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# TORAH FROM JTS

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Parashat Nitzavim 5775

פרשת נצבים תשע"ה



Safe in God's Memory

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This week's Torah portion, Nitzavim, contains stunningly beautiful verses that teach us that God's Torah "is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to observe it" (Deut. 30:14). The language of the verses is full of rich, physical imagery, "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?'" The Torah, the wisdom, is not far away, is not other. It is in our hearts. If we give our hearts space to be known and embraced, our hearts can share the wisdom that dwells inside. With this space, the wisdom of Torah emerges in new ways. It is not general; it is very specific to each person, to the challenges and blessings that he or she has encountered in his or her life.

Over the last several years my mother has been living with Alzheimer's disease. It is easy to imagine that as someone's memory dissolves, so does his or her wisdom. But I have found that with my mother this is not true. Her wisdom continues to dwell within her. Very specifically, her wisdom lives in her gratitude. While she has less and less access to things that make most of us grateful, she has more and more access to simple gratitude itself. For her children. For what she understands to be her health. For life itself. Joining with my mother is an experience of entering into gratitude with her, breathing deeply into the reality that existence itself is a gift.

In our parashah we are told, "I make this covenant, with its sanctions, not with you alone, but both with those who are standing here with us this day before the Lord our God and with those who are not with us here this day"

(Deut. 29:13-14). The commentators say that the reference to “those who are not with us” refers to future generations. And I love that idea, that we all entered into the covenant together—even those of us who were not yet Jews but would convert one day we are also part of it. And I would like to suggest that there’s also another population of people who are both here and not here—people who are living with cognitive impairments, people whose communication is not linear, people who are referred to as “not being all there.” For God’s purposes, they are all there. We are called on to recognize them, to include them fully as participants in the covenant.

We are now approaching Rosh Hashanah. On Rosh Hashanah we put a lot of emphasis on memory. We must remember our actions so that we can do *teshuvah*, change our ways. But in the *Musaf Amidah*, the prayer at the heart of the Rosh Hashanah service, we refer to God as “*zokher kol hanishkahot*” (the One who remembers what has been forgotten). The essential remembering is done by God. While we do our share, each according to our ability, God is the one who remembers even that which is forgotten, “for there is no forgetting in your realm” (Mahzor Lev Shalem, p. 135). We are safe in God’s memory. The prayer about memory is sealed with “*Barukh atah Adonai, zokher haberit* (Praised are You, God, who remembers the covenant).” God remembers that we are part of the covenant, that we were all there, that Torah is planted in each of us, that it is in our mouths and in our hearts, that it does not depend on what we remember or what we are able to put into words.

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## דבר אחר | A Different Perspective



### Beyond Dreams

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Harry thought. Then he said slowly, “It shows us what we want . . . whatever we want . . .” “Yes and no,” said Dumbledore quietly. “It shows us nothing more or less than the deepest, most desperate desire of our hearts . . . However, this mirror will give us neither truth nor knowledge. Men have wasted away before it, entranced by what they have seen, or been driven mad, not knowing if what it shows is real or even possible . . . It does not do to dwell on dreams and forget to live, remember that.”

—*Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*

Their moment has almost come. The Children of Israel stand poised on the edge of the Jordan about to enter the Land. The moment of their dreams is about to become reality. However, a new era of responsibility is about to begin as well. The Children of Israel will no longer be able to look to God to fulfill their every need. Instead, they must learn to support themselves and to take responsibility for their own behavior. As God tells the people in this week’s parashah, “It is not in the heavens . . . Rather, the thing is very close to you, in your mouths and in your hearts so that you can fulfill it.”

Although the Israelites have been told of a dream-like land “flowing with milk and honey” (Exod. 13:5, Deut. 6:3, and elsewhere), they are now reminded that they have also been given a tangible tool: Torah. As Professor Dumbledore tells Harry Potter, dreaming is only productive if it informs how we live. This, too, is the message of Parashat Nitzavim. Instead of dwelling on a dream that is (thus far) ephemeral, we are told that the Torah is in our hands. What will we choose to do with it?