

PARSHAS NETZAVIM - CLOSER THAN YOU THINK

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Closer Than You Think¹

For this mitzvah that I command you today - it is not hidden from you and it is not remote...It is something very close to you. It is in your mouth and in your heart - to perform it.

It would be convenient to assume that these psukim are meant to deliver a "Yes we can!" message to those who might think it humanly impossible to live by the Law. Understanding that people might think that the Torah places an onerous burden on our shoulders, the Torah might pause to reassure us that observing its demands is eminently doable.

Convenient as it might be, this cannot be what the Torah means. The Torah speaks of this mitzvah, i.e. one mitzvah in particular, not all mitzvos. It must mean something quite specific. Moreover, the entire thesis is misguided. The Torah would only disabuse us of a position that is somewhat defensible, that people might innocently accept were its error not pointed out to them. Is it possible, however, for anyone to believe that the Torah that Hashem gave us is unlivable - that G-d made some huge mistake? If G-d asks us to obey, it must be within our power to do so. We might genuinely claim that we find it difficult, but we could never imagine it to be impossible.

We needn't search too far to find the point of reference of our psukim. The parshah immediately preceding ours ended in two mitzvos: precision in the study of Torah ("When you listen to the voice of Hashem your G-d to observe His commandments and His fixed rules"^[2]), and teshuvah born of love of Hashem ("When you shall return to Hashem with all your heart and all your soul"^[3]). Indeed, each of these mitzvos is explained as the point of reference of our psukim. The gemara^[4] understands that our psukim refer to the mitzvah of deep comprehension of the Torah; Ramban and Sforno see teshuvah as the focus of attention.

According to the gemara's approach, it would be more than imaginable that we would balk at pursuing Torah knowledge beyond certain limits. After all, any part of a Torah that can be identified with the Divine Mind must be beyond our comprehension. Why bother pushing the limits, when we know that those limits clearly exceed our grasp. In other words, the true, deeper meaning of any part of the Torah appears to be "hidden" from us.

Other parts of Torah present an entirely different challenge. We have no way of approaching certain

topics without guidance from people, teachers, who have successfully navigated their byways before. Those people are not always immediately accessible. They are "remote" from us, and require Herculean effort to meet up with them.

The Torah informs us, according to this approach, that we are wrong on both counts[5].

We will here develop, however, the approach of Ramban and Sforno. The initial assumption - the jumping off point - is as compelling as it is in the gemara's approach above. Teshuvah mei-ahavah seems to us to be almost an oxymoron. Love, in its usual sense, assumes a certain commonality between the lover and the object of that love. Try as we may, we would have a hard time convincing ourselves that we mortal, limited beings of flesh and blood share anything essential with Ein Sof. We also love what we understand deeply and profoundly. We cannot love something or someone with whom we have nothing in common, no basis of shared identity. Do we fool ourselves into thinking that we grasp any of G-d's essence?

How, then, can a mortal human being love Hashem? The Sifrei itself asks the question! Our psukim address this conundrum, and provide some of the solution.

First, the Torah eliminates a proposal that has some merit, but doesn't go far enough. "It is not in heaven," begins the next pasuk. We would not be wrong in assuming that one way in which we could come to love Hashem is by studying the heavens, i.e. the expanse and nature of the physical universe. (The Rambam says as much. At the end of Hilchos Teshuvah[6] he tells us that love of Hashem is not instantly bound to the hearts of all people. It has to be acquired, worked at. It comes from studying and contemplating the braches of knowledge that make Hashem known to Man. Earlier[7], the Rambam pinpointed study of the physical universe as a way to grow in the love of Hashem: "What is the way to love and fear Him? When a person contemplates His works and His wondrous creatures, and sees in them infinite wisdom, immediately he loves, praises and exalts Him....") We might also argue that love of Hashem is "distant," in that studying and contemplating will take us only so far. Another necessary component is spending time in a place endowed with a rich Divine Influence designed to bring a person closer - the beis hamikdash. We don't always find ourselves a stone's throw from the Temple Mount. Travelling to a "remote" location is no easy task!

Our psukim tell us that we are wrong. Love of Hashem is neither restricted to the study of the "distant" expanse of the universe, nor remote, requiring travelling to a specific location.

In general terms, the reason that our initial analysis is incorrect is that we have far more in common, so to speak, with Hashem than we might realize. While it is true that we cannot love something with which we are not familiar, the relationship between father and son seems to be an exception. Sometimes fathers and sons meet who have never met before. They feel a bond that makes it easy to establish a relationship. They love someone who has never been part of their life before.

What they really encounter in the other is a bit of themselves. The same applies to our relationship with HKBH. While we cannot intellectually fathom Him, we detect the relationship of Father and son.

We may find Him inscrutable, but at the same time recognize ourselves within Him. As the Zohar^[8] pithily puts it, "Kudsha Brich Hu, the Torah, and Yisrael are all one."

Our psukim add more to this. Why is Hashem not to be found only in the distant vastness of the physical universe; why is He not remote, approachable only at the beis hamikdosh? Because "it is something very close to you...in your mouth." Our lips can bring Him close to us, through the songs of prayer, and the song of Torah study. Both of these activities bring a person to the level of genuine love of Hashem. These songs are effective, however, not as a magic formula. Uttering words - whether they be words of davening, or words of learning - does not automatically bring one to ahavas Hashem. These songs must be "in your heart - to perform it." The heart must be willing, and then some. Love of Hashem will follow in the wake of these songs only when the innermost desire of the heart longs for closeness with Him.

In a heart full of yearning for Hashem, however, ahavas Hashem is not a far-away goal. It is close at hand.

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1. *Based on Haamek Davar, Devarim 30:11, 14*
 2. *Devarim 30:10*
 3. *Ibid.*
 4. *Eruvin 55A*
 5. *The Netziv in the section before ours fleshes out the meaning of all pertinent psukim according to this approach.*
 6. *Hilchos Teshuvah 10:6*
 7. *Yesodei HaTorah 2:2*
 8. *Zohar, Vayikra 73*
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