

We always read Parshat *Nitzavim* right in the middle of what in the Jewish calendar is known as the season of *teshuvah* – repentance, the month of Elul.

This represents an amazing connection since *Nitzavim* is the primary source in the Torah for the concept of *teshuvah*. The teaching embedded in *Nitzavim* is that although we will sin and face the consequences of our failures, it is within our reach to find our way back to a life of blessing.

We learn from this week's Torah portion that error and transgression are core to what to be human is. Unlike the 'original sin' model, which other religions embrace, we Jews have the gift of Torah, which, in essence, is the path towards a life of *teshuvah*. *Teshuvah* is not the alternative to perfection; *teshuvah* is the path to perfection.

The Talmud gives a higher place to the common individual who makes a mistake and repents than to the full *Tzadik*, who never feels the need to repent. A life of Torah involves an ongoing cycle of discovering the places where we give in to temptation and trying harder, only to learn of new weak points. How comforting it is that although we may feel severely removed from God, and God may feel far away, our access to Torah as a vehicle for *Teshuvah* is always at arm's reach.

In one of its classic verses, *parshat Nitzavim* teaches us that the mitzvot are within our reach, and not in heaven:

"Surely, this *mitzvah* 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 and impart it to us, that we may observe it?" Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, "Who among us can cross to the other side of the sea and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may observe it?" No, the thing is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to observe it." (Deuteronomy 30:11-14)

What exactly is "*mitzvah*," the "it" that is not in heaven but within our reach? The Talmud teaches that this refers to the Torah as a whole. Furthermore, since *Teshuvah* had been presented a few verses earlier in the same chapter, the Rabbis go as far as to argue that what is not in heaven is the ability to engage in *Teshuvah*.

In Deuteronomy 30:2 we learned: "and you **return to your Lord, God**, and you and your children heed God's command with all your heart and soul."

This is important for us to hear because, although the concept of *Teshuvah* is beautiful, it is also true that confronting our errors and our weaknesses can become daunting. Once we have moved away, far from our hopes and ideals, how are we supposed to overcome inertia and redirect ourselves towards God?

This week's Torah portion, at this critical time on the Jewish calendar, comes to remind us that the "*mitzvah*" of *Teshuvah* is not beyond us; it is totally and fully within our reach. Once the process of *Teshuvah* has been completed throughout the month of Elul, we are ready to walk into the new year with a joyful and a jubilant heart!

Shabbat Shalom and Shanah Tovah uMetukah! May we all be inscribed in the Book of Life!

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