

D'var Torah by Debby Brennan, Director of Machar's Jewish Cultural School

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Updating guilt: Do we have a choice?

By Debby Brennan

This week's Torah portion is *Nitzavim/Vayeilech*, Deuteronomy 29:9-31:30

Nitzavim/ Vayelech combines strong cautionary language with deep pathos. This Torah portion is read on the Shabbat preceding Rosh Hashana. It describes an epic moment as Moses faces his own death.

Moses calls together the entire community for his final instruction, "Your tribal heads, your elders and your officials, all the men of Israel, your children, your wives, even the stranger within your camp from the woodchopper to the water drawer..." (Deuteronomy 29: 9-10) Moses calls those who are there, and those who are not there. Moses, on the precipice of his own death, is keenly aware of the possible ambivalence of the people under Joshua's leadership, which will follow the death of Moses, and he admonishes his listeners to follow the law. God commanded the people not to worship other gods, and the curse and consequence for failing to follow the law include destruction, exile, and abandonment.

However, Moses also speaks to the fact that it is not difficult to follow the law. He speaks of free choice and the triumph of good over evil, life over death. Moses encourages the people saying, "But the word is very near to you, in your mouth, and in your heart, that you may do it." (Deuteronomy 30: 14) Moses describes the simplicity of the choice. Our modern interpretation includes a responsibility to ethical action. We, too, have a simple choice to encourage morality, and authenticity. They are in our mouth and in our heart. The word is very near to us. Our response to our world and our community is our "song" – Moses's parting gift.

Moses claims that the reward for following God's commands is prosperity and a long life. (Deuteronomy 30:8-10; 30:16; 30:19-20.) In fact, we know that this is not true. Following all of the rules and making ethical choices does not necessarily result in reward. Bad people do prosper and good people do suffer. The biblical view never mentions reward or punishment after death. The rabbis, who came to dominate the religion of the Jews after the Temple was destroyed in the year 70, introduced the concept of a reward after death. Today, we have a different outlook than either that of the Torah or the rabbis -- namely, that trying to act ethically is its own reward and we don't expect it to result in prosperity or long life or a share in the world to come after death. We find wisdom in the words of Ben Azzai, a distinguished rabbinic scholar of the early 2nd century, who is credited with saying, "The reward of a mitzvah is a mitzvah." (Pirkei Avot 4:2)

God says that the people will soon begin worshipping other gods and so "I will forsake them, and I will hide my face from them" (Deut. 31:17). Scholars tell us that passages such as this were added to the text of Deuteronomy after the Babylonian exile (587 BCE) to explain, in retrospect, that exile was God's punishment for the transgressions of the people. Normally, the defeat of a nation would be taken as a sign that the god of the conqueror was more powerful than the god of the defeated, but this prophetic trick was used to convince the defeated Israelites that they should be more worshipful, not less, because of the Babylonian conquest. The brilliance of the passage is the idea that the defeat of the Israelites is not explained by the weakness of their god, but by the power of their god. Both the successes and the failures of the Jews are attributed to the same God. This has been, historically, an important factor in Jewish survival.

In the Torah portion, both Moses and God say that the Israelites will be guilty of many transgressions that will lead to destruction and exile. This is where Jewish guilt begins. Today, we must also confront guilt, but our goals are to minimize feelings of guilt and to foster self-improvement. We cannot blame ourselves for failures that we cannot control.

Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur provide an opportunity for self-reflection, the chance to improve ourselves and our lives. We have the power to change. Just as Moses gathered the whole community, Israelite and stranger alike, this is our opportunity to welcome those who have turned away, those who do not follow

the rules, and those who don't come to the call. We celebrate a holiday that encourages all of the community to gather together, even those members who join us only once a year. And we welcome them on their terms.

Discussion questions:

In your experience, when does guilt serve a useful function? When is it destructive?

Should one act ethically out of fear of consequences? What kind of consequences?

Why should one act ethically? Is ethical action its own reward? Is it a duty? Perhaps both?

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