



Torah Reflections on *Parashat Nitzavim-Vayeleh*

Deuteronomy 29:9 – 31:30

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“What good am I anymore? I used to help my husband, my *shul*, my nieces and nephews, and now I can’t do anything for anyone.”

“Esther” is 88 years old. Rendered immobile by arthritis, living in pain, she feels she can no longer make a difference. But I would suggest another perspective. Esther makes a difference when she prays for Israel and for her family. She makes a difference when she signs a petition to free a Jewish family marooned in Ethiopia. She makes a difference when she leads the *V’ahavta* for the congregation in the nursing home where she lives. And she makes a difference when she offers kindness to the people who live and work with her.

Our Torah affirms that we are obligated beings. We are linked to God and the Jewish people through the *mitzvot*, the ethical and ritual commandments articulated in the Torah. We have opportunities to engage in holy action every time we observe a *mitzvah*, whether it is lighting Shabbat candles, saying a bedtime prayer (*Sh’ma*), helping a stranger, or otherwise working to repair our broken world.

When we are ill, injured, or frail, it is easy to feel, like Esther, that we cannot find or make meaning. We may be consumed by our own pain and discomfort. We may be unable to imagine transcending ourselves, especially when our current limitations make the horizons of our lives so much narrower than they were before. How can we do a *mitzvah*, when we are ourselves dependent on others?

In Parashat Nitzavim, we learn that the Torah given at Sinai belongs to all future generations of Jews, as does the awesome obligation to fulfill the covenant through observance of the *mitzvot*. Lest we find the expectations placed upon us overwhelming, we are taught that what is required is within our grasp:

Surely, this *mitzvah* which I enjoin upon you this day is not too baffling for you, nor is it beyond reach. 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?’ 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?’ No, the thing is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to observe it. (Deuteronomy 30:11-14)

Moses utters these moving words as he nears the end of his life, as the Jewish people stand poised to enter the Promised Land on their own. He senses that they will doubt whether they can really continue to uphold the covenant without his leadership; he suspects they will be daunted by their own limitations and by the formidable obstacles

they will face. He reassures them that they are capable of fulfilling God's *mitzvah* , that God will ask of them no more than they are capable of doing.

This message is comforting for us, as well, reminding us that what God asks of us at any moment is to do what we *can*. We are thus empowered to bring holiness to the world in any given moment through our prayers, speech, and action.

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