

We've been given permission
 Am I the only one who feels
 Incompetent? Unrealized?
 'Cause wasn't it just yesterday
 That I was seeing thunder with my own two eyes?
 And wasn't it just yesterday
 That I didn't get my laundry done,
 That I didn't go out and do something fun,
 That I got dumped, just another one?
 And even the rooster knows the difference between the night and
 the rising sun!
 But sometimes I don't know
 You say it's close to me
 Why don't You just show me?
 You say it's in my heart
 And You should know, because You know the heart You placed
 inside each one of us
 You say it's in my heart
 That heart of stone which You engraved and will replace with one
 of flesh when the time has come
 And my mouth could be an ocean
 Filled with words you've placed inside it
 Waves and tides ruled by the seasons
 Of the moon
 Its shadows you designed
 It's so close to me, isn't it?
 And You too are close to me, aren't you?
 So close we could kiss, isn't that true?
 So I cling as hard as I can, but I'm still apart, too?
 I cling as hard as I can, but what should I hold on to?
 And if I sing as loud as I can, will I disturb you?
 Until I can finally hear the words myself, it may take a while
 But I'm sure that won't surprise You.

To listen to Bronwen sing this song, visit www.jtsa.edu/so-close-to-me.

To receive *Torah from JTS* by email, visit www.jtsa.edu/torah



Nitzavim 5776

נצבים תשע"ו



Returning *with* God

Rabbi Mychal B. Springer, Director, Center for Pastoral Education, JTS

This week's Torah Portion, Nitzavim, speaks profoundly about *teshuvah*, the literal and figurative struggle to return to God. When we turn back to God “with all [our] heart and soul,” the parashah tells us, then God “will bring you together again from all the peoples where the Lord your God has scattered you” (Deut 30:3). Being scattered is a state of disorientation and disconnection. *Teshuvah* represents a coming home. There's an organic connection between the return to the Land of Israel—the land at the center of the Jewish soul, from which we have been banished—and the return that involves changing our ways and opening our hearts to God.

The next verse says: “Even if your outcasts are at the ends of the world, from there the Lord your God will gather you, from there He will fetch you” (Deut 30:4). There is no place that is too far away for God to reach us, either literally or figuratively. Even those of us who live on the edges of society will be gathered up. In this *teshuvah* process, God's passionate commitment to the marginalized is front and center.

The Hebrew reads “*biktzeh hashamayim*”, the ends of the heavens. How is it that “the ends of the heavens” is translated as “the ends of the world”? In Psalm 19, the sun moves from one end of heaven to the other, crossing the sky in an arch:

His rising-place is at one end of heaven,
 And his circuit reaches the other;
 Nothing escapes his heat (v. 7).

As the sun moves across the heavens each day, it also moves from one end of the earth to the other. So the ends of the heavens and the ends of the earth

are the same. This is a beautiful image of interconnectedness and reconciliation. At the ends—and in the end—the divine world and the human world come together. The outcasts are gathered in. *Teshuvah* is the space in which *out* and *in* are reconciled. The promise that we will be gathered up by God can offer a profound comfort for those of us who experience ourselves in far-flung places, whether emotionally, spiritually, or physically.

If we return to our original verse, we see something interesting in the language. The New JPS translation I quoted earlier says: “He will bring you together again from all the peoples where the Lord your God has scattered you.” But the word that is being translated as “bring you” is actually “*veshav*”, which means “He will return.” (“Bring you” is the causative form of the same Hebrew root.) The translation skips over the problem, but the rabbis in the Talmud do not.

And when they will be redeemed in the future, the Shekhinah will be with them, as it says, “Then the Lord your God will return [with] your captivity” (Deut. 30:3). It does not say here *veheshiv* [and He shall bring back] but *veshav* [and He shall return]. This teaches us that the Holy One, blessed be He, will return with them from the places of exile. (BT Megillah 29a)

The verses in the parashah seem to convey that we are the outcasts and God is eternally at the center. But this Talmudic midrash complicates the picture. Just as we are outcasts, God is an outcast. Somehow, God, in the form of the Shekhinah, God’s in-dwelling presence, is also in need of return. The image of God returning us, bringing us back, conveys one kind of power. But the image of God coming back *with* us, alongside us, conveys a different kind of power. I cannot pretend to understand this power fully, but I understand the Rabbis to be teaching us that this power is rooted in connectedness, in being with the outcast, dwelling inside the “not yet.”

There’s something about being joined by the divine in this place on the edge that has the potential to shore us up as we long to return. Perhaps it is the experience of being joined in this way which enables us to open up “with all [our] heart and soul” and return at last.

The publication and distribution of the *JTS Parashah Commentary* are made possible by a generous grant from Rita Dee (ז"ל) and Harold Hassenfeld (ז"ל).

דבר אחר | A Different Perspective



So Close To Me Bronwen Mullin, Student, The Rabbinical School of JTS (Class of '17)

*For the thing is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to observe it.
See, I set before you this day life and prosperity, death and adversity.*
(Deut. 30:14-15)

You say it’s in my heart
Like my heart is less a mystery than the great expanse of heaven
You say it’s in my heart
Like my heart is less a threatening thing than the deepest darkest
ocean

And my mouth is full of snares
I say such stupid things sometimes
And then when it really matters
No one’s listening
No one really cares

But it’s close to me, isn’t it?
One day I’ll get there...?

You say it’s in my heart
As if my heart is not a foreign land to be ravaged and conquered
You say it’s in my heart
As if her pillars and her altars smashed don’t rise again and now
they’re stronger

And my mouth follows my eyes
And with my mind, all three uncircumcised
How can I know what really matters
I can see out
But not inside

Yet it’s close to me, isn’t it?
One day I’ll get there...?

Let heaven and earth witness
The human condition
Choose life or choose death