

After Viddui, the Confession, we will be reading the Torah. I mentioned in another service, and during services for the last many year, that the traditional portion, from Leviticus 16, concerning sexual immorality, important as that theme is, was replaced in most liberal congregations with an excerpt from the portion *Nitzavim* in Deuteronomy, that we read less than two weeks ago during our regular Shabbat cycle. It contains elevated themes that fit this day brilliantly, and, considering that the portion always falls very close to Yom Kippur, it seems as if this portion should indeed have always been the portion chosen for today.

*It begins: You are standing here today, each and every one of you, before Adonai your God. Your leaders, your tribes, your elders, officers, every single man, woman and child, every gentile who lives among us... You stand here in order to enter into covenant with Adonai your God, and Adonai confirms this intention today. You are the people whose only God is Adonai, a heritage still intact from the times of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.*

And indeed, here we are. Not, as in Biblical times when this was first uttered, just a few decades from the origins of our covenanted relationship with God, but thirty-two hundred years later. Yet we still need reminding. As it says later in the portion:

*This commandment that I give to you today is not too miraculous for you too handle, nor is it too far away from you. It is not in heaven... It is not on the other side of the ocean... This word is very close to you, it is already in your mouths and in your hearts. You can do it.*

And you can, we can, despite the fact that our hearts, our minds, our very spiritbodies are so filled with impulses that bring us into *meshuva*, a turning away from the right pathway. We seek *teshuva*, the turning toward.

Yes, sometimes I go off on strange journeys of the philosophical imagination, but please bear with me here. Think of these next words as a guided meditation. You may even wish to close your eyes...

A seething cauldron of id; black bile bubbling over with rage and hatred, burning sprays of wrath leaping dangerously out haphazardly... watch out!

No, not a cauldron, a caldera of id, a miles-wide caldera of black lava bile surrounded by bleak and desolate brownish grey igneous rock, yet, amazingly, within the swirling horror, scintillating sparkles of gold and silver and platinum, pulsing flashes of diamond and ruby.

No, maybe not a caldera, but a morass of id, a swamp of boiling black mud, sulfuric fumes twisting up to poison the very air... yet even amidst the stench, the clear and fresh scent of green life and flowers can be detected...

There is another morass! And another... dozens of them, no hundreds... thousands, billions! And each morass is the bodyspirit of a living human being, and each one faces the enormous challenge to purify the gold and diamonds and flowers, to distill goodness from them, from the bubbling stink of their birthplace. Can it be done?

And can it be done alone, each morass on its own?

Yet beneath this seemingly irredeemable landscape are aquifers of pure water, bringing freshness to the land, undercutting the leaching poisons and transporting the refined beauty from morass to morass, strengthening each, linking them together, making what appeared to be an impossible task a doable action.

This water is the word, the voice of God, the commandment, the covenant. Many words, in fact, *devarim*, words, Devarim, the Hebrew term for the book of Deuteronomy itself. Devarim, the commandments, Devarim, the covenant.

Tradition winks and tells us that these words were already written, in letters of black fire upon a sky of white fire, two thousand years before God finally spoke the first few, saying "Let there be light."

That, within this harsh and dangerous, cursed world laced with free-floating blessing, a world populated by myriads of seething swamps of nightmare laced with precious gold and occasionally wafting the freshness of flowers, in its very sub-structure, in its innermost constitution, is redemption. Redemption is in the very blueprints that were drafted before the construction of this universe. The covenant lives and breathes, a Tree of Life that grows even from what seems to be barren and desolate stone and ash.

The Word embraces these countless distinct calderas of humanity, binding them into a sort of pulsating unity. A unity that simultaneously seeks to grow stronger and to break apart. To gather stones and to cast away stones.

The Word sits heavily on some, lightly on others; it is an intrusive invasion for some, a welcome guest for others. The Word, if heard, can be all the difference between falling into the boiling caldera or happily stumbling into a meadow. The Word, if heard, can be the difference between uncovering the pure fountains of the deep, or breaking open the cracks of doom. The difference between a breath of greeney freshness or an inhalation of smokey death.

And the presence of the Word is not perceived or received or even present the same way at all times. The Word is a flux; we may hear it when we need it most, but we may also miss it, overlook it, ignore it when we need it most. More horribly, it may simply not be there when we need it most. There are as of this moment, seven and half billion ways that the voice may be heard.

We pray, for example, for a restoration of health and peace, and that prayer may open the gates: the Word swirls in and heals. But maybe there are fifty gates, and the prayer opens only twenty-nine; we sicken and die. But maybe it opens thirty, and we recover.

We speak of miracles, and attempt even to define what we mean, but do not know what we mean, for we are far, far away from an understanding of existence that even begins to embrace its totality. Another teacher tells us that there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt in our philosophies, but only some of us believe this.

We do not yet know what the flow of time means, what place causality has, if there really is a beginning and/or an end. We cannot intelligently speak of what is meant by “normal,” let alone what is meant by “miraculous.”

The spiritbody stumbles, just a small stumble, and maybe meets with death. The spiritbody stumbles, bumps just the right part, and maybe unlocks the hidden veins of gold, emerging in genius.

Open eyes. The weird fantasy has concluded. Make of it what you will.

Hear now words from the haftarah for this day, that shall be read in its entirety to us soon: *This is the fast that I choose: To unlock the shackles of wickedness, and loosen the bonds of the yoke, to set the downtrodden free... It is to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the poor into your house; when you see the naked, clothe them, and do not ignore your fellow human being. Then shall your light break forth like the dawn and your healing quickly spring up.*

We are Israel, we are the God-wrestlers. Our entire way is not a way of acquiescence without a good fight. Yes, most often we must admit that our arms are too short to box with God. But sometimes we win, and when we win, in accordance to a Talmudic anecdote about Rabbi Eliezer, God says “nitzachtani banai,” meaning “my children defeat me,” but curiously also meaning “my children make me eternal.”

Sometimes we wallow in the morass, it is so deeply a part of our natures, after all. The innumerable books and movies and television shows of horrible crime, always so

popular, the rubber necking on the highway to see the accident, the sporting events of simulated, and sometimes not so simulated combat, the incessant actual wars... all of these point to the cauldron of poison, the caldera of malignant magma, the morass of horror that is the birthplace of our spiritbodies. And yet, within it all is the gold and diamonds and flowers of our equally constituent righteousness... most importantly, over and under it all is the call of Adonai, the Word.

And on a day such as today, strung like a ribbon of perfect beauty, like a hefty rope of dependable strength, is the spacetime gift of the Day of Atonement.

Grab that rope, adorn yourself with the ribbon, bedeck yourself in the jewels of your own inner gold and rubies. There is indeed a chance that today we really might make the turn to deeper righteousness. Grab a-hold of the yearning within the hearts of every one around, for every pew and bench seats yearning spiritbodies, and all together, are we not mighty?

With a cosmic foundation of covenantal wisdom, with the precious goodness within us, with the echoing and thunderous voice of the Word, with the mighty scaffold of this Day of Atonement, with the helping hands of all here, as well as all the Jews of the world, how can we fail to choose life and live?