



The Collective Conversation

Weekly Torah Essays from the
Young Israel of Scarsdale Community



Sefer Devarim

Parshat Netzavim

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Finding Heaven on Earth

By Becky Nachmani

In this week's *parsha*, *Moshe* gives a dramatic speech to the Israelites regarding the covenant with God. Upon reading the *parasha*, I was struck by two things. The first was the duality of tone and clarity of the message throughout the different portions—the *parsha* oscillates, at points, between strong and threatening language and whimsical verses filled with flowery poetry and uplifting words of hope.

The second prominent theme that struck me was the constant connection in the text between us as human beings and *adama*, the earth—a link that is meant as a reminder to center ourselves in the tangible realm, that is, this world, when connecting to the greater being that is Hashem.

The *parasha* starts with a strong threatening tone and a clear message about what will happen to us if we abandon God's laws. It is a warning of the consequences of failure to abide:

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לֹא-יִסְלַח אֱלֹהִים אֶת-שְׂמֹנוֹ
וְגִבּוֹרֵת אֵת-עֵצָה בּוֹ כְּלִי-הָאֵלֶּה הַכְּתוּבָה בְּסֵפֶר הַזֶּה וּמַחַה ה' אֶת-שְׂמֹנוֹ
מִתַּחַת הַשָּׁמַיִם:

Hashem will never forgive [those who know of this covenant but follow their own selfish heart]. Rather, Hashem's anger and passion will rage against them, till every sanction recorded in this book comes down upon them, and Hashem blots out their name from under heaven. (29:19)

The *parsha* goes on to speak about the impact of these transgressions on future generations by connecting this warning to the *adama*, in this case, the land of Israel. It states that those transgressors will be removed from the land that is Israel, and the future generations will see the devastation in the land, and it will be clear to all that this occurred because the covenant was broken. Explaining that there will be total destruction of the *adama*, *our world*, and *our future worlds* if the covenant is not withheld. This is all very direct language. It is meant to be clear and to the point. It is meant to ensure that there is no miscommunication. Everyone listening to this declaration will understand the consequences of their actions on themselves and on their future generations.

The 3rd *aliyah* completes Chapter 29 with a cryptic, somewhat mystical *pasuk*:

הַנְּסֻמֶּרֶת לַיהוָה אֲלֵהֵינוּ וְהַנְּגַלֶּת לָנוּ וְלִבְנֵינוּ
עַד־עוֹלָם לַעֲשׂוֹת אֶת־כָּל־דְּבָרֵי הַתּוֹרָה הַזֹּאת

The hidden things belong to God, but the revealed things apply to us and our children forever. (29:28)

The 4th and 5th *aliyot* explain the blessings will be restored onto the Jewish people for keeping the covenant; they will be *prosperous and numerous* and return to the land.

To be candid, while reading the first few *aliyot*, I felt uneasy. At times I felt like I was being reprimanded, even guilty, and at other times I was altogether confused by what *Moshe* was trying to tell us. The early language was clear and concise, followed by *kabbalistic* references and metaphors. As a general optimist, I was a bit downtrodden from these earlier verses. It wasn't until the 6th *aliyah* that I was brought to a place of contemplation and wonder. Some may call it my 'ah-ha moment,' my moment of clarity. At that point in the parsha, *Moshe* explains that keeping the Torah and *mitzvot* is not something unattainable or beyond our reach, referring to the heavens, but something that is close to us here on earth, our *adama*. This passage created an understanding for me that the covenant and its *mitzvot* are something that will benefit us as humans here on this earth and should not be seen as godly or messianic in nature. The point is to worry less about the reward in the afterlife and see the Torah as a roadmap to a good life here and now.

Moshe is reminding us to stay grounded and focused on those in this world. To connect and unite with each other. To be kind and present. To make a difference and create impact to our adama—the same land we have been given as a gift from God for upholding the covenant.

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I would be remiss if I did not mention that our Torah portion fittingly falls out right before *Rosh Hashana*, a time of self-reflection on both our covenant with God and our relationship with each other. A time when we take time to work on our own *adama*.

Wishing everyone a Gmar Hatima Tova!

Becky and Jon Nachmani moved to Scarsdale in January of this year from Riverdale NY. They have 3 children Ava 8 (SAR), Benjamin 7 (Eagle Hill) and Charlie 1. In their short time here, they have felt extremely welcomed by the community and its clergy and are looking forward to spending the High Holiday season at YIS.

Contact Steve Smith at stevenjsmith@yahoo.com to write a dvar Torah for the parsha of your choice

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