

Nitzavim – Shabbat 12 September 2015

Three hurdles to change

There is no coincidence that the portion of Nitzavim is always read on the Shabbat preceding Rosh Hashanah. The Gemara suggests that the reason is “In order that the year concludes with its curses.” The previous portion of Ki Tavo contains a litany of verses that include the Tochecha- the admonitions- the horrors that will befall B’nei Yisrael if they spurn G-d and His Torah. We read Nitzavim with the intention that we enter the new year in a positive way, full of blessing and hope for the future.

But there is also another connection, Israel we are told, may be dejected and far away from the Torah, living amongst all the nations of the world nevertheless, there is always a point of return. “And you shall return (Tashuv) to the Lord your G-d and listen to his voice.” The root word Shuv- to return is applied here in these verses 5 times emphasising the possibility of return for Israel.

“For this commandment that I command you today- it is not hidden from you and it is not distant. It is not in heaven...Neither is it across the sea..... It is very near within your mouth and in your heart to do it.” According to Ramban this “commandment” refers to the mitzvah of Teshuvah, return to G-d, and applies today for the individual as well as for the future.

What a powerful message this is in the month of Elul leading up to Rosh Hashanah. We sometimes impose psychological barriers to our Teshuvah.

The Kotzke once asked his disciples to explain the verse from Tehillim; “As far away as east is from west so has He made our sins distant from us.” (psalms 103:12). “How far is east from west?” He asked. To which one of the disciples replied. “The whole world separates east from west.” “No,” responded the Rebbe. “When you face west and you wish to face east all you have to do is turn around and you will be facing east.”

“It is not too distant or far from you” said Moshe. We sometimes think we are too far gone to return to Him. Says Moshe all we need to do is change direction. Rabbi Soloveitchik stressed this point by saying that Teshuvah is like a large circle and at any point through the year you are never too far away from the center.

Another impediment to Teshuva is the attitude that if we turn back to G-d we need to change every aspect of our lives, give up all our comforts and live a hermetical existence far removed from the physical and mundane in life. “It is not in heaven,” says Moshe. Judaism is a pragmatic non ascetic religion aimed at elevating the physical world around us.

The final hurdle to teshuvah is the belief that it might apply to a bygone era or place and not to the present day, that to be Jewish might be good for Israel but not living in the diaspora.

“It is not on the other side of the sea” said Moshe. Judaism is not limited to a specific place or time, but applies to the Jew wherever he/she may happen to be.

“Open for me the eye of a needle and I will open for them gates through which wagons and coaches can pass.” (Shir Hashirim Rabbah.) God says: you come back to me, and I will help you.