

Rosh Hashana 5779 Sermon
Rabbi Alex Freedman

Shanah Tovah.

A story: There once was a man who had given up on his life.
He found no joy in his work, his family, or his community.
He said, “G-d, I’ve had enough of home life, work, everything.
Show me the way to Heaven!”
“Very well,” replied God, “Start walking. You’ll get there.”

As it turned out, Heaven wasn’t far away – just a few days’ journey from his village.
So late one afternoon he set out on his way.
He walked until nightfall and then decided to rest beneath a leafy tree.
Just before he fell asleep, it occurred to him that in the morning he might become confused and forget which was the way to Heaven.
So he left his shoes by the roadside, with the tips pointing toward Heaven.

But sometimes unexpected things happen.
Sometimes, to some of us, our shoes get turned around.
Was it an imp? Was it an angel? Was it just a squirrel? Who knows?
If you ever went to summer camp, you know this happens.
Somehow the man’s shoes got turned around.
In the morning he rose feeling rested from his sleep.
He stepped into his shoes, and began walking – unaware that he was in fact returning home.
By noon he could see a village on the next hillside, and his heart leapt. “I’ve arrived in Heaven!” he thought.
He ran down into the valley and up the hill, not stopping until he had arrived at the gates of the village.
“What a beautiful place in Heaven!” he thought.
My village was always so crowded, so noisy.
This is different, so filled with life and joy!”
He sat down on a bench in the square and witnessed the life of the village.
He heard the songs the children sang at school and the sounds of the adults at work.
He felt the vitality, the energy, and the love that filled the village.
In the evening he heard the joyful sounds of families reunited at home and smelled the meals that were being enjoyed by each family.
“I’ve really reached Heaven!” he exclaimed. And he began to feel hungry.
He thought, “Since Heaven looks so much like my village, I wonder if there is a street in Heaven like my street.”
And just where he thought it might be, there it was!
Just as he was wondering at this marvelous coincidence, a woman came to the door – a woman who bore a striking resemblance to his wife.
The woman called his name and asked him to come in for dinner.
His heart leapt again. “They know me in Heaven!
There is a place set for me here in Heaven!”

“I don’t know what’s in Heaven,” the woman responded, “but your soup is getting cold at home. Come inside!”

He entered the house. This house in Heaven was nothing like his house in the village.

That house was always crowded, cluttered, filled with commotion.

This place was cozy and homey and filled with life.

He sat at the table and ate the best meal he’d ever had.

He complimented the woman on her heavenly soup.

“You have given me a taste of Heaven.”

To which she answered, “Have some more soup!”

Afterward he went up to his bedroom and entered the deepest, most restful sleep he’d ever known.

In the morning the woman who looked like his wife handed him his tools and sent him to work.

At first the man was incredulous.

Who ever heard of working in Heaven?

But then it occurred to him that even in Heaven there were tasks to be done.

After all, even in the Garden of Eden there was work to be done.

And he found that this work was different from the work he’d done before.

Not dull or tedious, it filled him with a sense of purpose and stewardship.

And that night he returned to the same warm and loving home, the same kind woman, and more of her wonderful soup.

Do you know that in all the years that followed, no one could convince this fool that he hadn’t made it to Heaven!

Every one of his days from then on was filled with more wonder, more purpose, more joy, and more life than the day before.

Rabbi Ed Feinstein retells this story about this foolish genius.

He’s a fool, blind to the fact that things are the same today as they were yesterday.

And he’s a genius, open to the possibility that today can actually differ from yesterday.

Speaking of heaven, and speaking of yesterday, we read about heaven yesterday in the Torah reading, Nitzavim.

More precisely, we read about what’s not in heaven, Lo Bashamayim Hi: it.

I can’t think of a verse that is more famous *and* more obscure.

Let me read it to you, from Deuteronomy 30:11-14.

יֵאָמֵר כִּי הַמִּצְוָה הַזֹּאת, אֲשֶׁר אֲנֹכִי מְצַוְךָ הַיּוֹם--לֹא-נִפְלְאוֹת הִיא מִמֶּךָ, וְלֹא רְחֹקָה הִיא. יֵב לֹא בְשָׁמַיִם, הִיא: לֵאמֹר, מִי יַעֲלֶה-לָנוּ הַשְּׁמַיִמָה וְיִקְחֶהָ לָנוּ, וְיִשְׁמַעְנוּ אֹתָהּ, וְנַעֲשֶׂנָהּ. יֵב וְלֹא-מֵעֵבֶר לֵיָם, הִיא: לֵאמֹר, מִי יַעֲבֹר-לָנוּ אֶל-עֵבֶר הַיָּם וְיִקְחֶהָ לָנוּ, וְיִשְׁמַעְנוּ אֹתָהּ, וְנַעֲשֶׂנָהּ. יֵד כִּי-קָרוֹב אֲלֵיךָ הַדָּבָר, מְאֹד: בְּפִיךָ וּבִלְבָבְךָ, לַעֲשׂוֹתוֹ.

I’m going to emphasize a certain word in my translation:

“For this *Mitzvah*, which I instruct you today, is not too baffling for you, nor is *it* distant. *It’s* not in the heavens, that you should say, ‘Who among us can ascend to the heavens and take *it* for us and teach *it* to us, so we can observe *it*?’ Neither is *it* across the sea, that you should say, ‘Who

among us can cross to the other side of the sea and take *it* for us and teach *it* to us, so we can observe *it*.' No, the *thing* is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to observe *it*."

But...what is "it"? Exactly what is the *Mitzvah* that's not in heaven?

While the Torah's metaphor is unforgettable, it seems the Torah forgets to specify the subject. I'll share two different answers offered by the Rabbis.

Rashi of the 11th century and his camp say "it" is the Torah writ large, Taryag Mitzvot, the package of 613 commandments.

In other words, the Torah as a whole is the *Mitzvah* that seems impossibly daunting to keep. We wonder, is it really possible to be fully observant: Shomer Shabbat, Shomer Kashrut, daven regularly, give Tzedakah, and more?

Keeping all the *Mitzvot* may appear overwhelming and hopelessly distant.

But our Parsha responds, it's not in the heavens - it's not impossible.

You don't have to be Superman to be observant.

It's very close to you, in your mouth and your heart.

Ibn Ezra of the 12th century adds that the *Mitzvot* are accompanied by speech and touch the heart.

If you can muster the desire, you too can keep all the *Mitzvot*.

Ordinary people can achieve this.

Indeed, we all know ordinary people who do.

How does Rashi identify this?

He looks forward at the subsequent verses.

He sees that a verse that follows our passage says:

אֲשֶׁר אֶנְכִי מְצַוֶּה, הַיּוֹם, לְאַהֲבָה אֶת-ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְלַכֵּת בְּדַרְכָיו, וּלְשֹׂמֵר מִצְוֹתָיו וְחֻקֹּתָיו וּמִשְׁפָּטָיו

"Which I instruct you today, to love the L-rd your G-d, to follow in His ways and keep His *commandments, decrees, and laws*."

Rashi says that the subject in *this verse* - the commandments, decrees, and laws - must be the same subject of the *passage* I read in full, Lo BaShamayim Hi.

In short: Rashi reads forward.

He sees our passage in question, keeps reading, and latches on to the *next* subject, the Torah's commandments.

Now let's turn those shoes around.

Reading forward isn't the only way to read our passage.

What happens if we read backward?

This brings us to Ramban, Nachmanides of the 13th century, who does exactly that.

He looks at the *previous* verses to identify *that* subject.

He reasons, whatever the subject was of the *previous* passage must be the same subject as ours.

And what is the topic that precedes our passage? Teshuva, repentance.

I'll read you two verses that lead directly into our passage, and I'll emphasize one word in Hebrew and English:

פי תשוב ה, לשוש עליך לטוב, באשר-שש, על-אבותיך. י פי תשמע, בקול ה אלאיך, לשמר מצותיו ונקותיו, הכתובה בספר התורה הזו: פי תשוב אל-ה אלאיך, בכל-לבבך ובכל-נפשך.

“The L-rd your G-d will grant you abounding prosperity in all your undertakings, in the fruit of your womb and the offspring of your cattle, and the produce of your land. For the L-rd will **return** to rejoicing over you, as He rejoiced over your ancestors, for you will be hearkening to the L-rd your G-d and observing His commandments, laws and decrees that are written in this book of the Torah - when you **return** to the L-rd your G-d with all your heart and all your soul.”

In those verses you heard twice the Hebrew verb Lashuv, to return.
But it's deeper than that.

The verb “to return,” which is the root of Teshuva, appears *seven times* in this preceding chapter. In the Torah, seven is a perfect ten.

It represents a perfect, complete whole: as one of many examples, there are seven days in a week.

But seven appears again and again, which makes it the Torah's perfect number.

So mentioning the verb “to return” exactly *seven* times is highly significant.

Now let's read Teshuva into our passage.

Let's identify “repentance” as our “it.”

Teshuva, or self-renewal, is the Mitzvah that seems impossibly daunting.

We wonder, is it really possible to become better in certain ways, not repeat the mistakes of the past, not be locked in to our habits?

Starting over may appear overwhelming and hopelessly distant.

But our Parsha responds, it's not in the heavens - it's not impossible.

You don't have to be Superman to begin anew and be better.

It's very close to you, in your mouth and your heart.

Seforno, of the 16th century, says Teshuva is in our mouths when we admit our sins and seek forgiveness from others, and it is in our heart when we genuinely feel regret and seek another chance.

If you can verbalize your mistakes, articulate your resolutions, and muster the desire, you too can succeed in your resolutions.

Ordinary people can achieve this.

Indeed we all know ordinary people who have.

The “it” in our passage of Lo Bashamayim Hi/ It's not in the heavens, can be *both* the Torah's Mitzvot *and* the Mitzvah of Teshuva.

Both work.

But I think Ramban has the stronger case and Teshuva is the better fit.

First, it's more natural to look for the previous subject than for the next subject when identifying an ambiguous subject.

Next, Ramban emphasizes that if the Mitzvah were all the Torah's Mitzvot, the verse should have said "*all these commandments*," in the plural, not "this commandment" in the singular. Finally, we always read this Parsha around Rosh HaShanah, the season of Teshuva.

Though I like Ramban's interpretation better, Rashi's still works well.

We get two different answers when we read these verses forward and backward.

I love this imagery of looking forward and backward.

This has a lot to say about Teshuva, as the process definitely involves looking *backward*.

Thank you, Ramban.

We should examine our character, our actions, and our relationships over the past year.

What worked well? And what didn't go well?

Then Teshuva means we have to turn our shoes around and look *forward*.

Thank you, Rashi.

In the year ahead, who do we want to be?

What do we want to do?

How do we want our relationships to be?

I think the story about the shoes, while a light story, makes some serious claims about Teshuva.

While our friend wasn't atoning for any sin, it is clear that he changed his attitude, which altered his reality.

And Teshuva is self-renewal, making real changes.

Before he was wont to complain and focus on the negative, but that all went away.

For our friend, today was very different from yesterday even in the very same space.

Teshuva is so hard because we're living in the same space with the same people and attempting to be different next month from last month.

But that is the challenge.

The second link between the story and Teshuva is that our friend succeeded only when he turned his shoes forward and then backward.

With only one direction, he either never leaves town or never returns.

With Teshuva, we advance only when we look backward and forward.

We can understand backward and forward another way too.

One fair question to ask is, How did different people treat me in the past year?

If we're being honest - and the High Holidays push us to be honest - we must ask ourselves,

What is it about me that leads others to treat me the ways they do?

Exactly what is on me and what is on them?

For me, more than usual, my last year will be very different from my next year.

Last year I completed my fifth year of being assistant rabbi in New Jersey.

I loved the work and loved the shul and people.

But my family was too far away.

This year I look ahead to being closer to my family, as my in-laws are in Deerfield and my parents are in Cincinnati.

And I'm very excited to look ahead to joining this particular, wonderful community at Beth El. In my short time here, I realize this is a congregation that very much looks backward with pride and values tradition;

and it also looks ahead to renew itself and meet the needs of today's families.

Teshuva sounds simple but it's not easy.

But just like a race begins with one step forward, Teshuva begins with one small step in a different direction.

And it's a process that can begin right here in shul.

The Malbim of the 19th century noted that the Torah first instructs us in the verses I skipped to turn *toward* G-d, *Ad Hashem*, before we turn *to* G-d, *El Hashem*.

Our task over the next few momentous days is to make commitments.

Not a wish list of ten things, but a firm resolution to improve at, in my opinion, one thing.

Then when we leave our seats and return home, we live out that new commitment.

Becoming the person you want to be in the year ahead may seem impossible, but it's not in the heavens.

Rather, it's very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to do it.

The brilliance of Teshuva - also its Chutzpah - is the claim that tomorrow can be different from today.

To move forward, we must look backward and forward.

Our friend from the opening story was open to these possibilities. May we be as well.

So look backward at the year that was, look forward at the year that will be. And turn your shoes around.

Shanah Tovah.