

Sophie Claire Eisenberg-Edidin

D'var Torah

NETZAVIM

My Torah portion, *Netzavim*, is about the covenant which was established between God and the Jewish people and the curses and blessings that are joined with it. Actually, the covenant was already made with Abraham, then reaffirmed with Jacob, but it is during my portion that it is confirmed with all the Jewish people -- young, old, rich, poor, even those yet to be born. That includes us.

The covenant was made thousands of years ago, when the Jews were in the desert having fled from slavery in Egypt. God bestowed on them life, prosperity, and their own land, and made them God's people. In return, the Jews agreed to follow God's commandments, walk in God's paths, and be faithful to God. In the generations since then, every individual has the opportunity to become a Jew by accepting the covenant as well.

The covenant is like a fork in the road. We either choose to accept the covenant (the street of blessings) or take the other path -- a life without Judaism. While I cannot say that Judaism is the correct road to travel for everyone, it is for the Jewish people. You see, though the Torah says that if we turn to false gods we will die, this obviously does not mean that we will be struck down, but that the Jewish people will die out. Believing in one God is the base of Judaism. Turning to other gods would mean the destruction of our people.

Keeping the covenant isn't only believing in one God. It also means practicing the rituals and engaging in Jewish life. Rituals play a very important part in keeping Judaism (or any religion) alive. They are like the outline for a religion and all the different interpretations are frosting, added to enrich it.

Rituals are unifying. Despite some variations, we practice Judaism in the same way our ancestors did and Jews around the world do today. For instance, all around the world, Jews repeat the Shema everyday, just as I did for my ritual mitzvah.

As well as identifying all of us as Jews, rituals also connect us in an invisible web. Each Jewish family celebrates Shabbat within the same time frame. Even if we are not all in Israel, we can still know something of each other and each others' lives because we follow the same religious calendar. Celebrating Shabbat and going to services keeps us a people, though we are scattered.

However, it's possible to keep the rituals and still violate the covenant by pursuing foreign gods. People do it every day, turning to modern false deities, like Money and Power, mistakenly thinking that is how to find a full, rich life. They live helter-skelter, with nothing consistent from one day to the next. They forget who they are because there are no ties in their lives. The very purpose of Shabbat is to provide a day of rest and serenity, of relief from the harrying thoughts of money. These people don't see that, though. They work at jobs they don't like and they make lots of money and then they have nice, comfortable, meaningless lives. But their lives are blank. They die and they don't leave anything behind them. These are the people who truly violate the covenant with their self importance and their non belief in anything true. They add nothing to the world and they weaken Judaism. They are swept up in modern values. It is very easy to become like these people -- to blend in with everyone else and not realize you are breaking the covenant.

In fact, society always urges us to conform to the majority. At school, we have to dress like everyone else, we have to shop at the right places, and use the right slang and expressions. When we get older, we have to have money, and act like respectable adults. The minority is always persecuted, in every age. Sure, fashions and ideas of what is right change, but the rule is the same. You're considered strange if you don't at least try to act and seem like everyone else. I know for certain that if an orthodox kid walked into my school right now, with peyas and a keepee, everyone would laugh at him, probably including me. And then that kid would feel terrible and go home, and just want to blend in. Unless you have complete faith in yourself or your religion it is very hard to stay different intentionally and to enjoy your differences. That is why people break the covenant every day. Sometimes it just doesn't seem worth it.

There is one section in my Torah portion that is particularly beautiful. It says, *"This mandate that I am prescribing to you today is not too mysterious or remote from you. It is not in heaven, so that you should say, 'Who shall go up to heaven and bring it to us so that we can hear it and keep it?' It is not over the sea so that you should say, 'Who will cross the sea and get it for us, so that we will be able to hear it and keep it?' It is something that is very close to you. It is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can keep it."*

This section seems like something written yesterday, fresh and new. It is not speaking only to some distant ancestor, but to us, and I find that much of the Torah is not like that. Passages like this keep the Torah from seeming outdated. They apply as much to our lives today as to the ancient world. They give us hope that we are not worshipping a God that has left us.

The message of this section is that the mandate is not far away in an unreachable place. It is not a covenant made only with our ancestors, it was made with us too. There is a bridge of time here. We are not a different people than our ancestors. The mandate is not somewhere lost in a sea of time. It cannot be mislaid because it has been passed down, hand to hand, through all the ages. Some people may drop it, but there will always be those who will snatch it up before it hits the ground, keeping the bridge intact.

We are always full of excuses, and that is another reason the section was written. Whoever wrote it (let us say God dictated it, at the least) was not about to let there be a loophole. The section says there is no excuse. You already know the mandate. You don't have to go search for it. It is right there waiting.

Anybody can have a bat or bar mitzvah. All it takes is some work. I used to think, before I started studying the prayers and my Torah portion, that when it came to the actual ceremony I would feel some sort of change or revelation. Now I feel differently. I think that the ceremony is just a performance. I am showing what I learned during the year, yes, but I show what I learned in a flute recital. For me, the process leading up to the ceremony was the important thing. Through the preparation, I learned how to be a Jew, what it means to be a Jew and what it means to accept the covenant.

Before this year, I only understood the covenant vaguely and barely thought of it, but because of my Torah portion, I have come to feel that accepting the covenant is what becoming a bat mitzvah is about. Today, I am finally ready to accept it, fully meaning and understanding what I say.

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Before Rabbi Niles and Ellen conclude the service, I would like to say a few thank yous. First of all, I would like to thank Rabbi Niles. Through the years, he has led interesting and meaningful services and I love the discussion questions he asks on Friday nights. The New Shul would not be what it is without him. I would also like to thank Ellen for adding her beautiful voice to all the

services, letting me borrow her drum, and creating an atmosphere that makes everybody want to sing, beautiful voice or not. I'd like to thank Melanie. She taught me the t'aamim and the Hebrew, and made me study, which I am glad of now. She discussed the meaning of my Torah portion with me, giving me new insights and sat with me week after week, teaching me to do everything better. I'd also like to add that she is a wonderful Hebrew school teacher! Most of all, though, I'd like to thank my parents for giving me a Jewish life and always being there for me -- for telling me what I could or could not do, however I screamed at them and for always caring. Also, thank you to Gabby, my brother, because he is so smart and funny and sweet and I love him so much!

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