

Walk through the Parsha

with **Rabbi David Walk**



Ki Tavo

THE CROSSROADS

We always read the Torah portion of Ki Tavo two Shabbatot before Rosh HaShana. Of course, many rabbis suggest that the extensive section of blessings (relatively short) and curses (depressingly long) is the reason for this calendar arrangement. This week I would like to suggest another reason for why our Sages arranged the Torah readings in this way.

The verse I'd like to analyze is this: Your God, the Eternal, commands you this very day to observe these laws and rules; observe them faithfully with all your heart and soul (D'varim 26:16).

Here's the problem: 'All these laws and rules' had been given to the Jews throughout their sojourn in the Wilderness. So, what is this emphasis on 'this very day'? It was a forty-year long process, and, to the best of our knowledge, no specific Mitzvot were given on that very day.

In the JPS Jewish Study Bible, Bernard M. Levinson's footnote on our verse explains that our verse is meant to be the closing point for all the Mitzvot recorded from chapter 12 of D'varim until this point. In other

words, the Mitzva section of D'varim begins with: Take care to observe all the laws and rules that I set before you this very day (11:32), and ends with our verse.

Okay, so these verses act in unison to bookend this extensive section of Mizvot. That's fine, but not the approach accepted by most of our traditional commentaries.

Rashi, quoting a number of Midrashim, explains that each and every day the Mitzvot should feel to us as though they were received this very day. In other words, the Mitzvot should never devolve into stale material. They must remain fresh and beloved, always.

The S'forno agrees and adds another dimension. The 'every single day' nature of the commitment to Mitzvot must also embrace 'with all your heart and with all your soul'. In other words, this daily acceptance of our Torah duty must be total. We are enjoined to commit all of our intellectual, emotional, and spiritual powers to these actions. That is the 'with all your heart'. Moreover, we must do it with the entirety of our NEFESH (perhaps, 'soul'). This means that we must never be distracted or sidetracked by other forces and temptations (YETZER HARA).

This TODAY aspect is, I believe, the truly critical issue of our text. Spiritual success requires this sense

of 'my next action' is decisive. This is our verse's agenda. It is akin to the Rambam's declaration: Accordingly, throughout the entire year, a person should always look at himself as equally balanced between merit and sin, and the world as equally balanced between merit and sin. If he performs one sin, he tips his balance and that of the entire world to the side of guilt and brings destruction. On the other hand, if he performs one mitzva, he tips his balance and that of the entire world to the side of merit and brings deliverance and salvation (Laws of Repentance, 3:4)

We began with the idea of total commitment (LEV and NEFESH), and now we have added the aspect of urgency (HAYOM HAZEH). The Midrash is apparently concerned that urgency might mislead a person into errors of judgment. Midrash Tanchuma relates the famous parable of the crossroads:

This is as if God placed before the Jews two roads, a path of life and a path of death, and we're told to choose whichever we want. This can be compared to an elder sitting at a fork in the road. He tells all passersby, 'One path begins smooth and easy, but ends in brambles and thorns. The other begins with thorns but ends smooth and easy. The difficult beginning will soon be smooth; the smooth beginning will soon be difficult.' Similarly, Moshe

tells the Jews, 'Notice the wicked people who seem to prosper, but in the end they will be pushed aside with no eternal rest.

Since the commitment includes our intellect, we must be careful to make sound decisions. Just because we have totally committed our emotions to this endeavor, we must resist the urge to rush willy nilly into the spiritual fray.

Rav Aharon Lichtenstein was fully cognizant of this issue. The emotional and intellectual engagement must be total and balanced. He explained that the total engagement of heart and soul, LEV and NEFESH, and our personal behavior must reflect this dichotomy. Practice and theory must always work in unison. He explained:

That conjunction, which runs like a thread through the Torah, is the quintessential center of Torah existence and sensibility. This is true of the service of God generally, and of TESHUVA specifically... The charge is to develop a religious sensibility that is both attentive to minute detail, and to the building of the self and the repairing of one's relationship with God. We shall strive to charge our formal observance with experiential meaning and vitality; and we shall strive to lend substantive body to our passionate and committed mode of TESHUVA, to be guided and inspired by halachic observance.

So, this season of TESHUVA requires both intellectual and spiritual commitment to have even the slightest chance of success. TESHUVA, like any lifestyle makeover, is extremely hard.

Rav Avraham Twerski often pointed out that sinning is akin to addiction, and explained that we need to marshal all of our forces to combat this scourge. He explained that the mind and body also need help from God to achieve a higher level of KEDUSHA.

That great Torah scholar and addiction expert related that he once attended an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting and heard a recovering addict say: The man I once was drank. And the man I once was will drink again. If I ever go back to being the man I once was, I will drink again.

Rav Twerski concluded: This is why the Rambam continues that with this kind of TESHUVA the person can say, 'I am no longer the same person that committed that sin' (Hilchot T'shuva 2:4).

So, we arrive at a new approach to the aspect of 'this very day'. To succeed in this TESHUVA season, we must declare every day: Today, I am not that person who committed those sins. I am as new as this new day!

It is very hard, but doable if we fully accept the new day. 