

## **Connect The Dots**

### **Parshat Nitzavim - 5782<sup>1</sup>**

It has been a difficult few weeks for Orthodox Jews. The heated court battles over clubs at YU, the article on the front page of the New York Times about Chassidic education, the bitter infighting both of these articles have engendered on social media- all these raise important, fundamental questions, no matter what side you fall on in any of these issues. How does an Orthodox institution practice maximal inclusivity toward those whose lives have followed a different trajectory from the one the Torah envisions? What is the proper balance between guarding against harmful outside influences and educating toward an observant life on the one hand, and giving the next generation tools to support themselves and their families on the other? What are the long-term ramifications of the government deciding policies that affect religious institutions? What is the best way to disagree with someone, and how should we view those who hold very different views from our own? Yes, these are all weighty questions that we have addressed in various contexts in the past, and no doubt will address again in the future. Today, though, I won't be addressing them- not while things are still so heated. Instead, I'm going to talk about something everyone seems to agree is terrific. A short clip of a concert by the Miami Boys Choir, from 28 years ago, has gone viral on TikTok. The enthusiastic

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<sup>1</sup> Prepared in partnership with Rabbi Shaanan Gelman

performances of these boys, who are identified by name on the video, has become a sensation, with people crowing about “JPop,” the new form of KPop. The Miami Boys Choir has gained tens of thousands of followers in Instagram as a result; non-Jews are recording themselves dancing to songs like “Yerushalaim, Arim Saviv lah,” are critiquing the various performances and the clothing choices, and ranking the singers in order of their preference. One TikTok personality wrote, “These little Jewish boys are the only thing keeping me going right now.” Initially, many people didn’t realize that these “boys” now have four kids, pay yeshiva tuition, and whatever singing they do is in shul, the car or maybe the shower. Then, an obsessed fan found their wedding pictures... One woman even wrote that seeing this clip is reawakening Jewish feelings within her, and she is now contemplating going to shul on Rosh Hashanah!<sup>2</sup>

In ten different places in any Torah scroll, there are words that have dots over them. There are different approaches as to what these dots are meant to teach us, but pretty much everyone agrees that they are there to place extra emphasis upon the words which they adorn.

The final place in which we find dots in the Torah occurs in this week’s Parshah:

הַנִּסְתָּרִית לֵה אֱלֹקֵינוּ וְהַנִּגְלָת לָנוּ וְלִבְנֵינוּ עַד-עוֹלָם לַעֲשׂוֹת אֶת-כָּל-דִּבְרֵי הַתּוֹרָה הַזֹּאת:

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<sup>2</sup> <https://forward.com/culture/519230/miami-boys-choir-tiktok-yerushalayim-yeshiva-song-viral-video/>

(b) Concealed acts concern our God but with overt acts, it is for us and our children ever to apply all the provisions of this Teaching.

The Talmud notes that the dots appear over two words- **לָנוּ וּלְבָנֵינוּ**- and carry over to another phrase- **עַד-עוֹלָם**.

(כח) לָנוּ וּגְו'. לָמָּה נִקְוֶה עַל לָנוּ וּלְבָנֵינוּ וְעַל עֵי"ן שְׁבַעַד, מִלְּמַד שֶׁלֹּא עֲנִשׁ עַד שֶׁעָבְרוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל  
אֶת הַיַּרְדֵּן כִּי  
[שם מ"ג ב']

This teaches us that the next generation of Jews were not punished until they passed over the Jordan River and entered the Land.

Putting aside the problem of vicarious punishments, and the Torah's promise that **לֹא יָמוּתוּ אָבוֹת עַל בְּנֵיהֶם**, that children will not be killed for the sins of their parents, we have a statement about the long-lasting implications of our actions. Even if children aren't punished *on account of* the actions of their parents, the actions of parents create a reality children have to live with. The poet Philip Larkin said it best in his poem, *This Be The Verse*<sup>3</sup>, slightly sanitized for a synagogue setting:

They mess you up, your mum and dad.

They may not mean to, but they do.

They fill you with the faults they had

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/48419/this-be-the-verse>

And add some extra, just for you.

But they were messed up in their turn

By fools in old-style hats and coats,

Who half the time were soppy-stern

And half at one another's throats.

Man hands on misery to man.

It deepens like a coastal shelf.

Get out as early as you can,

And don't have any kids yourself.

Obviously, his acerbic conclusion is wrong, but psychologists often talk about how maladaptive behaviors parents display in relation to their children are repeated by the next generation, because this is just how children learn to behave from their parents. The same thing is true about a Torah life; when children see parents actively engaged in Torah and mitzvot, they will emulate that behavior, but if we place Torah engagement on a back burner, that type of prioritization passes on to the next generation. The Kotzker Rebbe used to say that if you *talk about* how important Torah is to you, you will also have children who *talk about* how important Torah is to them...

While it seems obvious that decisions in every realm have far reaching ramifications, the Torah wants us to understand this before Rosh Hashanah in particular. Yoshi, David and Binyomin had no idea that 28 years later, they'd become a viral sensation. Heck, outside of descriptions of infections, the word "viral" didn't exist at that time! Actions, habits, ideas- all these are long-lasting. Through our awareness of this, we connect the dots, and tip the scales in our favor- for us, our children, and for eternity. Shanah Tovah Umetukah!