

PARASHAT NITZAVIM

SHMUEL RABINOWITZ

# Who cleanses you?

This week's Torah portion – *Nitzavim* – continues with the description of the covenant made between God and the Jewish nation before it entered the Promised Land.

We read verses that were visions of the future, predicted by the Creator of the universe, though for us they are events that occurred in history. In these verses, we read that the Jewish nation will sin and veer off the path, will be exiled from its land and, after some time, will wish to return to its God and land.

The Torah continues to describe that at this point, God will gather His nation from all the places to which they were exiled, and will return them to His land. This incredible revelation has already started to come true. The Jewish nation was exiled from its land and is returning to it after nearly 2,000 years.

The Torah describes what is going to happen from this point forward: “And the Lord, your God, will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, [so that you may] love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, for the sake of your life.... And you will return and listen to the voice of the Lord, and fulfill all His commandments, which I command you this day” (Deuteronomy 30:6-9).

These consoling verses say that after the Jewish people returns to its land, God will circumcise the people's hearts. What does that mean?

Centuries of sin, exile and distance created a sort of spiritual cover over the heart that thickened as time

passed.

The phrase “circumcise your heart” might seem familiar from some relationships in our lives that did not survive over time or through hardships. There were people in our lives to whom we opened our hearts at certain points, and our relationship with them flourished, but the passage of time and various events caused us to grow apart. Over the years, our hearts closed off and the old feelings were relegated to dark corners, replaced by a thick layer of disconnection and separation.

When the Jewish nation returns to its land, this layer has to be removed gently so that the heart can open, feel, and get closer to God. The “mohel” who will perform this circumcision on the heart of the Jewish nation is none other than God Himself. This process is called *teshuva*, repentance.

We are familiar with the term “teshuva” from this period of time in the Jewish calendar. During the time between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, the Jewish nation is called upon to do teshuva, to repent for deeds of this past year. This teshuva is that of the individual. But the teshuva that the Torah is dealing with in this week's parasha is the complete teshuva in which the entire Jewish nation returns to its God.

THE MISHNA discussing the laws of Yom Kippur ends with these words: “R. Akiva said: ‘Happy are you, Israel. Before whom are you purified, and who purifies you? Your Father in heaven, as it is written (Ezekiel 36:25):

“And I shall sprinkle upon you purifying waters, and you shall be pure”; and (Jeremiah 17:13): “The Lord is the mikveh of Israel.” Just as a mikveh purifies the impure, so the Holy One, blessed be He, purifies Israel!” (Yoma 8:8).

In this saying of our Sages and in the verses cited in it, there are two additional descriptions of the process of teshuva and purification.

The first description compares the process to sprinkling purifying water on a person who became ritually impure due to proximity with a corpse, with God acting as the kohen sprinkling the purifying water.

The second description is loftier, with the process of teshuva compared to a person entering a ritual bath to become pure and cleansed. In this allegory, God Himself is the mikveh that purifies the Jewish people.

Rabbi Akiva, among the greatest of Mishna sages, expresses wonder and pride: How amazing to be part of the Jewish nation! Not only does a Jew get help in the process of doing teshuva and softening his heart, but God Himself is the One offering the assistance, and He is the mikveh that purifies him of all his sins.

These various images are all allegories for the process that the Jewish people is slated to undergo: the process of teshuva, cleansing, and softening of the heart as preparation for the return to the ancient covenant, thousands of years old, between God and His people. ■

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DAVID WOLPE

# Two rules for getting lost

Of all the banes and blessings of technology, none has helped me more than the GPS.

I have a directionally dysfunctional brain. My instinct is always wrong. If I am sure I should turn left, the correct answer is right. The stereotype that men do not ask for directions does not apply to me – I will ask anyone, at any time. It is fortunate that I live across the street from my synagogue, because if I lived far away, my attendance would be hit or miss. I have even managed to get lost with the GPS, because it cannot always recalibrate as quickly as I err.

Many years ago I listened to an interview with a psychologist who wrote a book called *You Are Here: Why We Can Find Our Way to the Moon, but Get Lost in the Mall*. In the interview he explained that when people get lost, there are two things we often get wrong that we need to remember.

The first: When you are lost, stop. People have a tendency when lost to speed up, often in the wrong direction. Panic induces us to try and undo the mistake, only to end up compounding it. That first rule reminded me of the confession in the al het, for the sins which we have committed “by running to do evil.” I have often wondered – why run? Why not do evil slowly? But anyone who has ever been on a diet understands. There is half a box of cookies; you don't wish to waste them; if you eat them very fast, it doesn't count. In other words, there is a very human impulse to do things we suspect to be wrong quickly, so it can be behind us. When we are lost we do the same thing. Let's solve this, fast. But that is a wrong approach. We need to stop.

The second rule: People don't appreciate that they are lost. Appreciate in two senses:

- Know that you are in fact lost. How often have you heard someone, who

clearly does not know where he is, say, “I'm not lost”? Admit and accept it.

- Know that some of life's most unexpected and beautiful experiences come from being lost – which makes it easier to admit. Any traveler will tell you that it was the unplanned journey, the bungled trip, the side alley and back path that was not intended, that yielded some of the most treasured moments.

THOSE ARE very good rules for being lost in life as well. Stopping is scary. We have the fear of the cartoon character who runs off the cliff and as long as his legs keep moving he stays up but the moment he stops he falls like a stone. We make bad investments and throw good money after bad because we are afraid to stop. We get into arguments and double down because we are afraid to stop. When you are lost in life, stop. Take a moment and a breath and a prayer.

“You stand here today,” we read in

our parasha. Stop before you go into the land. Israel has been wandering, lost. At some moments they have appreciated the journey and learned from it. At other moments they have allowed their fear to dominate their lives, and rebelled or complained or panicked. Now, before they enter the land it is time to appreciate the wonders you discover when you realize you are lost, and take a moment of pause that allows you to evaluate and begin to change direction. Next week is Vayelech, when we are instructed to go forward. We can do that properly once we have paused and understood.

On Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we have the chance to stop, and admit that in our lives we are lost. We can reset our spiritual GPS, and begin anew. ■

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JUDAISM 3.0  
GOL KALEV

# Unveiling our eyes

Knowledge is there – we need to see it

Is knowledge acquired? The Book of Deuteronomy seems to suggest that knowledge is already there, but we fail to recognize it due to a state of enslavement – nationally or personally. Hence a process is needed to train our hearts, eyes and ears. This is the process of receiving the Torah.

That explains the seemingly contradictory duality of Moses's message. On the one hand, he reminds the Israelites that they have witnessed God's miracles and wonders, but on the other, he also reminds them that they have failed to translate this into consciousness, as they repeatedly seek to go back to Egypt, worship idols and disobey God's orders.

Moses reconciles this duality in his final days, explaining: “But the Lord has not given you a heart to know, eyes to see and ears to hear, until this day.”

Now that the 40-year dis-enslavement process has been completed, the day has arrived for God to fulfill what would later be described in Psalm: “Unveil my eyes, and I shall see the wonders of your Torah.”

More than 3,000 years later, poet Leah Goldberg, who appears on the Jewish state's NIS 100 bill, wrote about the near-utopic state of her beloved country, but implied that it is not recognized: “Who has eagle eyes to see? Who has a wise heart to acknowledge?”

Indeed, just like our eyes can be unveiled, they can be re-veiled. That is exactly what happened in the time between Moses and Goldberg. Over a 1,000 years of flourishing (Judaism 1.0), were followed by some 2,000 years of re-enslavement (Judaism 2.0). “Once again there was an Egypt,” Herzl explained in *Altneuland*, suggesting we should include the exodus from Europe in the Passover Seder. During these centuries of exile, knowledge was dormant.

Failing to see what is in-front of us also exists on a personal level (some interpret Goldberg's poem as an analogy to her personal life). Sadness, tiredness, regret and lack of inspiration blocks, while a state of calmness, happiness, optimism and acceptance, as well as security, allows our eyes to be unveiled and to see the wonders.

Such was Herzl's personal circumstances in Paris. At first, it was riddled with noise. He lived with his parents, young children and his demanding wife, who was in repeated conflict with his parents. But then ahead of his own return to Vienna, his family moved back, and Herzl was left to his own devices in the city of lights. Secured in the reassuring knowledge that his family was safe in Vienna, Herzl flourished in the spring of 1895 – intellectualizing with the Paris elite, frequenting the opera and breathing the optimism of the belle epoque. (Herzl's personal circumstances are reminiscent of Moses's at the time of his flourishing). Herzl's heart suddenly knew, his eyes saw and his ears heard.

“No portion of my argument is based on a new discovery,” Herzl proclaimed right in the first paragraph of his manifesto *The Jewish State*. “The materials of the



(Si Janko Ferli /Unsplash)

structure I am designing are not only in existence, but actually already in hand.”

Internalizing the lessons from Moses's exodus, Herzl understood that transformations need to happen gradually – he referred to those 40 years in the desert as “education through migration”. Yet, he also acknowledged that “a state of awareness can only shape inside of us by the death of the individual that we were yesterday.”

## Herzl's heart suddenly knew, his eyes saw and his ears heard

### Judaism 3.0

Between those two back-ends, a transformation of Judaism was embarked upon. By now, this transformation is becoming evident. Zionism is turning into the organizing principle of Judaism and the primary conduit through which both Jews and non-Jews relate to Judaism – in positive and negative alike.

This is a direct continuation of Moses's final words in Deuteronomy. Just as he prophesied, God has gathered the Israeli nation from the dispersed nations and circumcised their hearts to love God (reflected in Israel being a nation of believers – secular and religious alike). The “terms” for the credit given by God is described in Parashat Nitsavim, including the tough sanctions if we default. Indeed, one can look at Nitsavim as “terms and conditions” for today's state of Judaism.

The transformation of Judaism is on the one hand obvious, but on the other, yet to be recognized. Some still think that Judaism can exist today without Zionism. This is as laughable as the idea that Judaism can exist without its previous organizing principle – Rabbinic Judaism, and instead rely on nostalgia for the

Tempe and ritual of the sacrifices.

And yet, it is hard to let go of the Diaspora way of thinking – 2,000 years of Egypt takes its toll. While most Jews transformed, some still suffer from instinctive Pavlovian-like opposition to Zionism. Herzl described them in harsh-terms in his play *The New Ghetto*, and his article “Mauschel.”

The addition to the familiar enslaved state of being is depicted in another one of Goldberg's songs, “My homeland.” Even though characterized with poverty, hunger, year-round rain and greyness, Goldberg's praise to her old country is remarkably strong. But then Goldberg engages in what seems to be a farewell tour of her beloved life of yesterday, traveling from city to city, from state to state, with a song and music-box, “to eulogize your glamorous Diaspora.” ■

*The writer is the author of the upcoming book Judaism 3.0 – Judaism's transformation to Zionism (October 2021). For details: [Judaism-Zionism.com](http://Judaism-Zionism.com). For more of his parasha commentary: [parashaandherzl.com](http://parashaandherzl.com)*

### To the root of our souls

A carefully layered read of Herzl unveils the interplay between two bookends of his thinking: “A state of awareness can only shape inside of us by the death of the individual that we were yesterday” on the one hand, and the need for transformations to be gradual, on the other.

The same can be said about a layered reading of the Torah – between a radical negation of Egypt and its “idols, wood and stone, silver and gold” on the one hand, and the need for a gradual transition (hence the 40 years in the desert), and for physical tools to worship God.

As we are about to start a new year, the same can be said about our individual and collective process of *teshuva* – the return to our authentic self, to the root of our souls – as Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook described it.

A young person getting married can perhaps part from his single days through a gradual transition, but an older bachelor might require some destruction of the individual he was yesterday in order to make room for the new state of awareness.

Israel is not a young nation. It has a rigid past that took it far away from its authentic self. As Herzl said “we are what the Ghetto made us.” Hence a radical transformation was needed, and that is exactly what Zionism is. Those who have yet to recognize that Judaism has transformed and Zionism is its anchor, can perhaps do so in the upcoming year. Indeed, as the old year ends, we are ready to welcome this new year in Zion, along with all its blessings.