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Nitzavim: One Step at a Time

Rabbi Shmuel Silber

"For this commandment which I command you this day, is not concealed from you, it is not far away. It is not in heaven, that you should say, 'Who will go up to heaven for us and fetch it for us, to tell it to us, so that we can fulfill it?' Nor is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us and fetch it for us, to tell it to us, so that we can fulfill it?' Rather, this thing is very close to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can fulfill it." (Devarim 30:11-14)

Which "commandment" was Moshe Rabbeinu referring to? Many of the commentaries explain that Moshe was not referring to one specific *mitzvah*, rather to the Torah in its entirety. Moshe was telling the people, *although there are many mitzvos and expectations, do not get overwhelmed. There are many obligations and responsibilities, but you will succeed.* Others explain that the *mitzvah* (commandment) refers to the *mitzvah* of *Teshuva* (repentance and return). Although we may stray far from God, the ability and opportunity to return and rekindle the relationship is always available to us.

Whatever the precise definition may be, the message is the same. Creating personal holiness, cultivating a spiritual identity, cementing a passionate relationship with God may seem difficult, all our spiritual aspirations are within reach.

Rebbe Nachman of Breslov advances an alternate insight. Moshe says to the Jewish people:

Lo Ba'Shamayim Hi, (It is not in the heavens) God does not ask you to live in the heavens. God does not expect us to achieve angelic perfection, He does not ask us to stop being human and live in the celestial sphere. He doesn't even demand of us to be wholly righteous.

What does God ask of us?

Ki Karov Eylecha HaDavar, (This thing is very close to you) Just reach a bit beyond yourself. Hashem wants us to grow. It doesn't have to be in a dramatic or heroic growth, just be a little more, just become a bit holier each and every day. When Yaakov fled from home to escape the wrath of Esav, he received a magnificent vision. He saw a ladder with its base on the earth, yet its top extended into the heavens. What was the meaning of this vision? Yaakov was to be the father of the 12 tribes, the father of *Bnai Yisroel*, and God was communicating to him the Divine expectations of Yaakov's offspring. God says to us: *Life is a ladder – all I ask is that you try to advance up the rungs. You need not climb two at a time, you need not ascend at a quick pace, just climb. Just take the opportunities that are within reach (karov, close) and find a way to move yourself and your life forward.*

This was one of the last messages Moshe gave to our ancestors. Moshe, who taught us so much, provided us with the Divine framework for successful living and concluded his tenure of leadership with a simple message. God doesn't expect perfection, God doesn't need us to be angels, He just wants us to grow. All Hashem desires is for us to climb the ladder of personal development and self-actualization.

As we enter the Yomim Noraim, we must feel confident and excited for the year ahead. There is much we must accomplish and much we must rectify. There are things which work well, things which need repair, and things which must be fundamentally changed. But we must remember Rome wasn't built in a day. People aren't built in a day. To fully actualize our potential takes years and for some an entire lifetime. Yet, all God asks of us is just a little growth every day. All my Father desires is for me to try to climb up another rung. And if I fall, all He asks is for me to find the courage to once again begin the ascent. *Ki Karov Eylecha HaDavar*, it is very close to us – happiness, fulfillment, and self-actualization are all closer than we think. All we need to do is reach a bit beyond ourselves.

I want to take this opportunity to wish each of you *Kesiva V'Chasima Tova*. May each of us, together with our families and our nation, be inscribed for year of life, growth, holiness, health, happiness, and redemption.