

Parashat Nitzavim-Vayelech: An Invitation to Look Inwards

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Dear Friends,

As the month of Elul draws to a close and with it the period of return ("t'shuva") a very basic and perhaps somewhat childish question surfaces once again: Where exactly is God? Where are we meant to look for Him? Where are we trying to return to?

There is a Jungian understanding that humans are divided into two major types: extroverts and introverts. The awareness of the extrovert is turned outwards, and that of the introvert is turned inwards. The first will search for the Divine or for the experience of the Divine outside and the latter will search within themselves. The first will look around with open eyes at the wonders of Creation in which God left Divine footprints, and the latter will speak of the Divine with eyes closed in order to sense His presence within them.

It often seems as if the Torah is a masterpiece of the extroverts! We are four parashot before the end of the yearly cycle and we have heard mostly about "the heavens and the earth and all of their hosts." We've heard about Egypt and Canaan, about the Red Sea and Mount Sinai, Moav, Charan, and Ur Kasdim. The God of the Torah seems to be in the heavens, and it is from there that He manages His real estate. Very little has been said about the heart and the inner world of human beings. (Yes, I know there was mention of it here and there, but I was hoping for more, much more.)

And here, finally, a moment before the end, the Torah gives a generous crumb to the introverts among us. My classmates on the Kibbutz read this passage on stage in front of hundreds of people, on our joint Bar Mitzvah (as is done to this very day on most Kibbutzim). I did not understand it at all when I celebrated my Bar Mitzvah at the age of twelve and a half (I was among the youngest in my class). But that has all changed:

"For this commandment which I command you this day, it is not too hard for you, neither is it far off. It is not in heaven, that you should say: 'Who shall go up for us to heaven, and bring it to us, and make us to hear it, that we may do it?' Neither is it beyond the sea that you should say: 'Who shall go over the sea for us, and bring it to us, and make us hear it, that we may do it?' But the word is very near to you, in your mouth, and in your heart, that you may do it." (D'varim 30:11-14)

Growing up on the Kibbutz, I felt very distant from the Torah and from the Divine. As long as I perceived the biblical and religious discussion to be governed by rabbis, teachers and other extroverted messengers, I could not be part of it. By extroverted, I don't mean people who speak in a loud voice or with vehement hand movements (although sometimes there is a connection). I am referring to an extroverted

conversation, that which speaks of the external world, of what is outside of us, out there, in the outer layer of our lives – a discussion of morality, for example, of do's and don'ts - rules that are imposed on us from the outside in. An extrovert will search for external proof of the existence of an external God. And indeed, this God, or rather, this understanding of God, never worked for me.

Something wonderful began to happen in the world (and in my life) back in the 1960s, creeping into the 70s, the 80s, gaining momentum in the 90s and is now widespread. Alongside the insane external materialism that possessed most of us - and still does - a new, delicate, internal dialog developed. I believe it is one of the most interesting revolutions of our time (at least in the West) - humans started turning inwards.

Until the 60's the frontier had been "over there". Once humans made it to the moon, a subtle new frontier started emerging: that which lies within. Scientists deepened their researching into the working of the human brain and the human mind. For example, until quite recently soldiers who returned from the battlefield were considered perfectly healthy, okay, and even lucky, because they returned with their body intact. Their post trauma and nightmares were of no concern to anyone. Today, the IDF (as well as other western armies, I am sure), regard post trauma as a major injury - an injury to the soul.

It is in this new realm - the realm of the inner - that I met the Divine for the first time. How moving and uplifting it was when I heard the Torah strumming upon my very own heartstrings, playing a beautiful harmony with each other. How delightful was it, to discover how the Torah translates into language and codes that which the heart knows but cannot express.

I meet many people who are turned off by the Torah, even repelled by it. They are so alienated by it because they are captives of an external reading, the pseudo-historical, nationalistic zealous version that one encounters when reading the Torah extrovertly. Many have never experienced the introverted reading of the Torah.

And indeed, our Torah can be very deceptive. I know. At times it reads like the Chief Rabbinate of Israel, God forbid - external and zealous. Sometimes it reminds us of the worst of the Ayatollahs, the executioners and the stoners of women.

Yet every year I am drawn further in. The external seems increasingly pointless and irrelevant, while words that we often encounter around this time of the year - such as "come near", "return" and "gather inwards" - move me and stir my soul. Every time I read the Torah additional, endlessly deeper layers appear. I hear the Sages of Pirkei Avot calling out to me: "delve in Her endlessly, because all is within Her," (Mishna Avot, 5:22).

The Torah reminded Abraham that his seed will be "like the sand on the shore, too many to count." The external, extroverted, understanding is that a miracle would happen: Abraham, who was childless, would bear a nation of many people. The introvert, on the other hand, will not start counting descendants, but may choose to read it as a calling to see the blessing - the plenty, their joy - within. The extrovert may realize that within every person, every cell, every seed, within every grain of sand on the shore, lies an entire, infinite world. For the introvert, the infinite Torah mirrors the heart, and the heart mirrors the grain of sand. They are all infinite, and they all mirror the infinite within each other, reminding each other that everything - all answers, all possibilities - lie within each and every one of them.

We just need to see. Truly see.

It calls upon us to respect every speck of creation, but most importantly, it teaches us a profound theological understanding that the cosmos is not One infinite gathering of finite pieces - grains of sands, if you like - but rather, that we are One infinite gathering of infinite infinities.

Now *there* is a paradox! How can there be infinite infinities? But it is a paradox only in the world of the extrovert - because externally everything needs to make sense. For the extrovert God is "out there", hence God needs to play by rules of the outer-physical world. For the introvert, on the other hand, God is not bound by external limitations. The human heart (not the physical pump some call "heart") is able to fathom multiples of infinity.

Parashat Nitzavim speaks of a new covenant that the Israelites are called to enter into with God. However, it is not exactly new. It does not replace the Sinai covenant, or the covenant between Abraham and God. It seems to take the relationship between humans and life a step deeper - from the outer to the inner. One should continue to perform all the Mitzvot mentioned thus far, but recognize that they stem from the innermost sanctuary of our being.

And then a new understanding will dawn: (that) "this commandment... is not too hard... neither is it far off. It is not in heaven... Neither is it beyond the sea... But the word is very near to you, in your mouth, and in your heart, that you may do it."

This coming Wednesday evening we take leave of 5777 and greet the incoming year, 5778. I will send a separate New Year's greeting before the holiday. In the meantime, I wish us all a Shabbat Shalom, a Shabbat of drawing near, of gathering and of looking inwards. For all the answers are there.

Whoops, not there! They are here...

Shabbat Shalom,
Elisha