

PARASHAH: Nitzavim (Standing)
ADDRESS: D'varim (Deuteronomy) 29:9(10)-30:20
READING DATE: Shabbat
AUTHOR: Torah Teacher Ariel ben-Lyman

*Updated: July 4, 2006

(Note: all quotations are taken from the Complete Jewish Bible, translation by David H. Stern, Jewish New Testament Publications, Inc., unless otherwise noted)

Let's begin with the opening blessing for the Torah:

***“Baruch atah YHVH, Eloheynu, Melech ha-O’lam,
asher bachar banu m’kol ha-amim,
v’natan lanu eht Torah-to.
Baruch atah YHVH, noteyn ha-Torah.
Ameyn.”***

(Blessed are you, O’ LORD, our God, King of the Universe,
you have selected us from among all the peoples,
and have given us your Torah.
Blessed are you, LORD, giver of the Torah.
Ameyn.)

The parashah (portion) for this week is a most significant one. To be sure, a verse-by-verse commentary would prove to be very informative for the average reader. Space does not permit me to do such a study, so, I will, instead, explain (what I believe to be) the crux of the passage, that is, the central teaching.

“For Moshe writes about the righteousness grounded in the *Torah* that **the person who does these things will attain life through them.** Moreover, the righteousness grounded in trusting says: **“Do not say in your heart, ‘Who will ascend to heaven?’**”—that is, to bring the Messiah down—or, **“Who will descend into Sh’ol?”**—that is, to bring the Messiah up from the dead. What, then, does it say? **“The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart.”**—that is, the word about trust which we proclaim....” –Romans 10:5-8 (Emphasis, Stern’s)

This is a quote from the *B’rit Chadashah*, specifically, from the pen of Rabbi Sha’ul (Paul) of Tarsus, yet it reads strikingly similar to our text from Parashah *Nitzavim*!

“For this *mitzvah* which I am giving to you today is not too hard for you, it is not beyond your reach. It isn’t in the sky, so that you need to ask, ‘Who will go up into the sky for us, bring it to us and make us hear it, so that we can obey it?’ Likewise, it isn’t beyond the sea, so that you need to ask, ‘Who will cross the sea for us, bring it to us and

make us hear it, so that we can obey it?’ On the contrary, the word is very close to you—in your mouth, even your heart; therefore, you can do it!” (Chapter 30:11-14)

The reason is because—unbeknown to some well-meaning Christian readers—Rav Sha’ul is quoting **Nitzavim**, yet he applies a well-known rabbinical method of interpretation, called *midrash*, to the text. As we shall see, his conclusion to the text was rather radical for his day and age! To be sure, it is for ours as well! Before getting into what he had to say, lets first explore our text from the parashah, found in the Torah Proper.

The opening verse of **Nitzavim** reads, in the Hebrew:

אַתֶּם נֹצְבִים הַיּוֹם כְּלָכֶם לִפְנֵי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם
רְאִשֵׁיכֶם שְׂבִיטֵיכֶם זְקֵנֵיכֶם וְשֹׁטְרֵיכֶם כָּל
אִישׁ יִשְׂרָאֵל

טַפְּכֶם נְשִׁיכֶם וְגֵרְךָ אֲשֶׁר בְּקִרְבְּךָ מִחֲנֹךְ
מִחֹטֵב עֵצֶיךָ עַד שֹׂאֵב מִיַּמֶּיךָ

“Atem nitzavim hayom kulechem lifney ADONAI Eloheychem rasheychem shivteychem zikneychem veshotreychem kol ish Yisra'el. Tapechem nesheychem vegerecha asher bekerev machaneycha mechotev etseycha ad sho'ev meymecha.”

Today you are standing, all of you, before ADONAI your God—your heads, your tribes, your leaders and your officers—all the men of Isra'el, along with your little ones, your wives, and your foreigners here with you in your camp, from the one who chops your wood to the one who draws your water. (Verses 10,11)

This rather all-conclusive list of representatives from *Am Yisra'el* (people of Isra'el), spoken by Moshe, tells us that the important message to follow needs to be heard by all. This list included the officers, leaders, tribes, and heads of all the men of Isra'el. But he did not stop there. Verse eleven goes on to include the children and wives of the men, as well as the foreigners who had attached themselves to Isra'el as a people; the entire spectrum of workers was represented here. What was so important to HaShem that he had Moshe assemble all of the people?

For Future Generations to Come

Sometimes in speech, the tenses in the verbs can be very crucial for a proper understanding of the text. I believe this is such a case. I must resist the urge to do an exhaustive case-by-case word study here. I will draw your attention,

however, to the fact that in Chapter 29, Moshe informs the people that the covenant that HaShem is making with them there, is not just with them alone, but, that the responsibilities will also fall on of their ancestors to come (Verse 14-16). In other words, this includes those today who identify with *Am Yisra'el*! This lets us know that these words of the Torah (the covenant) are pertinent for us today, and that we might do well to listen to them! These verses contain our “pace-setter” for the rest of the parashah. Let’s read on.

“When the time arrives that all these things **have come** upon you, both the blessing and the curse which I **have presented** to you; and you **are there** among the nations to which ADONAI your God **has driven** you; then at last, you **will start thinking** about what **has happened** to you; and you **will return** to ADONAI your God and **pay attention** to what he **has said**, which **will be** exactly what I **am ordering** you to do today—to you and your children, with all your heart and all your being” (30:1-3, emphasis on verbs mine).

Whew! What a statement! What could the Holy One possibly mean by all of this? Surely he wasn’t predicting the disobedience of his children? Surely, **if** they did disobey him, breaking his covenant, he wouldn’t bring upon them “every curse written in this book” (29:27) would he? Sadly, the Torah historically records that the people **did do** exactly as HaShem said they would. They forsook the LORD their God, and prostrated themselves to, and served, false gods; false gods that the Holy One despised! But Moshe’s discourse did not stop there. He did mention that they **would return** to HaShem. Let’s read further.

“At that point, ADONAI your God will reverse your exile and show you mercy... (Chapter 30:3b).” Baruch HaShem (Blessed be the Name)! This is marvelous! The Sovereign LORD himself would bring about the return of the people to the Land of Promise. We see here, unequivocally, that it is the Power of HaShem that brings about a true change of heart! Judaism has a term for this “turn around”, it’s called “*t’shuvah*”. In it’s truest definition it **always** involves a 180-degree forsaking of the error, in return back to the truth! HaShem has just instructed the people that despite their apostasy, he would show them mercy and cause their *t’shuvah*. To be sure, he takes it a step further and introduces a concept familiar to Christian readers of the New Covenant—circumcision of the heart (30:6)! These verses are full of surprises indeed! I have to wonder out loud, “How many of the House of Isra’el **really** stop to read all of the magnificent promises spelled out for them in this parashah? How many Christians even know that they exist, here in the ‘Old Testament’”? But, HaShem is just getting started! Let’s read further.

“However, all this will happen only if you pay attention to what ADONAI your God says, so that you obey his *mitzvot* and regulations which are written in this book of the Torah... (30:10).” Now this verse brings us **exactly** to where our Rabbi from Tarsus started, in the opening verse of my commentary.

In order to understand what I'm referring to, you, the student, need to go back and read (on your own) Romans 9:31-10:5.

The "Scarlet Thread" of the Torah

Here's the meat of my commentary—pay attention: The Nation of Isra'el, as a whole failed to grasp the **central concept** of the teaching of Moshe, and consequently, the teaching of Rav Sha'ul. Moshe describes, in no uncertain terms, the availability of the grace of HaShem, when it comes to attaining "life". Most assuredly, he presents before them, the option to choose "life" and "good", or "death" and "evil" (30:15-20). In the verses quoted at the onset of my commentary, Moshe describes "IT" as not being too hard for them to grasp; he describes the "IT" as not being beyond their reach either! This important "IT" wasn't in the sky, which was obviously out of their reach, providing them with a legitimate excuse for disobedience, had "IT" remained there. Likewise, the "IT" wasn't beyond the [Mediterranean] sea, providing them once again with the same excuse for disobedience. "On the contrary," says Moshe, "IT" was very close to them, in their mouths [!], even in their hearts (New Covenant feature again)—therefore, they could do "IT"! Whoever said that a person **could not** keep the Torah? Where does this idea come from that "IT" is too difficult? Or that "HaShem is asking too much of me"? But wait! What is the "IT"? Obviously (or maybe not so obviously), the "IT" that Moshe is referring to can **only** be the Torah! Or could it also be a hint (*remez*) of something even greater?

Rav Sha'ul, I believe, supplies us with the answer. I need you, the reader, to recall the strange but true example that John used in Chapter 1, verses 1-14 of his Gospel. Here, John gives us a lesson in "Torah algebra". In verse one, the Torah was *with* HaShem, yet, the Torah *is* HaShem (Torah=HaShem)! But in verse fourteen, John goes on to tell us that the Torah *became* a human being and lived with us (Torah=human being)! The rest of John's account in that first chapter, explicitly states that Yeshua the Messiah **is** that human being! So, according to "Torah algebra": If Torah=HaShem, and Torah=human being, then HaShem=human being! This is controversial indeed! No Jew, using normal modes of logic would accept this interpretation. But Rav Sha'ul was not using normal logic when he quoted the passage in Deuteronomy 30:11-14, and applied his rabbinical teaching tool called *midrash* on it! He was using heavenly logic.

Yeshua the Messiah is **undoubtedly** the subject of Romans 10:5-8. Yet the rabbi identifies the "IT" of Deuteronomy with the Messiah! Why? Because of the truth that you and I already know about Yeshua, as explained earlier by John. Yeshua came from heaven! —**He** did not remain up there, out of our reach, providing us with some valid excuse for lack of faith, which leads to disobedience; nor is **he** "beyond the sea", or to put it the way Sha'ul did, still "in *Sh'ol*". The fact that Sha'ul doesn't use the exact same wording as Moshe here, but opts for the example of *Sh'ol* (the place of the dead, i.e. hell), does not seriously alter the meaning of what Moshe meant. In fact, Sha'ul's example

takes the application a step further. For the Hebrew mind, if something was “beyond the sea”, it might as well have been “in *Sh’ol*”—for it was **beyond** the reach of normal human efforts to obtain! And in the case of *Sh’ol*, it was impossible! At any rate, Yeshua **was not**, and still is not beyond the reach of normal human efforts—for **he** has been raised (from *Sh’ol*) by the power of HaShem, and is **now available** for everyone who will trust! His life from the dead now produces life in all that obey and put their trust in him! These are the very same choices that Moshe was describing!

Because the **goal**, or focus, **at which the Torah aims is the Messiah** (certainly not the end of the Torah), all that go on to receive him find, as HaShem promised through the mouth of Moshe, life and good! We can see from these examples how intimately Yeshua relates to the Torah—not just as the “living Word”, but as the eternal choice presented to man. Today, we are also presented with a choice: life through Yeshua, the Living Torah.... Or death, because of disobedience and disbelief.... Considering the abundant mercy that the Holy One, blessed be He, has poured out through his Son, how can we **not** accept him as our Savior?

The closing blessing is as follows:

***“Baruch atah YHVH, Eloheynu, Melech ha-O’lam,
asher natan lanu Toraht-emet,
v’chay-yeh o’lam nata-b’tochenu.
Baruch atah YHVH, noteyn ha-Torah.
Ameyn.”***

(Blessed are you O’ LORD, our God, King of the Universe,
you have given us your Torah of truth,
and have planted everlasting life within our midst.
Blessed are you, LORD, giver of the Torah.
Ameyn.)

“Shabbat Shalom!”

Torah Teacher Ariel ben-Lyman yeshua613@hotmail.com