our very worst fears – that one day we will lose our vitality, that we will become unable to contribute, that we will turn into a burden upon others even if they ultimately treat us with far more compassion than did the ungrateful son. Even if we become diminished in capacity or in functioning, even if we become dependent on others and less able to do for ourselves, even if some of our innate skills and talents can no longer shine through in quite the same way – still, we pray that others will appreciate the goodness and humanity that

are truly the mark of a person's worth, far more than her abilities or accomplishments. Please God, let us grow old with dignity surrounded by those whom we love!

The Chinese parable depicts with humor and wisdom the challenges of aging and it also reflects a profound truth about parenting as well; our children learn not only from what we say but even more so from what we do, and so we must guard our behavior scrupulously. They will notice if we expect from them fidelity while at the same time dishonoring our own parents; they will observe if we preach kindness while gossiping about friends and disparaging co-workers; they will detect if we send them off to religious school each week while rolling eyes when it's time for us ourselves to attend services. We should act around our children as we would wish for them to act, and we should treat our parents with the same dedication and empathy with which we hope someday to be treated. *Al tashlicheinu l'et ziknah* – if we want not to be cast off in our elder years, let us support the dignified aging of others in return.

Tonight we gather together for *Selichot*, the late-night penitential service which occurs on the Saturday before Rosh Hashanah, further intensifying the spiritual preparation for the holiday which began a few weeks ago with the arrival of the Hebrew month of Elul. Since then we have been blowing the Shofar each weekday morning and adding Psalm 27 for the Days of Awe into our liturgy twice daily; we've been turning our hearts and minds towards repentance so that when the High Holidays come upon us we are at least somewhat ready. The self-reflection and introspection, the psychic work of facing our mistakes and embracing forgiveness, the sacred task of setting goals and intentions for the year to come – all this is hard to accomplish in just

the 10 days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur alone. Rather, we use the entire month of Elul to start paving the way for what is to come, an experience that deepens tonight as we enter into the final week leading up to the holidays.

Selichot emphasizes ideas of human frailty, acknowledging that all of us have made mistakes in the year just ending, and Divine compassion, with God offering us mercy even when we are undeserving of it. It uses as its central motif the 13 Divine Attributes – one of the best-known parts of the service along with the *Ashamnu* confessional and *Sh'ma Koleinu* mentioned earlier – as this text is read on fast days and associated with themes of transgression and forgiveness, owing to the fact that it is originally found in the Torah as part of the aftermath of the great sin of the Golden Calf. In the Sephardic community, *Selichot* are generally said for 40 days, beginning with the first of Elul and continuing through Yom Kippur, a period of time which also mimics the 40 days Moses spent on Mt. Sinai before receiving the 10 Commandments. In the Ashkenazi community, *Selichot* are generally said on the Saturday night before Rosh Hashanah alone unless there are fewer than four days between Shabbat and the holiday in which case they're moved back to the week prior.

Indeed, it is this discrepancy in customs between Ashkenazi and Sephardi Jewry that led to a powerful teaching about *Selichot* shared by the fourth Chabad Rebbe, Rabbi Shmuel of Lubavitch, who once asked his father, the Tzemach Tzedek, why their community did not continue to say *Selichot* after Saturday night had ended. “My son,” the great rabbi replied. “Now is no longer the time for words. Now we must translate words into deeds.”

In certain ways, the Tzemach Tzedek's message is similar to that of the Chinese parable – it's relatively easy to say any number of different things, whether it's telling our children to respect their elders or confessing before God that we have done wrong and wish to return. But to match our actions to our intentions is a far harder thing. We can't preach filial responsibility while wheeling our father to the edge of a cliff; we can't sit in synagogue atoning for our sins without also going out to repair some of the damage we've done. We gather tonight to begin setting our goals for the coming year. The real work will come in aligning our behavior to our priorities.

This morning we also read *Parashat Nitzavim-Vayelech*, containing some of the most beautiful and stirring words in all of Torah. "Surely this Instruction which I enjoin upon you this day is not too baffling for you, nor is it beyond reach. It is not in the heavens, that you should say, 'Who among us can go up to the heavens and get it for us....?' Neither is it beyond the sea that you should say, 'Who among us can cross to the other side of the sea....?'" No, the thing is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to observe it" (Deuteronomy 30:11-14). While the immediate context of these verses is Torah itself, the accessibility of the Divine Law to all of Israel, the fact that these words always fall on the Shabbat right before Rosh Hashanah has led some to wonder if they can't also be applied to the work of *teshuvah* (sacred return) that is at the heart of this season. It can seem daunting and overwhelming and sometimes even impossible to rid ourselves of bad behavior, to forgive those who have wronged us, to apologize to those whom we've hurt, to make sure that our deeds match up with our words. And yet, our *parasha* reminds us that all of these things are squarely within our reach. Just as Torah is not

only for scholars and sages, *teshuva* is not only for martyrs and saints. We are all capable of doing a little bit better than we've done in the past.

And so tonight we enter the sacred hour of *Selichot*, willing our hearts and minds to move towards return. A well-known *midrash* (rabbinic story) compares this act to standing before a mirror – because of the distortion of distance, every figure in a reflection appears to be twice as far away from us as it really is. And yet with every step we take towards the mirror, the reflected object also moves a pace closer. So too it is with *teshuva*, teach the rabbis. Our goal seems impossibly far off but God says, “Take one step toward Me and then another, and I will meet you more than half-way” (Humash Etz Hayim, p. 1170).

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Wishing us all the strength, courage, and insight to embrace a path of *teshuva* this season and in so doing to usher in the very sweetest of new years.

Shabbat Shalom and Shana Tova!

