Simchat Torah Challenge

DISCUSSION GUIDE

Nitzavim

How Important Are Actions, Really?

In this week's portion, Nitzavim, Moses reassures the people of Israel that the laws he is teaching them are accessible to them. He uses a series of striking metaphors:

דברים ל:יא-יד (יא) כִּי הַמִּצְוָה הַזֹּאת אֲשֶׁר אָנֹכִי מְצַוְּךָ הַיּוֹם לֹא־נִפְלֵאת הִוא מִמְּךָ וְלֹא רְחֹקָה הִוא: (יב) לֹא בַשָּׁמַיִם הֻוא לֵאמֹר מִי יַעֲלֶה־לָּנוּ הַשָּׁמַיְמָה וְיִקָּחֶהָ לָּנוּ וְיַשְׁמִעֵנוּ אֹתָהּ וְנַעֲשֶׂנָּה: (יג) וְלֹא־מֵעֵבֶר לַיָּם הֻוא לֵאמֹר מִי יַעֲבָר־לָנוּ אֶל־עֵבֶר הַיָּם וְיִקָּחֶהָ לָּנוּ וְיַשְׁמִעֵנוּ אֹתָהּ וְנַעֲשֶׂנָּה: (יד) כִּי־קָרוֹב אֵלֶיךָ הַדָּבָר מְאֹד בְּפִיךָ וּבִלְבָבְךָ לַעֲשֹׂתוֹ:	**Deuteronomy 30:11-14** (11) Surely, this Instruction that I enjoin upon you this day is not too baffling for you, nor is it beyond reach. (12) It is not in the heavens, that you should say, "Who among us can go up to the heavens and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may observe it?" (13) Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, "Who among us can cross to the other side of the sea and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may observe it?" (14) No, the thing is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to do it.

- **What do you think is the main message Moses is trying to impart?**
- **Have you ever overestimated the difficulty of a particular goal or achievement? If so, what made you change your perspective?**

What connection does the verse suggest between having the Torah "in your mouth and in your heart" and actually putting it into practice? One approach to this question appears in the writing of the 16th-century Polish rabbi known as the Keli Yakar.

כלי יקר על דברים ל:יא כִּי אֶפְלוּ בִּזְמַן שֶׁלֹּא תָּבֹא לְיָדְךָ אֵיזוֹ מִצְוָה יֵשׁ לְאֵל יָדְךָ לַעֲשׂוֹתָהּ בְּפִיךָ, כְּאָמְרוּ רַבּוֹתֵינוּ זִכְרוֹנָם לִבְרָכָה (מנחות קי.): כָּל הָעוֹסֵק בְּתוֹרַת עוֹלָה כְּאִלּוּ הִקְרִיבָהּ כו', וְזֶה הֶקֵּשׁ עַל כָּל שְׁאָר הַמִּצְוֹות שֶׁהָעוֹסֵק בָּהֶם כְּאִלּוּ עֲשָׂאָם, זֶהוּ שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: "בְּפִיךָ וּבִלְבָבְךָ לַעֲשׂוֹתוֹ",	**Keli Yakar on Deuteronomy 30:11** For even when you don't have the opportunity to perform a commandment, you can fulfill it with your mouth, as our Sages said (Menachot 110a): "Whoever engages in the study of the law of the

burnt offering is considered as if he had offered a burnt offering." This applies to all other commandments—that one who studies them is considered as if he had performed them. This is the meaning of *in your mouth and in your heart to do it*. For you can *render the offerings of our lips* (Hosea 14:3), and it is as if you had actually performed them. Similarly, even if one intended in his heart to perform a commandment but was prevented and did not do it, the Holy One, blessed be He, considers it as if he had done it (Berachot 6a). This is the meaning of *in your mouth and in your heart to do it*.	כִּי יָכוֹל אַתָּה לְשַׁלֵּם פָּרִים בִּשְׂפָתֶיךָ וְדוֹמֶה כְּאִלּוּ עָשִׂיתָ אוֹתָם, וְכֵן אֲפִלּוּ חָשַׁב בְּלִבּוֹ לַעֲשׂוֹת אֵיזוֹ מִצְוָה וְנֶאֱנַס וְלֹא עָשָׂאָהּ, מַעֲלֶה עָלָיו הַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא כְּאִלּוּ עָשָׂאָהּ (ברכות ו.), זֶהוּ שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: "בְּפִיךָ וּבִלְבָבְךָ לַעֲשׂוֹתוֹ".

- **After reading this passage, how would you characterize the Keli Yakar's view of how important actions are in Judaism?**
- **Do you find the Keli Yakar's reading of Deuteronomy 30:14 compelling? Why or why not?**

The Keli Yakar uses our verse from Nitzavim to downplay the importance of actions. However, a very different approach is recorded in the Talmud. In this passage, it records a disagreement between two great rabbis about the relative importance of study and action:

Kiddushin 40b Rabbi Tarfon and the Elders were reclining in the loft of the house of Nit'za in Lod, when this question was asked of them: Is study greater or is action greater? Rabbi Tarfon answered and said: Action is greater. Rabbi Akiva answered and said: Study is greater. Everyone answered and said: Study is greater, for study leads to action.	**קידושין דף מ עמוד ב** וּכְבָר הָיָה רַבִּי טַרְפוֹן וּזְקֵנִים מְסוּבִּין בַּעֲלִיַּית בֵּית נַתְזָה בְּלוֹד. נִשְׁאֲלָה שְׁאֵילָה זוֹ בִּפְנֵיהֶם: תַּלְמוּד גָּדוֹל אוֹ מַעֲשֶׂה גָּדוֹל? נַעֲנָה רַבִּי טַרְפוֹן וְאָמַר: מַעֲשֶׂה גָּדוֹל. נַעֲנָה רַבִּי עֲקִיבָא וְאָמַר: תַּלְמוּד גָּדוֹל. נַעֲנוּ כּוּלָּם וְאָמְרוּ: תַּלְמוּד גָּדוֹל, שֶׁהַתַּלְמוּד מֵבִיא לִידֵי מַעֲשֶׂה.

- **The Talmud takes the time to situate this episode: they were "reclining" in the attic of a particular house, in a particular town. Why might the Talmud take the time to tell us where and how they were sitting?**
- **When it comes to the balance between study and action, do you find yourself**

leaning more toward Rabbi Akiva or Rabbi Tarfon?

The Talmud's approach is taken even further by the Radak, an influential biblical commentator, in his commentary on Genesis:

רד"ק על בראשית, הקדמה וְדִמּוּ חֲכָמֵינוּ זִכְרוֹנָם לִבָרָכָה הַתַּלְמוּד מִבְּלִי מַעֲשֶׂה לְמִי שֶׁבּוֹנֶה בֵּיתוֹ וְאֵינוֹ מַצִּיב לוֹ דְּלָתוֹת, כִּי בְּוַדַּאי יִהְיֶה אוֹתוֹ הַבַּיִת מְשֻׁלָּח וְנֶעֱזָב כְּמִדְבָּר. וּמִקְצָתָם דִּמּוּ אוֹתוֹ לְמִי שֶׁאֵין לוֹ בַּיִת וּבוֹנֶה דְּלָתוֹת לַבַּיִת, כִּי טֹרַח הַדְּלָתוֹת לְלֹא תוֹעֶלֶת הוּא. וְאָמְרוּ חֲכָמֵינוּ זִכְרוֹנָם לִבְרָכָה הַחָכְמָה מִבְּלִי מַעֲשֶׂה הִיא טַעֲנַת הַבּוֹרֵא עַל בְּרוּאָיו. וְאָמְרוּ מִי שֶׁאֵין דְּבָרָיו דּוֹמִין לְמַעֲשָׂהוּ הוּא מְבַיֵּשׁ אֶת עַצְמוֹ.	**Radak on Genesis, Introduction** Our sages of blessed memory compared study without action to someone who builds a house but does not set doors in it, for surely such a house would be open and abandoned like a wilderness. Some compared it to someone who has no house but builds doors for a house, for the effort spent on the doors is useless without the house. And our sages of blessed memory said: "Wisdom without action is the Creator's complaint against His creations." They also said: "One whose words do not match his actions shames himself."

- **The Radak brings two seemingly opposite metaphors to make the same point—a house without doors and a door without a house. What are some of the different implications of each?**
- **In your life, have you ever realized that your actions and words were not aligned? How did you respond?**

We have seen sources that look down on wisdom and learning that do not lead to action. A verse in Exodus, describing the people of Israel's acceptance of God's laws, may take this idea even further. From the earliest commentators to the present day, readers have noted the apparent oddity of the verse's conclusion, "we will do and we will listen," which reverses the seemingly natural order of first understanding and then acting.

שמות כד:ז וַיִּקַּח֙ סֵ֣פֶר הַבְּרִ֔ית וַיִּקְרָ֖א בְּאָזְנֵ֣י הָעָ֑ם וַיֹּ֣אמְרוּ֩ כֹּ֨ל אֲשֶׁר־דִּבֶּ֜ר יְהוָ֗ה נַעֲשֶׂ֥ה וְנִשְׁמָֽע׃	**Exodus 24:7** Then he took the record of the covenant and read it aloud to the people. And they said, "All that God has spoken we will do and we will listen."

- **What does this verse suggest about the importance of action in Jewish**

practice?

- **Can you think of a time you committed to something before fully understanding what the commitment would entail? How did it turn out?**

Further Questions for Discussion

1. All the sources on this sheet offer different perspectives on the importance of action. Which view spoke to you most? Which spoke to you least? Why?
2. Returning to the first source, Deuteronomy 30:11–14, how has your understanding of Moses' words changed or deepened after studying the other sources on this sheet?
3. Different sources on this sheet compare action with study, intention, or wisdom. Which of these do you think creates the most meaningful tension with action? Why?
4. What is one question you are still left with after studying these sources?

Suggestions for Further Study

If you are interested in seeing further sources on Nitzavim, visit the Simchat Torah Challenge Nitzavim page, which includes additional resources for continued learning. You can find additional sources on Sefaria's Nitzavim topic page, which houses a wide variety of sources. You may also be interested in looking at Sefaria's topic pages on Learning, Education, and Commandments.

The last source on this sheet, Exodus 24:7, is a fascinating source in its own right. If you would like to do a deeper dive on it, you can explore various commentaries on it, from ancient exegesis to modern philosophy, on Sefaria. Click this link, and use the sidebar to choose which commentaries you would like to read.

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