

Sermon | Parshat Nitzavim
סדרה אלול תשפ"ב | September 24, 2022
B'nai Israel Congregation
Rabbi Mitchell Berkowitz

Over-the-Counter Judaism

Does anyone know the name that is given to the final Shabbat of the year, the Shabbat which immediately precedes Rosh Hashanah? ... It has no name. There is nothing in particular that we do for today. We recite Psalm 27, but we have been doing that twice daily for almost a month. There is no special ritual to mark the end of the year, or to single out this final Shabbat of 5782. For all other Shabbatot which precede the beginning of a new month, we refer to that Shabbat as Shabbat Mevarchim, the Shabbat on which we bless the upcoming month. But not for Tishrei; not for the new year. Instead, we allow this Shabbat to pass by without much pageantry. And I guess that I am grateful for that. Those who work in synagogue life, both clergy and staff, have enough to worry about on these days immediately leading up to the High Holidays. It is nice to have a Shabbat that is just that—a Shabbat, a day of simplicity, a day of intentional rest. Don't get me wrong; I like complexity and challenges. By now you all know that about me, personally. I would much rather sit down with a difficult *daf* of Talmud than with a simple chapter of biblical narrative. I find deep religious meaning in deciphering the complex talmudic argument, rather than in the teachings of Hasidic masters and modern biblical exegetes. But on this Shabbat before Rosh Hashanah, I am reminded to appreciate that which is simple, accessible, and very near to me.

In Parshat Nitzavim, Moses describes the 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...Neither is it beyond the sea...No, the thing is very close to you, קִי־קְרוֹב אֵלַיךְ הַדָּבָר,

תִּחְזְקוּ.”¹ As the Israelites prepare to enter the Land of Israel, they must be reassured that this enterprise to which they will dedicate their lives is not an impossible task. Up until this point they have had Moses, Aaron, and Miriam in their midst, guiding them and serving as intermediaries between the people and God. But Miriam is gone, and Aaron is gone, and soon Moses will be gone, too. What, then, will they do? Moses reassures them: This is very close to you; it is accessible and within reach; you can do it.

With all the complexity of the High Holidays and Sukkot, it is easy to get lost. It seems complicated. The liturgy may be familiar for some, but foreign for others. How exactly does one build a sukkah, or put together the *arba’a minim*, and then wave the lulav and etrog? As Jews, we are good at adding complexity and nuance to the world. But the lesson of Parshat Nitzavim, and this final Shabbat of the year, is not to allow that to become the operating principle. We need not overcomplicate life. Judaism and Jewish life should be accessible, attainable, meaningful. It should not be like filling a complicated prescription at the pharmacy. It should be available over-the-counter.

The rabbis of the Talmud even compare Torah to a medication. Rav Yehuda contrasts the medications that we create to cure an ailing individual with the Torah that God gave to us. “When a person gives a drug to their fellow, it is good for one part of his body but may be harmful to another. Whereas the Holy Blessed One gave the Torah to the Jewish people, and it is a drug of life for one’s entire body.”² The Torah is not only good for the Jewish parts of our lives, if our lives can even be compartmentalized in this fashion. Rather, the Torah and Jewish

¹ Deuteronomy 30:11-14.

² Bavli Eiruv 54a.

traditions are good for the entirety of our being. We learn how to be in relationship with our family members, with our community, with ourselves, and with God. And if this “drug” is really as spectacular as it sounds, with no negative side-effects, then it should be accessible, available, and very near to me.

Like all information, Jewish texts and ideas have become exponentially more accessible and widely available in these past few decades. On a daily basis I use resources that are available to anyone with an internet connection. I use Sefaria, an online library of Jewish texts from the Torah to today, many of which are available in a readable English translation. I use Hebrew and Aramaic dictionaries that are available for free online. I am subscribed to countless newsletters from Jewish websites like MyJewishLearning, ExploringJudaism, and my personal favorite, TheTorah.com. Years ago, much of Jewish knowledge was hidden in Hebrew books that required not only your ability to physically access the material, but also the language skills to read the text. All of that has dramatically changed. Judaism should not be a secret hidden away from the world. It should be, and today it is, available and very near to us all.

Not all of Judaism has to be talmudic. It doesn't have to be complex halakhah. It doesn't have to be Hebrew, Aramaic, and Ugaritic. Yes, of course, there are also those parts, and they (minus Ugaritic) led me to where I am today, but that is not all of Judaism or the only way to access our tradition. So, in the new year, we aim to do both: We will get back to basics, *and* we will provide opportunities to dig deeper. Our *shlichah*, Uriel Lin, will soon begin teaching a Sunday morning Hebrew reading class for adults. Later in the fall we will have a class about Yiddish and its impact on our tradition. There will be workshops and trainings on how to do basic but important things like visiting one who is ill, and how to maintain a kosher kitchen. We

are investing in creating opportunities to get back to basics, to make sure that you feel that Judaism is very near to you. And we will also maintain our commitment to those more challenging conversations and difficult aspects of Jewish life today. Rabbi David Golinkin will be our Scholar in Residence in November, and he will teach us about various matters of nuanced halakhic-import, like the place of Jewish law in the Jewish State and Jewish views on abortion and reproductive rights. Our Scientists in Synagogues program will address questions about Jewish medical ethics and the limits of scientific research.

Our goal is to have something for everyone in our community because Judaism and Torah should be close to you, neither too baffling nor beyond reach, neither in the heavens nor beyond the sea. I hope that you will join us, partner with us, and find something to deepen your Jewish knowledge and enrich your engagement with Jewish life. For some things, you should not need a complicated prescription. Perhaps, at least occasionally, Judaism can be accessed over-the-counter. Shabbat shalom.