

Shabbat Nitzavim - September 26, 2008 – 27 Elul 5768
Congregation Or Chadash, Chicago, Illinois
Rabbi Larry Edwards

Only to Turn

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.

See, I set before you this day life and prosperity, death and adversity. For I command you this day, to love the Lord your God, to walk in His ways, and to keep His commandments ... I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day: I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life... (Deut. 30:11-16, 19)

What prevents us from finding, or sensing, our inborn connection to God? God is both far and near. The verses of this week’s portion, *Nitzavim* – always read on the Shabbat just before Rosh Hashanah – speak of the commandment, the Torah, the teaching as being very near to us. It is not too hard. It is the path of life, and it is already in you.

The discussion that a few of us had after watching the wonderful documentary “Watermarks” on the evening of Selichot reminded me of the many turns that one’s life-path can take. I thank Matt Simonette for suggesting and introducing this film, which follows a group of Jewish women from Vienna who had been championship swimmers in the 30’s. All of the women, now in their 80’s, had left Vienna in the Nazi period, scattering to Tel Aviv and London and Los Angeles and New Jersey. The grandson of a member of the Jewish sports club, HaKoach, had the idea of telling their stories and bringing them together to swim one more time in Vienna.

Given the themes of the season, our discussion turned partly, and naturally, to the question of forgiveness. Was it necessary for these women to forgive the Austrians for kicking them out so many years ago? Was the film actually about forgiveness and reconciliation at all? The theme of return was certainly there – the entire arc of the film’s narrative was of a very physical, geographical return to the city of their birth. The only gesture of apology from the Viennese side was the restoring to the record book of the Viennese sports association the name of one of the women, the best swimmer of her generation, that had been expunged because she was Jewish (and refused to swim at the 1936 Berlin Olympics). Other than that, it really wasn’t about reconciliation at all. No one asked for forgiveness, and no one offered it.

It was a film about memory, and about the formation of complex human identities, and about one small chapter of Jewish history in the last century. It was about friendship and how, after long separation, relationships can be renewed. It was also about how memory and identity get transmitted, partially at best, to the following generations. But it really was not about forgiveness or reconciliation.

And that made me think some more about what we mean by these categories. Surely it is a good thing not to be paralyzed by the past, to do whatever work is necessary in order to move oneself to a place where life is not stuck in past hurts and can be lived with creative energy. In the case of this particular story, though, everything was not wrapped up into a neat emotional package with a carefully tied ribbon. It was just a story about taking the risk of returning to a place that had been the scene of pride and accomplishment and also of terrible pain. And it was a return that took place many years later, after successful lives had been lived in other places, and old wounds were no longer fresh and raw.

Also running through my mind was the line from our holiday liturgy, “Who by fire and who by water?” At a time when other European Jews were destroyed by fire, these swimmers were saved by their talent in the water. And water itself can be a means of destruction – as we have seen again so recently – or of purification.

Perhaps it is not always necessary, and it certainly is not always possible, to forgive and to be forgiven, to finish that soul-work in a full and meaningful way. But it is always possible, I think, to turn a little bit, to make a move in the direction of bridge-building and connection. It is possible to do some of the work that makes one more human. It is, or should be, possible to face one’s fears at least sideways, if not full-on.

Nehama Leibowitz points out that in Chapter 30 of Deuteronomy, the root *shuv* – return – occurs 7 times in the first 10 verses. Various forms of the word for life – *chai* – occur 6 times in the last 6 verses.¹ That this chapter is always read before the New Year – and in most Reform congregations on Yom Kippur itself – highlights a central theme of the season. We attempt to turn toward God and God attempts to turn toward us, and in that turning is the possibility of life. Life is turning; to be alive is to be engaged in *teshuvah*.

Yet it seems so often to be difficult. Earlier in the chapter Moses says, “Then the Lord your God will open up your heart and the hearts of your offspring to love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul, in order that you may live. The actual verb is “circumcise” – circumcise your heart. Way back in Chapter 10 (Deut. 10:16) Moses demanded that the people circumcise their own hearts – figurative language for removing the blockages, the impediments that come between you and God. But here, now almost at the end of the book, and at the very end of the year now passing away, Moses promises that God will circumcise your heart, God will remove the impediments that stand in the

¹ Nehama Leibowitz, *Studies in Deuteronomy*, 310-15.

way of a full relationship. Several rabbinic sources assure us that, “When a person seeks to purify himself, he receives help in doing so.”²

Only to turn. Begin to turn, and you will receive help in turning. The arrival is left to the future. What we seek now is to be turned in the right direction, in the direction of choosing life. May God remove the impediments that block our way. May we summon the strength and the courage and, when necessary, the *hutzpah* to continue on the path of life for another year.

² Jeffrey Tigay, *JPS Torah Commentary Deuteronomy*, p. 285 (Shab 104a etc).