

PARASHAS NITZAVIM

The Ends of Heaven

Turbulence seems to be inescapable in Jewish history. When times are good, Jewish people tend to forget about the Creator and His Torah. They wander off in search of the forbidden fruit the pagan cultures dangle in front of them, thus bringing down calamity on their heads.

In this week's reading, Moses prophesies that the Jewish people will be oppressed, persecuted and driven into exile. But there would always be hope. In the throes of their misfortune, he foresees, they will think about what has befallen them, and they will repent. Then Hashem will gather the exiles from the nations among whom they have been scattered. "If your castaways will be at the ends of heaven," Moses assures the Jewish people, "Hashem, your Lord, will gather them in from there."

The commentators are puzzled by the strange language of this last verse. You would normally expect to find castaways at the ends of the earth, not at the ends of heaven. In what sense will Hashem gather the castaways from the ends of heaven?

Some commentators resolve this problem by interpreting the verse in an allegorical sense. Every person, they point out, is a paradoxical hybrid, an improbable fusion of the spiritual soul and the material body. The soul is a spark of the divine, a fragment of Hashem's heavenly throne sent down to the earth to dwell in a beautiful clot of matter called the human body. The soul yearns to be reunited with its celestial Source, while the body is drawn to the pleasures of the material world. The tensions generated by this internal conflict defines the dynamics of human existence. Who will emerge victorious the body or the soul? The answer to this question determines success or failure when all is said and done.

This then is what Moses was telling the Jewish people. When will Hashem bring the castaways back to the Holy Land? If they are "at the ends of heaven." If their striving is for spirituality, if they reach out to grasp the fringes of heaven so that they can pull themselves ever upward. But if they are "at the ends of the earth," if they reach out for the illusory enticements of the material world, they will not be worthy of redemption.

There was once a sage who had only small group of disciples, but he was exceedingly wise. After a while, his fame spread, and he began to receive many requests for admission to his academy.

The sage called a meeting of his disciples to discuss the situation.

“We don’t want to let in just anyone,” he said. “We want only the best and the finest. But how do we determine who they are? By what standards shall we measure our applicants?”

“Honesty,” said one disciple.

“Piety,” said another.

“Intelligence,” said yet another.

The sage shook his head. “None of these are critical. We can accept devious and make them devout, the sinful and make them sincere. But we must have someone who has a genuine desire to grow, someone whose heart and mind are attuned to higher aspirations. That is more important than anything else.”

In our own lives, as we approach the High Holidays with a sense of awe and trepidation, we make all sorts of resolutions about how we intend to improve ourselves. We resolve to be kinder and more considerate to others. We resolve to pray with greater concentration. We resolve to devote more time to Torah study. All these things are good and well. But these are not the most critical things on which we should focus. Rather, we should focus on fanning the flames of the divine spark that dwells within so that we should be consumed with a desire to reach out and touch the heavens. That desire will energize and inspire us and guide us down all the right paths to fulfillment. Someone once asked a sage, “I can only spare five minutes a day for Torah study. What should I choose to learn?” The sage smiled and said, “Study works of spiritual inspiration, and you will discover that you can spare far more than five minutes a day.”.