



Parsha Perspectives RABBI LABEL LAM

כי המצוה הזאת אשר אנכי מצוך היום לא נפלאה היא
ממך ולא רחקה... כי קרוב אליך הדבר מאד בפיך ובלבבך...

"For this commandment that I command you today, it is not hidden from you and it is not distant... Rather, the matter is very near to you, in your mouth and your heart, to perform it." (Deuteronomy 30:11, 14)

Moses's words to the Jewish people in the above verses are certainly encouraging—except for one important detail: The Torah does not explicitly mention which commandment is not hidden and near to perform.

Nachmanides says the verse refers to the commandment of repentance, based on the previous ten verses which describe the Jewish people's eventual repentance and redemption (see Deuteronomy 30:1-10).

Rashi says the commandment in question is the obligation to study the wisdom of our heritage. The verse states that the Torah is "not in heaven," beyond the grasp of ordinary individuals. Rather, it is accessible to each individual on his or her own level of understanding.

Whether we interpret the verse according to Rashi or Nachmanides, it is clear the theme is that the process of growth and self-improvement is close at hand and easily within our grasp.

For most people, the goal of achieving true self-improvement is anything but easy or near. Ask anyone who has tried to lose weight or change a bad habit. This is all the more true when the changes are spiritual. According to the Kli Yakar commentary, there is an even deeper issue involved. When a person commits himself to embarking on a new spiritual path, he is often plagued by fears that, given how far he has strayed, his plans to change will fail. The verse stresses that the ability to recreate ourselves is "in

your mouth and in your heart to perform it." As soon as we resolve to make positive changes, then what once seemed a remote possibility is within our grasp.

I was a recent college grad living and working in New York City. For some reason, regardless of where I had spent Friday night, Saturday mornings found me in a small Midtown synagogue. Sitting in the back, I'd read the archaic "thy's" and "thou's." I never knew what page we were on, but I stood and sat when everyone else did.

The *siddur* tickled my imagination. I'd glance at the Hebrew side wondering what it really said. One weeknight I turned on my desk lamp, and with trepidation opened up to page one of Genesis and started to read in Hebrew for the first time since my bar mitzvah. "*Breishit... bara... Elokim.*" The words crawled out from my mouth, and by the time I finished the first verse, my heart was pounding wildly—but not in pain. It was actually pleasant!

That simple reading exercise triggered an inner ovation. My soul had been patiently waiting for me to say those words of Torah. I was intrigued. The words I read with my mouth opened up new avenues in my heart, which led me to act on my

newfound inspiration. What I thought was far had become very close indeed.

As we draw close to the High Holidays, the notion of instituting major life changes seem too daunting to even consider. Not only is it difficult to imagine our "new selves," it's equally difficult to actually take the steps required to recreate ourselves in that image.

This week's portion teaches us that renewing our path in life in ways that reflect our true desires is not really distant at all. It is as close as our heart wants it to be.

Rabbi Lam can be reached at parsha@partnersintorah.org

WORD of the WEEK by Rabbi Mordechai Becher

שרירות

*"Peace will be with me though I walk בשרירות—b'sherirus my heart" (Deuteronomy 29:18). Rashi translates this as "my heart sees fit," and connects שרירות—sherirus to אשורינו—ashureinu (Numbers 24:17) which means "I will see him." Onkelos, however, translates the term as the "thoughts of my heart" and Yonatan ben Uziel as "the [evil] desires of my heart." Nachmanides understands the word as meaning "strong" and hence translates the phrase as "my stubborn desires." Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan cites the *Midrash Lekach Tov* that interprets the phrase as "remain free in my heart" (*The Living Torah*).*

Table Talk FOR DISCUSSION AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

On the day of his passing, Moses gathered the Jewish people together to enter them into a covenant with G-d. He warned them about the exile they would face when they would abandon G-d's *mitzvos*, but he promises them that eventually they will do *teshuvah*—they will repent—and then G-d will return them to their land.

נ) Moses reminded the people of the detestable and abominable idols which they saw in Egypt and other lands through which they passed. Why was it necessary to warn them (Deuteronomy 29:17) against worshipping these idols, if they themselves had witnessed how deplorable they were?

ב) Maimonides writes (*Hilchos Chagiga* 3:1) that the purpose of gathering the people together to hear the reading of the book of Deuteronomy (31:11) is to strengthen their religious commitment and fear of G-d. With such important objectives, why is this *mitzvah* performed only once every seven years and not annually?

A QUESTION FOR THE RABBIS

by Rabbi Mordechai Becher

Rabbi Avraham, son of Maimonides, was asked 13 questions by the Jews of Yemen. The last question they asked him was when they could expect the redemption and the coming of the Messiah. Rabbi Abraham replied, "I will only respond to you with what is written explicitly in the Torah, that the matter is completely dependent on our repentance. As it states, 'And you shall return to the L-rd your G-d... and He will return your captivity...' (Deuteronomy 30:2-3) And we ask of G-d that He should make the process easy and remove any impediments to our repentance as He promised in Ezekiel (11:19), 'I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh...' " (*Responsa of Rabbi Avraham*, son of Maimonides, No. 94).

HEY, I NEVER KNEW THAT! by Rabbi Mordechai Becher

You shall choose life..." (Deuteronomy 30:19). The Talmud understands this as the obligation to teach one's child a trade so that he has the ability to support himself (*Jerusalem Talmud, Kiddushin* 19a). Rabbi Hirsch indeed explains that a father's obligation to his son is to give him the means to "choose life" in the most complete sense of the word: teach him Torah to mentally and spiritually equip him for life, and a trade to physically and economically equip him for life (*Horeb*, par. 551-552). Rabeinu Yonah sees this verse as an exhortation to choose to perform a *mitzvah*, rather than do a *mitzvah* by rote or habit (*Shaarei Teshuvah* 3:17).



PARTNERS IN TORAH

A DIVISION OF TORAH UMESORAH

Rabbi Eli Gewirtz, National Director
Mrs. Shoshana Schwartz, Editor
Rabbi Mordechai Becher, Contributor

For information call **800-STUDY-4-2** or
email **INFO@PARTNERSINTORAH.ORG**

Distributed in UK by **Phone and Learn (PAL)**, a division of Partners in Torah
WWW.PHONEANDLEARN.ORG – **0800 055 3276**

LOOK *who made* PARTNER!

RACHEL LAVITAS, Clifton, NJ (Partner #55,208)

SARAH WEITZ, Miami, FL (#54,169)

ABBY RAHMANFAR, Brooklyn, NY (#53,657)

ADINA FISCHLEWITZ, Far Rockaway, NY (#51,366)

ALIZA HORAK, Overland Park, KS (#50,222)

SIGN UP TODAY: www.partnersintorah.org/signup OR CALL: 1-800-STUDY-4-2
MAKING PARTNER HAS NEVER BEEN THIS EASY!

STUDY ANY JEWISH TOPIC OVER THE PHONE OR IN PERSON WITH A KNOWLEDGEABLE, CAREFULLY SELECTED PERSONAL TORAH TRAINER.

TO POST COMMENTS ON THIS PARSHA SHEET, VISIT US AT: partnersintorah.org/parsha-partner/nitzavim-vayeilech5773#comments