

Nitzavim-Vaylech – Sermon 2 -2010

Last night, my sister was sharing with me that her sixth grade class now has a Facebook Page. Why in the world would middle-aged people want a sixth grade Facebook page. Yet, the individuals click on the page to see where their lives have taken them and to look back upon the past – although truth to be told, most of them haven't come that far in their lives – they have moved to Jewish suburbs of Long Island from Queens, New York. The students of Mrs. Vaughn's class of 1971 of Public School Number 154 in Queens now get together to look back upon their lives when they were twelve years old.

I think there is a fascination with looking back at the past – and returning to where we once were. The idea of return is deeply embedded in our souls. We want to return. There is a desire within us to return to the past – to a time we were young, to a time of innocence, to a time when we first began to explore the world. Our Torah reading speaks of one of the great themes of return of Judaism – a return to the land of Israel. “When you shall return to the Lord your God and hearken to His voice, then the Lord your God will turn your captivity and have compassion upon you and will return and gather you from all the people where the Lord your God has scattered you. The Lord your God will bring you into the land which your ancestors possessed and you shall possess it.”

The desire to return is a powerful sentiment. It is the most important word of our High Holiday Season. The Hebrew root to return – shin-vav-vet is the origin of the word Teshuva – translated as “repentance” – but better translated as “return”. The Jewish concept is that we can return to the state of purity which we had at the time of our birth – that we may start the year afresh. We are not burdened with the difficulties of the past year – we can have a new start. We can have that feeling of our unencumbered youth when we just embarked upon our journey of life.

The return to the Land of Israel derives from a similar sentiment. Israel desires to return to her native soil when she was young and innocent. She wants to feel that time when she was bound to God as a nation through the judges, prophets, and kings. She wants to feel that joyous sense of celebration of her festivals in the city of Jerusalem.

However, ironically, when we do return to the past, it is really more about the present. For in our return to the past, we discover who we really are, what is really significant to us, what we have cherished throughout our lives. We discover the values and the goals that we have held on to for many years. We see what has been constant in our lives for decades – and what has changed. We also recognize how similar or different we are from our associates in the life choices we have made. As we return, we engage in self-discovery.

Ultimately, reunions are more about us than they are about others. They clarify for us what we are all about. As we are in the season of return with the imminent arrival of the New Year, let us examine what is truly significant in our lives. The High Holy Days can be a source of inspiration if we return to the best we have to offer.