

Sedra Highlight

- Dr Jacob Solomon

Nitzavim-Vayeilech

You shall return to the HaShem, your G-d... (30:2).

One of the beauties of our yearly calendar cycle is that we always usher in Rosh HaShana with Parashat Nitzavim (either alone or with Vayeilech), a parasha that encapsulates T'shuva, the importance of repentance, the core value of these serious days. The Rambam explains at length that T'shuva requires us to consider our past behavior patterns, identify the areas where we are falling short, seek to immediately put them right, and flowing from that experience thereafter live on a higher plane. And by so doing, we return to G-d by living closer to His ideals.

The Ramban brings another dimension of T'shuva. When you read a book of any description, you are intimately coming in contact with the writer. The author has no doubt invested heart and soul into that work, and as you study it, you are sharing with the writer what he or she values most. So if you want to have dinner with Shakespeare, read Hamlet. If you'd like George Orwell as your guest, try Animal Farm. If you want to enter the universe that Tolkien created, the Lord of the Rings trilogy is a good start. In a similar vein

- L'HAVDIL - as you study the Torah at whatever level you're on, you're engaging with the Author of the Torah, the Almighty Himself. In the introduction to his commentary on the Torah, the Ramban emphasizes that the Torah is G-d's literary output. Every time you involve yourself with Torah study, you are in contact with Him, meaning that you are returning to Him.

Having dinner with G-d as it were, is what learning Torah is about, what G-d's values are, straight from the pen of the Author. Returning to G-d means being more involved with Him through higher quality Torah study.

On Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur, the Ashkenazim include the flagship and definitive UNTANEH TOKEF prayer. Its key sentence is UTSHUVA, UTFILLA, UTZDAKA - repentance, prayer, and charity - cancel the evil decree. Using the Ramban's explanation, it is possible to relate this ancient prayer to a much earlier-stated and deeply fundamental concept expressed by Shimon HaTzadik: "The world stands on three things: Torah, Avoda, and Kindness towards others" (Avot 1:2); when humanity achieves those things it is fulfilling the ultimate pinnacle role in the Creation (c.f. Avot 6:1). For these three things, declares Shimon HaTzadik, represent the ultimate purpose of the Creation. And with this explanation, it is the Torah

engagement that powers T'shuva. The Torah engagement also powers Avoda, as it currently does not refer to Temple service as in Shimon HaTzadik's days, but in our times means AVODA SHE-BALEV, the service of the heart; genuine prayer. And finally it powers G'MILUT CHASADIM, in reality tz'daka, acting kindly generously towards other people.

Perhaps this emphasizes the importance of prioritizing regular Torah learning as part of one's T'shuva package. As Rabbi Meir would regularly emphasize: "Whoever studies Torah without any ulterior motive, but sincerely, for its own sake, merits many things... including personal growth and the raising of that individual above all other things in the Creation" (Avot 6:1). 🌿📖