

Nitzavim - Vayeilekh 5783

נצבים-ויילך תשפ"ג

Returning *with* God

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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.

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