

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality (Portion of Nitzavim)

From Rav Binny Freedman

One of the most tragic episodes to come out of the Holocaust was the terrible story of the St. Louis.

In 1939, the last boat that was actually allowed to take Jewish refugees out of Nazi Germany was the St. Louis. At that point, the Germans still wanted only to rid themselves of Jews; they didn't care much where else they would go. And they saw this as a moneymaking opportunity. So they announced that any Jew who could afford five hundred dollars passage (plus an additional two hundred and fifty dollars entrance visa to Cuba), could book passage on the steam ship St. Louis.

Understand that this was, in 1939, an absolute fortune. In fact, five hundred dollars in 1939 was equivalent to almost eleven thousand dollars today! (Before adding the inflation since then....) Add to that the fact that the Jews of Germany and Austria who boarded this ship, had been under Nazi oppression since 1933, and with the advent of the Nuremberg laws in 1935, they could no longer earn a living in their professions or complete their degrees of study. Soon after, they were forced into ghettos, which meant they had to sell their homes for pennies and pay exorbitant rents to their non-Jewish landlords in the ghetto dwellings, because any Jew without a roof over his head was deemed an indigent and shipped off to Dachau. Most of the fares were gleaned from monies sent from abroad or the last of the family jewels to be sold.

So, the nine hundred and sixty Jews who boarded that ship in early 1939, had nothing left.

By the time the boat reached the coast of Cuba, however, that country, experiencing its own economic woes, began re-considering their decision to let nearly a thousand Jewish refugees in. For three days the boat sat in the harbor, until the Cubans finally announced the Jews could enter their country, but only at an additional visa cost of two hundred and fifty dollars a person! Two hundred and fifty thousand dollars was an unheard-of sum, which the people on the boat clearly could not raise, so for three more days they sat, while the world watched. Finally, three major Jewish organizations (including HIAS, the Hebrew International Aid Society) succeeded in raising the entire sum and offered to wire the money down to Cuba.

But by this time, it was too late; the press had gotten wind of it, and large demonstrations were filling the Cuban port, as workers rallied against allowing illegal immigrants in to take away their jobs. Cuba was going through its own economic crisis, and the government, for fear of being overthrown, did not want to rock the boat, and so the doors of Cuba were slammed shut.

And then began one of the saddest sagas of modern Jewry, as the St. Louis plied the high seas, from port to port, begging a place to bring these wretched Jewish souls with nowhere to go. They even lay anchor off the coast of Florida, while a special congressional sub-committee debated whether they should be allowed into the United States beyond the yearly refugee quota, which had already been filled. Here too, they were denied entry.

South America and North America, France, Spain, England, in short all the 'civilized democracies' of the world refused entry to these miserable refugees. And so, in the end, the entire boat (save for some of

the children whom England accepted) was sent back to Germany. Nearly all of these refugees, who had actually made it to the coast of Florida in 1939, disappeared up the chimneys of Auschwitz.

“U’vau’ Alecha’ Kol HaKelalot Ha’Eileh, Ve’Hisiguchah”

“And all of these curses shall come to pass on you, and will catch up with you (wherever you may be).” (28:15)

No matter where you will run to, says the verse, these curses will catch up with you.

Every teacher who explores the Torah, ends up developing a special relationship with a few sections here and there that speaks to him or her. Chapter 30 of the book of *Devarim* (Deuteronomy) contained in the first of this week’s double portion (*Nitzavim-VaYelech*), is actually one of the two chapters in the entire Torah, along with chapter 28 here in *Devarim*, that most speak to me personally, and indeed, they are a major part of the reason I am where and who I am today.

If I could pinpoint a specific text which most influenced me to come home to Israel and stay there despite all that has gone on in the past thirty years, it would be these two chapters (28 and 30) in the book of Deuteronomy. So, before we can understand the second (chapter 30, from this week’s portion) we need to go back first, to chapter 28 in last week’s portion, *Ki Tavoh*.

We must, however, make two points before beginning. First, it has become our custom to introduce the Torah thought with a story that illustrates the point. This week, however, it is the stories that are the point. So, if you are waiting for the content that follows the stories, don’t hold your breath, because I know of no other way to make the point this week, than through the stories themselves. This week, it is all about the stories.

Second, what I share with you this week cannot be taken as an objective truth. Indeed, it would be easy to suggest that our supposition this week is entirely mistaken. It may be that my suggestion as to the events referred to in these two chapters, is completely mistaken. I do not claim that these two chapters are absolutely referring only to what I am about to describe; I am suggesting rather, is that this is what these chapters mean to me.

In the end, one of the challenges when we learn Torah is to develop a personal relationship with the text, so that it speaks to you on a personal level. Here then, is what these two chapters (*Devarim* 28 and 30) mean to me:

To be sure, chapter 28 of the book of *Devarim* starts out well:

“And if you will hearken to the voice of Hashem your G-d, and do all of the mitzvot...then all of these blessings shall come to pass... you will be blessed in the city, and blessed in the field...blessed in your coming and in your going...” (28:1-6)

In short, for fourteen magnificent verses, the Torah speaks of all the good and blessings we will enjoy if we only follow the recipe as laid out in the Torah. And the picture that is painted is an idyllic one of bounty and blessing and peace in our own land.

And then, in verse fifteen, the Torah presents us with the frightening reverse side of the picture painted so beautifully at the beginning of the chapter. What, indeed, will happen if we, as a people, do not hearken to Hashem’s words?

“And if you will not hearken to the voice of Hashem your G-d, and do all of the mitzvoth...then all of these curses shall come to pass... you will be cursed in the city, and cursed in the field... cursed in your coming and in your going...” (28:15-17)

And what follows are fifty-three of the most difficult and painful verses in the entire Torah. Indeed, so horrible are these ‘curses’ or ‘verses of reprove’ (*Tochacha*), as they are known, that the tradition is to read them in a lower tone in the Synagogue as if to signify our pain and horror at even hearing all the terrible predictions that they contain.

To me, and I stress here, *to me*, these verses chillingly speak of the terrible events of the Holocaust, more than any other period in Jewish history.

“You will be cursed in the city, and cursed in the field... you will be cursed in your coming and in your going.” (28:16, 19)

There is a powerful set of responsa that came out of the terrible years of the Holocaust, compiled by **Rabbi Ephraim Oshri**, who was one of the last rabbis of the Kovno ghetto.

But the most powerful in this set of responsa are the short stories or explanations of the background of each question.

In one question, Rav Oshri describes a fellow who had come from Warsaw, with thousands of refugees, seeking refuge from the horrors of the Nazi occupation of Poland. And this man describes how the thousands of refugees heading east towards Lithuania, passed an equal number of refugees heading towards Warsaw, trying to escape the atrocities already occurring in the East.

The Jews in Nazi-occupied Europe did not know whether they were coming or going. It seemed wherever they went was the wrong way to go.

“Hashem will send upon you all manner of diseases...scurvy and pestilence...” (Verses 20-21) Some of the commentaries (including the *Malbim*) suggest that these are all diseases caused by starvation and over-crowding. There are survivors who suffer to this day, from the disease and malnutrition they experienced in the camps and the ghettos.

“Until you are decimated ... until you are destroyed from the face of the earth (land) which you have come there to inherit.” (28:20-21)

It is interesting to note that at no time in Jewish history was there such a total destruction of the Jewish communities as there was in Europe during the Holocaust. In the Spanish expulsion the Jews were exiled, not destroyed in their entirety, and in all of the destructions from the crusades to Chmelnitzki’s massacres in Poland, the community as a whole was never wiped out, and always succeeded in rebuilding itself.

But in the Holocaust, the Jewish community was completely wiped out. Poland today is a Jewish graveyard.

More telling, however, is the comment of **Rav Meir Simchah of D’vinsk**, on a similar verse in Leviticus, which many consider to have bordered on the prophetic. In his commentary (published posthumously in 1927), this Torah giant warns that:

“There is a great storm coming upon the Jewish people, and it is a storm the likes of which the Jewish people have never seen. It will destroy everything we know about our community, but it will be the impetus for our return to Zion.”

That storm, said the **Meshech Chochma**, is coming from Berlin....

Some of the commentaries point out that when the above-quoted verse speaks of the ‘land you have come to inherit’, it may not be speaking of the land Israel, which is normally the place being referred to when the Torah describes: *“the land which you have come there to inherit.”*

Rather, what we are speaking of is the land that you *think* you have come to inherit.

In other words, says G-d, there will come a time when you will think the land of your exile is your home; when Jews will consider themselves more German than the Germans.

I will show you, says the Torah, that that land is not your home. How many Jews thought: ‘it could never happen here...’ and were still struggling with how dedicated they had been to Germany, in the cattle cars on the way to Treblinka?

There was a fascinating case I recall from around the time I finished high school (1980-81). The ADL, if I am not mistaken, was suing a number of major industrial concerns in Germany and Poland that were buying up large parcels of land which were discovered to be rich in minerals, and particularly iron-ore. Apparently, this would save significant amounts of money as the shipping (transport) costs from the Russian mines would be greatly reduced. Problem was, all of these lands were the sites of mass killings of Jews. So these companies were trying to buy up the fields of Treblinka and Chelmno. Apparently, the bones and bodies over the years had somehow enriched and brought up the natural mineral deposits in the area.

And a visit to the gas chambers at Auschwitz-Birkenau will point out another interesting detail: Take a good look at the corners of the ceilings in the gas chambers, and you will notice the cement is colored by a greenish copper hue. This is the result of one of the key ingredients contained in the Zyklon-B gas pellets used to murder the Jews, copper-dioxide, which turns a greenish hue when exposed to Oxygen.

“Ve’Hayu Shamecha’ Asher Al Roshcha’ Nechoshet Ve’Ha’Aretz Asher Tachtecha’ Barzel.”
And the sky (air) above your head will be like copper, and the earth beneath your feet will be iron (minerals).” (28: 23)

While there are different explanations for these verses (including the idea that this was a generation too firmly rooted in the possessions of the material world), some of the commentaries are at a loss to explain the exact significance of the heavens of copper, and the sky related to iron....

“ Hashem will give the rain of your land as dust and earth, which will rain down from the heavens and destroy you.” (v.24)

There will come a time, says the Torah, when death and destruction will come from the skies...

“Hashem will make you as a plague before your enemies...and you shall be as an embarrassment (or a horror) to all the kingdoms of the land.” (28:24-26)

From 1933 until 1940, Hitler (as outlined in Mein Kampf) was not at all intent on destroying the Jews; he simply wanted them out of Europe. But no one would take them.

In 1940, in Evian, the Europeans convened a conference to tackle the problem of refugees, which everyone understood was a euphemism for the Jews. Incredibly, not one single country present, including the United States, offered to reduce its quota by even one single additional refugee.

Each country had a different reason for refusing to allow even a single Jew to enter their borders, but the most incredible response, (contained in the minutes of the meeting on display at Yad Vashem, Israel's national Holocaust Museum) came from Australia.

"We have no anti-Semitism in our country", claimed the Australian representative, "And if we allow Jews in, we will be encouraging the spread of anti-Semitism." Eighty years ago, we were an embarrassment to the entire world, which preferred to pretend we weren't even there.

"And your carcasses shall be food for the birds and the beasts, and no-one will even tremble." (28:26)

One of the most powerful photos to come out of the Warsaw ghetto is a photograph of a couple, walking down the street amidst throngs of passersby, sharing a moment amidst the destruction and deprivation of the ghetto.

What is chillingly apparent from a closer look at the faces of all the people in the streets, is that no one even takes notice of the bodies strewn about the streets and being loaded into a wheelbarrow.

"And you shall grope around in the noontday sun, as a blind man gropes in the darkness, and you shall not find your way, and you shall be oppressed and robbed every day, and none will save you." (28:29)

In the summer of 1944, as the last great Jewish community in Europe was being readied for the slaughter, Adolph Eichmann made an astounding offer: The German front lines were collapsing as their supply lines became stretched too thin; with all the rail lines diverted to transport Jews to their final destinations, they were in desperate need of mobile transport. So, Eichmann offered to trade the 400,00 Jews of Hungary for one thousand trucks. To prove his ability to make good on his offer, he stopped the transports for two weeks in the summer of 44'. At that time the crematoria of Auschwitz were killing as many as 10,000 Jews a day.

Imagine, a thousand Jews for a single truck. What did that make a single Jew worth? A steering wheel? A fender? There were no takers; nobody wanted the Jews.

The verse here does not seem to make sense. What difference does it make to a blind person whether he is groping around in light or darkness? Perhaps the difference is that when he stumbles in the darkness, he also knows that no one else sees his struggle, and so no one will come to his aid. During the nightmare of the Holocaust, we were screaming and stumbling in broad daylight, but no one wanted to see....

One day, in the Kovno ghetto, a man came to Rav Oshri with a terrible question. A large group of children had been caught up in one of the Nazi's infamous children's aktions, and it was clear to all that they were to be killed in the morning.

The man's son had been caught up in the group, but he had some valuables sewn into his coat and he was able to find a guard (one of the Jewish kapos) that was willing to release his son for this bribe. However, he made it clear that he would have to find another Jew to replace him, as the Nazis were meticulous about numbers. And so, the man wanted to know if he was permitted to free his son, knowing that another would be sent to his death instead.

Rav Oshri begged the man not to ask him this terrible question, but the man insisted.

"How can I tell you who is to live and who is to die, asked Rav Oshri, you must not ask me to answer this terrible question!"

But the man insisted yet again:

"You are our only rabbi, and I will do whatever the Torah requires, but I want to know, and you must tell me!"

This dialogue went back and forth all day, while they could see the man's son, along with the other Jews awaiting their deaths, behind the fence of the fortress gate.

Finally, the man said:

"If you are not telling me I can do this thing, then it must mean that there is no halachic dispensation, and I am obviously meant to allow my son to go to his death."

"No!" cried Rav Oshri, "I am not telling you that, and you must not hear it! I cannot tell you the Jewish tradition forbids you to save the life of your son; you must act as if you have never asked me and do what your heart tells you..."

But the man responded:

"If it were permitted for me to free my son, you would certainly have told me, so I know I may not do this thing, and, knowing that this is the will of my creator, I gladly accept the privilege of being tested with the binding of Isaac."

And the two of them, with tears in their eyes and the verses of Psalms on their lips, watched the son, along with the other boys, loaded on to the cattle cars for their final journey....

"Your sons and your daughters are given over to another nation, and your eyes see them and long for them all the day, to no avail." (28:32)

Eli Weisel, in his book Night, tells of the day he arrived on the platform at Auschwitz-Birkenau, not long before his Bar Mitzvah.

The Jews starved and exhausted were made to stand in their first selection, and none other than the angel of death himself, Josef Mengele, awaited them at the front of the long line. Although the Nazis tried to camouflage what they were really doing, it didn't take a genius to figure it out. All the young and strong and healthy looking men and women were going one way, and all the old and sick and small children were going the other way. You knew which line you had to get on.

A few people ahead of Eli Weisel, was a woman with two small boys, and as she reached the head of the line, Mengele stared at her with his evil sneer. He said nothing, merely grinning and pointing with one finger in each direction. But she didn't understand, so he screamed at her "Ein!" (One). And she still didn't get it, so he screamed again, all the while with that horrible smile, "you choose!"

The woman, finally understanding what he was asking her to do, began screaming, and went mad on the spot. And so they carted all three of them off to their deaths.

“And you will become mad from the sights which your eyes shall see.” (28:34)

And on and on, and on....

“Sons and daughters will you bear, but they will not be for you for they shall be enslaved. (28:41)

And the stranger in your midst shall rise up higher and higher above you and you shall be forced lower and lower...” (28:43)

In the camps, the non-Jewish criminals became the kapos and guards and thus the masters over the Jews who were at the lowest strata of life.

“And you shall serve your enemies... in hunger and thirst, naked, and with nothing left.” (28:45)

“And G-d shall lift over you a nation from afar... as the eagle flies, a nation whose tongue you cannot hear (and understand)” (28: 49)

As the German troops, emblazoned with the golden eagle, the symbol of Nazi Germany, swept through Europe and deep into Russia, Jews who never imagined the Holocaust ever reaching them were caught completely by surprise....

A brazen nation who will show no favor to the aged, nor grace to the young...”(28: 50)

“And he will lay siege to your gates until the mightiest and highest of your walls and fortresses come crashing down.....” (28: 52)

All of the faith that was placed in the Maginot line of France disappeared in a single afternoon in early 1940....

“And G-d will scatter you amongst all the nations, until the ends of the earth.” (28:64)

After the war, Jews spent years traveling the world to countries as far off as Cuba and Venezuela, the Siberian North, all over Europe and Africa and of course America and Canada, in search of family members scattered throughout the world....

“And you will fear night and day and will not believe in your life itself.” (28: 66)

“In the morning you will say ‘when will the night come’, and in the night you will say ‘when will the morning come, from the fear in your heart and the things that your eyes will see.” (28:67)

“And you will be sold into slavery, but there will be no buyers.” (28: 69)

To me, this chapter, in all of its pain and horror, speaks of the Holocaust. It is all of the questions we can never fathom, let alone answer, and all of the pain and horror, which can become part of life and which we are perhaps not meant to understand.

There will be times and things that will challenge the very essence of who we are, perhaps for reasons beyond us. This is not to say the Torah does not offer explanation. But neither does it mean we are meant to interpret those words into answers. Perhaps we are, each of us, meant to decide for ourselves what place to give these events in our lives.

If this was the end of the story, it would be tremendously disheartening, leaving us empty and barren, with no direction, much as the Jewish people were, for the most part, in the shadows of the gas chambers in 1945.

But there is a conclusion; a partner to this terrible chapter in the Torah, and for that matter in Jewish history, and that is chapter 30 of *Devarim*, in this week's portion, *Nitzavim*. (Chapter 29 is an interruption, whose explanation and place here is for another time.)

“And it shall come to pass, when all of these things shall come upon you... and you shall return to your hearts amongst all the nations of the world wherein G-d has scattered you.

“And you shall return to Hashem your G-d...

“And G-d will return your remnant and gather you in from amongst all the nations where you have been scattered.

“If your remnant shall at the ends of the heavens, even from there will G-d gather you in; even from there will He take you in.

“And G-d will bring you back to the land that your ancestors inherited, and will do good and make you greater even than your ancestors...” (30: 1-6)

If chapter 28 of the book of *Devarim* seems to speak of the Holocaust, then chapter 30 is all about the birth of the State of Israel.

There will come a time, says the Torah, when we will finally come home. After two thousand years of dreaming, the time will finally come to rebuild.

For two thousand years, ever since the Romans put torch to the Temple, we have dreamed of coming back.

At every Jewish wedding, and at every Jewish funeral, after every meal, and three times a day in our prayers, at the height of our greatest joy, and in the depths of our greatest tragedies, we have never stopped dreaming of Jerusalem and the land of Israel.

Seventy-five years ago, in one of the greatest experiments in the history of the world, a people that had never given up, began their incredible return. From South America and Eastern Europe, from darkest Africa, and the land down under, Jews speaking just about every language on the face of the earth began making their way back.

In the early nineteen fifties, literally from between the jaws of oppression, over eight hundred and fifty thousand Jews from the Arab nations and North Africa, were brought home in operation magic carpet. The country more than doubled its population in less than three years, and all this just two years after declaring itself a State and only months after the ceasefire of the costliest war in her history.

For the first time in history a nation transformed an ancient, Biblical language, back into a modern spoken vernacular. Anywhere you walk today in the land of Israel, and all over the world, Jews are speaking in the ancient tongue of their ancestors, something our great grandparents could only imagine.

Today, the State of Israel is going through a difficult time. And make no mistake about it, for those of us who think it is easier and safer to stay in Woodmere and Scarsdale, Miami and Los Angeles, what happens to the State of Israel, is really happening to the Jewish people everywhere.

And so people are struggling with it all: is this the dream? Will there ever be peace? Why does it have to be so hard?

The first line of this week's portion suggests both the challenge, and the solution:

"Atem Nitzavim HaYom Kulchem..." "You are, all of you, standing here today." (29:9)

There is a difference between being *be'amidah* and being '*nitzav*', though both are words which refer to standing up.

La'amod, means to stand, and refers to being upright as opposed to sitting or being downtrodden.

But to be *nitzav*, relates to the root of *yatziv*, to be stable. It is not just about your body being upright; it is about what you are standing on. To be *yatziv*, is to be stable. It is to recognize that we are standing here, in the streets of Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, on four thousand years of Jewish history. And it is the type of standing which can only come as a result of being ***Kulchem..." "All of you"***. All of us; together.

The single greatest response we can give to those who once again rise up to destroy us, is to be 'gathered in' to be together, firm in who we are, and in what we have to share with the world.

And to remember and rejoice in the fact that however challenging the events around us may be, and as far as we may have yet to go, we have come a long way since the time of our grandparents, and still have much to be thankful for.

This week's portion is always read the week before *Rosh Hashanah*, because it is the foundation of beginnings. This year, as we face the challenges that lie ahead, may Hashem bless us with the strength and the wisdom to become re-connected once again with the dream of who we are and who we can be, all of us, together, at long last, in the land of Israel.

Bets wishes for a sweet, happy, and healthy year,

Shabbat shalom,

Binny Freedman