

This week's parashah, Nitzavim, is particularly appropriate as the parashah that launches us towards the New Year – as indeed, it always does.

At the end of Chapter 29 of Deuteronomy, Moshe predicts – as he so often does – how the people will likely go astray and be exiled. The beginning of Chapter 30 reminds the people, however, that reconciliation is always possible, that there is a covenant based in love and that the people and Hashem can return to each other again and again.

Verses 8-10 culminate with this promise:

You, however, will again heed ה and obey all the divine commandments that I enjoin upon you this day. And your God ה will grant you abounding prosperity in all your undertakings, in your issue from the womb, the offspring of your cattle, and your produce from the soil. For ה will again delight in your well-being as in that of your ancestors, since you will be heeding your God ה and keeping the divine commandments and laws that are recorded in this book of the Teaching—once you return to your God ה with all your heart and soul.

These verses are followed by a stirring and famous poetic assurance.

In verses 11-14, Moshe instructs the people: “Surely, this Instruction which I enjoin upon you this day is not too baffling for you, nor is it beyond reach. It is not in the heavens, that you should say, “Who among us can go up to the heavens and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may observe it?” Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, “Who among us can cross to the other side of the sea and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may observe it?” No, the thing is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to observe it.”

Now, in Torah study, Philip Bayles laughed at the notion that “this instruction is not beyond reach!” 613 mitzvot can feel a little hard to reach for.

But that is assuming that what is meant by “this instruction” is in fact, all the mitzvot.

It could be something else.

Nachmanides teaches that it is actually the process of teshuvah, described in the preceding verses. He writes: “*this commandment* refers to [the commandment of] repentance aforementioned, for the verses, *and thou shalt bethink thyself; and thou shalt return unto the Eternal thy G-d* constitute a commandment, wherein he commands us to do so. It is stated in a future tense [rather than in the imperative] to suggest, in the form of a pledge, that it is destined [that Israel will repent]. . .

This is the sense of the expression, *in thy mouth, and in thy heart, that thou mayest do it* meaning that they *confess their iniquity, and the iniquity of their fathers* by word of their mouth, and return in their heart to G-d and accept the Torah upon themselves this day to perform it throughout the generations.

One thing I love about this interpretation is that, as Rabbi Aviva Richman wrote this week, “unlike an “original sin” model where humanity is unredeemable on its own, we have the gift of Torah as a pathway towards a life of *teshuvah*. *Teshuvah* is no mere “Plan B”—it’s the ideal. A life of Torah involves an ongoing cycle of discovering our blindspots and trying harder, only to learn of new blindspots. Although God may feel far far away, our access to Torah as a vehicle for *teshuvah* is immediate and ever present.

“. . .although the concept of *teshuvah* is beautiful, it’s also true that confronting our missteps and our blindspots can be daunting. Once we have strayed far from our hopes and ideals, how are we supposed to overcome inertia and redirect ourselves towards God? *Teshuvah* may very easily feel beyond us.

Teshuvah is hard – not necessarily apologizing or even changing our behavior, as much as getting over the internal resistance to the idea that we have to. I know for myself, when I am in conflict with someone, by the time I apologize or change my behavior, it's a relief. The much harder part is getting over the irritation, the internal desire to blame others, to escape the uncomfortable feeling of having done wrong.

Even this season, meant to get us to the space of teshuvah, can easily become a set of familiar rituals that direct us near but not at the heart of it.

As Rabbi Ethan Tucker wrote last year: "I cherish the slightly bruised spot on my chest and hoarse voice that I usually develop each year over the course of the tenth of Tishre. All those hours of chest beating and words of confession truly drive a spiritual metamorphosis through repetition and a sense of physical strain. But let's also be honest: it is frighteningly easy to evade true confession by cloaking ourselves in verbosity. The words, meant to prompt to deeper introspection, can become shields that keep our confessions at bay."

So as we go into this season of teshuvah, I want to paraphrase Moshe's blessing for us. Not only is the spiritual work not in heaven or across the sea, but also: it is not in the liturgy, that you can only get there through hours of recitation. It is not in the fasting and self denial. Those can be vehicles, but they will not be the destination of the work, which is in our own mouths and hearts.