

Nitzavim – Vayelech – Sermon -2010

This week, as the Book of Deuteronomy draws to its conclusion, we read the combined Torah selection, the parshiyot of Nitzavim and Vayelech. The juxtaposition of these two words is fascinating – since “Nitzavim” means to “stand still” while “Vayelech” means “he went”. What is the relationship between standing still and moving? There are times in life when we seem to be standing still. There are other moments when we seem to be moving. But when are we moving and when are we still?

The Hebrew word “nitzavim” implies standing at attention in an alert state. The Israelites are to be standing at attention in order to heed the sacred covenant, the relationship between them and God. They must be in focus in order to fully comprehend the sacred words which will bind them to God for all time. Although they are standing still, they are absorbing those words which will transform them and their children for all time. Although they are not physically moving, internally they are undergoing change. They are listening. The movement is occurring within.

In this way, the covenant will become internalized as a personal commandment. It will become part of Israel's self-definition as a people. Deuteronomy teaches, “For this commandment which I command you this day, it is not too hard for you, neither is it far off. But the word is very near to you, in your mouth, and in your heart, that you may do it.”

The giant of twentieth century Judaism, Franz Rosenzweig spoke about the difference between Law and Commandment. Law – he said – is something written on the books. It is text. It is history. It is academic. It does not move us nor does it change us. People can learn about Judaism but it does not effect them. On the other hand, commandment is something we interact with, that we truly listen to, and that we absorb into our own being. When we are truly focused on the beauty of the teaching of Judaism, it becomes transformed from Law into Commandment. When we hear the commanding voice of God speak to us through the words of Torah, then we are able to respond. However, we need to be attentive to the significance of the teaching. Jews who are truly focused on the teaching of Judaism take it into their very being. It transforms them.

On the other hand, movement seems to imply change. However, sometimes movement can be running in circles. Sometimes movement can be frenetic without any purpose or goal. The Israelites wandered in the wilderness for forty years but actually they were just running in circles. They had no destination as the Generation of the Wilderness would perish in the Sinai. Although they were moving physically, they were wandering aimlessly. So much of contemporary life seems to be about moving without going anywhere at all. Our lives seemed so fast-paced but where is it all going. One of the great rabbis Robert Gordis, wrote a famous sermon entitled, “Slow down and live.” That sermon was written in the 1960s. In comparison, life moved at a snail's pace compared to the era of multi-tasking – a time period where young people are chatting with several parties on a computer, texting on a cell phone and doing a homework assignment at the same time! We live in a world where it seems normal to interrupt a conversation with someone and tell them that there is someone else on another line. However, in our age of busy-ness how much business is actually accomplished. We are moving but where are we going?

The Torah wisely teaches us that sometimes we can be standing still – but more importantly, we are moving within ourselves as we gain insight and wisdom. On the other hand, we can be moving but not getting anywhere at all. May God grant us the ability to realize when we are truly undergoing transformation.