

Nitzavim & Teshuvah

Rabbi Sandy Roth z”l

You are standing today all of you before Adonai, your God – your tribal heads, your elders, all the people of Israel, you children, your spouses, even the stranger who is in your camp, from the one who chops wood to the one who draws water – to enter the covenant with Adonai your God... (Deut. 29: 9-11)

Baruch ben Jehiel of Medzibezh taught: Moses our teacher, when he gazed out over Israel and saw that they were “standing”, realized that this standing still and not moving (was an indication of their spiritual condition.) He declared that it is no wonder that **“you are standing today,”** for now you are on the highest possible level, **“before Adonai your God “** bound in the highest form of ecstasy with the Holy One, face to face without a dividing screen. And from such a level it would be incomprehensible to move, rather only to simply stand still and be there. (in *Sparks Beneath the Surface* p. 256)

“all of you...”

Even though there is a hierarchy, these are some of the most inclusive lines in Torah, listing not just tribal heads and elders, but women, children and the *gerim toshavim* (resident aliens who live in our communities) as well as workers who are among us. The whole of the community is greater than the sum of its parts. Each individual Israelite may be flawed and imperfect, but when all of them join together, the strengths and good qualities of each are reinforced and magnified.

“from the one who chops wood to the one who draws water”

I couldn't resist these words in this passage. There is a Zen saying, "Before Enlightenment, chop wood carry water, after Enlightenment, chop wood carry water." What's the difference? The tasks are the same. The need is the same. What about the frame of mind? Who is chopping? Who is carrying water? What did our ancestors attribute to these words?

...The first line of Nitzavim mentions the word **“hayom.”** Each and every day, or moment, we stand before God, both outer and inner self. In the Torah, **hayom** means this day or this moment, at this very time. It is not particular, it is not fixed. The word **hayom** begs us to be present, to be mindful, to what is happening right now. We are offered to enter into the covenant of God, now, each and every moment. And with this offer of covenant, we are presented with the choice of blessing or curse. Each and every day, we are faced with blessings and curses. As we stand in wholeness, recognizing our strengths and our weaknesses without judgment, we are privileged to accept the covenant. What is that covenant for you? For me it is a sacred contract with my self and the greater Self of the universe; the freedom that allows my self to stand in the presence of God and feel united. It is through mindfulness that my heart opens, and I am calm and alert so that I am free to choose life over and over again.

(over)

God will circumcise your heart and your descendants' hearts so that you will love Adonai, with your whole self—so that you may live. (Deut. 30:6)

Verses 30: 1-10 include the Hebrew verb meaning “return,” *shuv*, seven times. It is appropriate as we are in the month of Elul... the time of *teshuvah*. When there is repetition in Torah, it is not by accident... here it is to emphasize a point. Here, *v'shavta ad* means **turn around toward** and *tashuv el* means **return to**. This variation reflects two stages in the process of repentance. The first stage is a realization that our behavior is wrong and requires a change of direction. This is **turning toward** God. The second stage is coming into the presence of God as the result of one's new way of life, **returning to** God. (*Malbim*)

Looking inward and looking outward: that's what we do on Rosh Hashanah. We stop long enough to look at the world and the year that has passed. But we also take the time to look at ourselves. If we can understand who we are and what's expected of us, then we can begin to change, to return. Every change, begins within; it must start deep within our hearts. When we open our hearts, circumcise them, we are able experience a greater Existence of Being. This is the true meaning of Teshuvah.

Rabbi Shefa Gold

Teshuvah, a word usually translated as Repentance or Return, also means Response, and in that meaning I find instruction guiding me towards a certain stance in relation to my life. When the “great shofar is sounded”...”the still small voice” emerges as my response. The art of response requires Listening which necessitates the ongoing cultivation of a patient, calm receptive presence. I don't mean listening as a passive bystander. The kind of listening I'm talking about is when you allow yourself to be addressed directly; it means “taking it personally”.

When I walk outside and look up at the sky, I can open myself to receive its blue as a gift or as a letter that is addressed to me. Its beauty calls forth a response.... gratefulness, praise, wonder. Something in me rises to meet that presence which calls to me through the purity of Blue.

And when I encounter suffering in the world, I can let its mystery address me, calling forth compassion from my own depths. Response is an art-form that requires opening, listening and knowing oneself and one's reactions. Respons-ibility is the freedom to respond wisely, rather than be enslaved by patterns of reaction.

***How do you understand the word “Teshuvah”?**

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