

D'var Torah – Nitzavim/Vayelech 5770

September 3, 2010

By Rabbi Maurice Harris

Shabbat shalom to everyone on this, the last Shabbat before the Jewish New Year of 5771 begins. I hope to see all of you this Wednesday night, Thursday morning, Thursday night and Friday morning for Rosh Hashanah services, and then again Friday night and Saturday morning for *Shabbat Shuvah* services. It's a lot of *davening*, a lot of togetherness, and I pledge to bring my breath mints if you will too.

In our annual journey through the Torah, we've gotten very close to the end of the scroll. This week we've arrived at the double Torah portion known as *Nitzavim/Vayelech*. It begins with well-known words, spoken by Moses to the Israelites: *atem nitzavim kool-chem ha-yom leefnay adonay*. One translation reads: "You stand this day, all of you, before the Eternal One your God."

It's a moment in which Moses tells the Hebrews that they are about to enter into a covenant with God and in the fullest sense, become a nation bonded with God. There are several moments of covenant between God and Israel in Torah, and this one stands prominently alongside the pact made between God and the people earlier in the Torah at Mt. Sinai. Now, the Israelites are poised to enter the Promised Land in just a matter of days or weeks, though, sadly, Moses won't be making that journey with them. But for now, Moses informs them that they are about to ratify, once again, their sacred agreement, their eternal pact with God, as they get ready to transform from a wandering tribe of Hebrews to a nation within a land.

Moses goes on to remind the Israelites that if they keep the covenant they will create a just and prosperous society, and enjoy peace with their neighbors. If they violate the covenant, however, there will be sad and painful consequences. Ultimately, the land will spit them out, and they will find themselves in exile. Their beloved promised land will fall into ruin and destruction on such a scale that neighboring nations will pity them.

We read these words with dramatic irony. As readers we know that not one but two bitter and catastrophic exiles await the Israelites in the centuries after Moses's life. After warning the Israelites that exile will be the cost of breaking the covenant, Moses tries to offer them hope should they ever find themselves in exile in the future. Here's some of what he says:

When all these things happen to you [meaning when you do inevitably violate this covenant and find yourselves exiled from your land] ... should you take [all that I've said] to heart amidst the various nations to which the Eternal your God has banished you, and **should you then return to the Eternal your God**, and you and your children heed God's command with all your heart and spirit ... *then* the Eternal your God will restore your fortunes and take you back in motherly-love. God will bring you together again from all the peoples where the Eternal your God has scattered you. Even if your

outcasts are at the ends of the sky, from there the Eternal your God will gather you, from there God will fetch you. And the Eternal your God will bring you to the land that your ancestors possessed, and you will possess it; and God will make you more numerous than your ancestors were.

If we stop and look at this passage closely, we start to see how extraordinary it is. Here is Moses, giving his final speeches to a people he knows is deeply flawed, yet full of promise. Moses has been repeating the warning that their well-being as a nation is entirely in their hands. If they uphold their part of their covenant with God, they'll create a beautiful society. If they don't, at first things will slide downhill, and in the worst case scenario, they'll suffer military defeat and exile.

Then, in the passage I just quoted, Moses's message takes a new turn. He tells the people that even if they violate their covenant with God profoundly, to the extent that they are crushed by a foreign army and hurled to the four corners of the earth – even then, there's something they can do to redeem things. There's something they can do that is so powerful and potent a spiritual force that it can overcome the consequences of their previous wrongdoing, and even all the previous wrongdoings of the generations that came before them. That action that can reverse the flow of negativity and even restore things to a state that was better than how it once was before is the action of *t'shuvah*, turning, or returning, to a righteous path.

Let me read the key passage again: “**should you then return to the Eternal your God**, and you and your children heed God’s command with all your heart and spirit ... *then* the Eternal your God will restore your fortunes and take you back in motherly-love.” The Hebrew for the word “return” in this sentence comes from the same grammatical root as the word for *t'shuvah*, the word we often translate as spiritual return or repentance during the High Holy Days. So So Moses is telling the people that even if they become seriously depraved and suffer the worst consequence, exile, there's still hope. God is their covenant partner, and the terms of the agreement are real, but if Israel breaks the agreement, God will leave the door open.

Now that I've said this much, I can imagine a scene at some of your homes. “Hi honey, I'm back from services.” “Great, how was it?” “Lovely.” “What did the rabbi have to say?” “*He said it's never too late to REPENT! REPENT!* Oh, and they need more volunteers to bring honey cakes for the Rosh Hashanah children's services.”

It may come as a shock to you, but in truth I didn't come here tonight to threaten Divine fire and brimstone and shout the word “repent” at you. The truth is, I don't need to. We don't need a preacher to warn us that we really do live in a world of sacred responsibilities and real consequences. The climatologists measuring the melting of the polar ice caps or the bereaved families of the four Israelis who were gunned down by Hamas terrorists this week are in a far better position to tell us about the real-life consequences of breaking our sacred covenant with the Life Force, with the Creative Being that both surrounds us and lives within us.

An author I'm fond of citing, Karen Armstrong, teaches that religious mythic stories describe *something that had in some sense happened once but that also happens all the time*. These teachings

are trying to tell us something about the nature of Life, with a capital L, and they offer us an invitation to take on a wiser, healthier spiritual and psychological posture, to borrow more of Armstrong's language.¹ In the mythic dreamscape of the Hebrew Bible, the *Tanakh*, the Hebrews move in time back and forth between two states of being: at home in the Land of Israel, or scattered and vulnerable in exile. Home and exile, this is the image. And the teaching is that the movement between these two states is ingrained in the human experience. This is part of what it means to be human. This is the Jewish core metaphor for the spiritual challenge of human life.

We all have had experiences of being serene, grounded, joyful, at one, connected to something larger than ourselves – you can fill in the specific words that suit you personally. And we all have had experiences of being distressed, confused, lost, aggravated, disconnected, lonely, and hopeless. Moses's message to the Israelites in this week's parashah is that they *will* go into exile at some point. They *will* stray from the path of integrity, of genuine connection with the Sacred Power that animates the universe. Just as we all will. This is exile.

We might even spend a long time in exile. But when we are ready to pivot and turn, when we recognize that the path we've been following is out of touch, out of balance, and outright no good for us and others around us, *t'shuvah* – turning, or returning – is there as a path to reconnection. We might wander on roads far from the Sacred Source, but all the roads are connected. It's always possible to find our way home.

Maybe this helps make sense of what the Talmudic sages meant when they taught that *t'shuvah* was one seven things that God created before creating the cosmos. The possibility of recognizing our bad choices and unhealthy patterns, and then turning to a better path is hard-wired into the elemental fabric of creation, right there with gravity and the strong and weak nuclear forces.

This Shabbat, as we draw near to the holy days that center on *t'shuvah*, may we be comforted by the thought that there's always a pathway back to serenity and goodness whatever our mistakes have been. May we take heart in the insight that everyone journeys back and forth between being spiritually at home and being spiritually in exile. May we become less harsh in our judgments of others who've wandered into their own variations of exile, since all of us do this. And may we be encouraged by the notion that the possibility of *t'shuvah* is always with us because it is part of the cosmic blueprint.

Shabbat shalom and *l'shana tova tikatayvu* – may we all be written for a good new year.

1 Armstrong, Karen, *The Case for God*, pp. Xi-xii, Alfred A. Knopf © 2009.