

Nitzavim / Va'Yeilech – 5783

One of the problems with reading the Torah as we do from week to week is the lack of continuity of the story line. It is almost like it used to be when radio was first invented, and folks used to listen to the same program every evening at the same time to hear the continuation of the story. Or the same as my grandmother Sophie who adored the Edge of Night on TV, and everything had to stop so she could take her apron off and watch the TV. We are meant as a people to take the Shabbat off and listen to the next installment of the saga of the Jewish people but in reruns, year after year, week by week. However, so many of us only get the story in bits and pieces and we lose a lot of the impact and suspense delivered through the story line.

This week is no exception. Last Shabbat, if we were reading the parsha in its entirety we would have ended the reading by hearing the Tochecha, the sequence of blessings and curses that would befall the People Israel upon entering and inhabiting the Promised Land if they forgot to keep the covenant. We are left wondering how the forgetting of the covenant, or the breaking of the covenant, would play out on the lives of the people over time. This week, we are given a very important hint as to what the future would be like if we strayed. We always read this part of the story on the Shabbat before Rosh Hashana for a very specific reason.

Let me first read the first few verses from Chapter 30 which is part of today's parsha. Since you have had your chumashim collected, you can't turn to the page, but here's what we read on page 1169. (Read to top of next page). If you listen to the text carefully, first we are meant to return to the

covenant and then HaShem, the Holy One blessed be He, will shower us again with his favour.

I didn't read every midrash dealing with these few verses, but just a cursory read indicated to me that the sages don't mean that there is cause and then an effect. It isn't that we return first and then HaShem responds. It is more a reciprocal action / reaction sort of thing. We both make moves at the same time. Think of it as two parties being at opposite ends of the road and they take off together and meet in the middle, but if the people stop, so too then will HaShem.

When I began to ponder this, I found myself asking exactly what qualifies as a return to the covenant? After all, there are 613 mitzvot, some are you must do this and some of them are you cannot do that. How do we define what it means to return? Then if you think about what we hear at Yom Kippur, we are taught that we are not ever expected to go from evil to good like turning on a switch but rather to make amends for our errors and sins and try to perfect them the next time, to choose the opposite the next time the opportunity is provided. So, return doesn't mean to turn around and go all the way back in one journey then. Now what?

A partial bit of insight came to me when we were reading the Torah this last Thursday morning. You know I try to ensure you don't have to wait too long for us to find our place in the reading from one week to the next. So, it was obvious we are almost at the end of the fifth book and the end of the entire scroll. That, by definition means that we are soon to start all over from the beginning. And what do we read? Bereshit! In the beginning. But we soon come to realize that that beginning actually happened three times. HaShem created an imperfect world, the sages teach, and then sought a partner in the perfection of the world. Adam was a failure. Noah was a dead

end. But Abraham was the winner. He and therefore we became the partner in the perfection of the world. In the whole five books, looking back, we haven't become very perfect, so does that mean we have to start all over again, from the beginning?

No, we begin where we left off, where we lost our way, where we chose Yetzer HaRah instead of Yetzer HaTov. I learned over the course of my teaching career and tried to pass on to my student teachers that I worked with that we all begin our careers as novices, and all aspire to become experts at teaching. Some get there eventually, but lots get stuck somewhere in the middle of the continuum. The most important thing is that we reflect on our errors and try to improve on them the next time. Isn't that what we are meant to now, in the month of Ellul and through the Yamim Noraim, the period of introspection between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur? We are meant to reflect on our progress as individuals and as a collective and steer back towards the ideals of our covenant.

Note I emphasize the word ideals, not specifics. Of course, it is better to daven every day, keep kosher at home, honour the Sabbath Day and keep it holy, etc. But that is not the totality of the ideal. Those are the particulars to help us find our way to holiness. But it is holiness we are meant to aspire to, to an equal society, to a just society, to an observant way of life. WE are meant to treat one another and ourselves a particular way because we are the children of HaShem, and we were created in his image. We are meant to seek justice and choose life. The word return is figurative. We cannot pivot and turn back; we can only go forward. But if we strive to go forward and stay in the shadow of the covenant, then HaShem will be there to guide us and provide spiritually for us. Every end is a new beginning and as I have said over and over again, when it has been appropriate, we put one foot in

front of the other and seek the sun of the next day because every day is a new chance to return to HaShem however we ourselves, individually, define it. It is the journey and how we make it that is crucial. Shabbat Shalom.