

PARSHAS NETZAVIM & VAYEILECH - THE REALLY LONG WAY HOME

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

The Really Long Way Home¹

It will be that when all these things come upon you - the blessing and the curse that I have presented before you - then you will take it to your heart among all the nations where Hashem your G-d has dispersed you, and you will return unto Hashem...you and your children, with all your heart and all your soul[2].

We are accustomed to seeing these verses as a foil to the horror of the ninety-eight evils pronounced in the last parshah upon a Jewish people that fails to uphold its part of the covenant with G-d. Here, we think, Hashem softens the blow by beckoning us to return, and assuring us that He will receive our teshuvah eagerly and graciously. When we get to rock-bottom, we can dust ourselves off, get up and walk back into the embrace of Hashem. It is a perfect section to read before the Yomim Nora'im.

The thought is certainly true - but it may not be the primary intent of these pesukim. Why would the Torah stress "among all the nations," rather than leave the location unspecified? Might not a collective teshuvah apply to a single group, rather than to all the far-flung communities of the Diaspora?

The Torah may be telling us something quite different. It speaks not so much as about a single episode of return, so much as what will happen as Jewish history nears completion. It tells us here what the end will be of the collective historical experience of the Jewish people in its long and difficult exile. The Torah describes what will happen when all that it foretold at the very beginning will have transpired, one way or another, along the tortuous path of Jewish history. When thousands of years will have passed, when Jews will have been sent on their mission to indeed touch "all the nations," something that Man might not have predicted will occur. There will be casualties along the way, to be sure, but at the end of the process, the Jewish people will return with a vengeance.

It is not the Jewish spirit that will wither and fall away, but doubt and uncertainty. Looking back, Jews will return to Hashem with all their hearts and all their souls - they and their children. The return will not be a gingerly-attempted, half-hearted move towards reconciliation with their Creator, but a full and vigorous recommitment. The return is not *el Hashem*, which would mean reorienting

themselves in the direction of His Will, but ad Hashem, arriving, as it were, fully reconnected with the Divine and attached to Him. The return will be resolute and complete, born of conviction, not desperation.

The pesukim do not speak simply of a Jewish people facing the consequence of its disloyalty to G-d. They speak of "taking...to heart." This ordinarily means pondering the deeper meaning of something that is already known, understanding its implications so that they are emotionally internalized, not merely intellectually understood. Looking back, Jews will "get it," for the first time in a long time. They will not only recall the events of their history, but detect its pattern, and more importantly, its principles.

What will accomplish this remarkable about-face? Klal Yisrael will look at itself, after thousands of years of exile, and marvel at its own survival. They will sense that they have gotten to the end of the line - and stand in awe of their own survival, with the Torah still intact and cherished in their hands. How did this come to pass, they will ask themselves? What is this Torah, which we carried with us through the difficult millennia? They will understand fully how they survived. They will realize that nothing but Hashem's protection and guidance saw them through the process; they will comprehend that only a Divinely-authored Torah could have warmed their souls and preserved their stubborn determination not to let go in the worst of times. They will know the truth of Hashem, and know the truth of His Torah.

"Hashem...will circumcise your heart...that you may live[3]." Circumcision removes the seemingly immovable and unrelenting obstruction. Many tendencies and ideologies blocked the expression of the genuine Jewish longing for Hashem along the way. History, scripted by the guiding Hand of G-d, will see to it that whatever used to get in the way will do so no longer. You will then see the reality of G-d so clearly that your relationship with Him will define life itself. Without it, you will not see yourselves as genuinely alive. Granting you this clarity and insight will be what grants you life, what insures "that you may live."

The national return of the Jewish people is not the last chapter in a long history, but the consequence assured by that history. In the end, it will all have been worth it.

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1. Based on the Hirsch Chumash, Devarim 30:1-6
 2. Devarim 30:1-2
 3. Devarim 30:6
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