Nitzavim: Devarim (Deuteronomy)

What's it all about?

This week's parsha includes some of the fundamental ideas of Judaism, including the unity of Israel, the future redemption, and the practicality of Torah and its applicability to everyday life. It also discusses free will, informing us that it is up to us to choose between life and goodness and death and evil and urging us to always choose life.



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"Life and death I have set before you, blessing and curse. And you shall choose life."

Take a deeper dive

How should we repent?

This isn't merely a theological question to ponder once a year, during the High Holidays, when the subject of divine forgiveness is top of mind. It's a rather pressing question we face every time we have to ask forgiveness. And it's not at all a simple one.

Thankfully, this week's parsha gives us a inspired guide to doing just that. "When all these things come upon you," Moses tells the Israelites, "the blessing and the curse that I have set before you—I promise you that you will consider them in your heart… and you will be inspired to return to God, your God, with all your heart and with all your soul, and you will once again heed His voice in accordance with all that I am commanding you today."

Rabbi Chaim Ibn Attar, an 18th Century Moroccan rabbi better known as Or Ha'Chaim, was troubled by this verse. Why, he wondered, would Moses mention blessings and curses before contemplating repentance? The answer, he concluded, was as simple as it was stark: ideally, when we misstep, we would repent without any threat of punishment. We'd simply see the error of our ways, feel remorse, and make amends. Sometimes, that's the case; but more often, we tend to realize we'd messed up only after we face the consequences of our actions, only, in other words, after we've been punished.

And that, Or Ha'Chaim assured us, was perfectly fine: God accepts our repentance even if we only repent because we've been slapped into saying we're sorry. His grace is infinite, and His aim one: accepting us back into the fold, forgiving us, loving us once again. That's why Moses continues by assuring us that "even if some of your exiles are in countries at the end of the heavens, God, your God, will gather you from there, and He will take you back from there."

Again, this insight is more than a soaring bit of theological comforting. It assures us that no matter how broken we believe things are, no matter how badly we might've messed up—we can always rise up, repent, and make things right.

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