

God's Word is Near

In Deuteronomy 30 Moses continues to prepare the Israelites for the journey ahead, the journey to be made upon entering the promised land; the journey that will be made without him.

Our focus today is on four lovely verses, Deuteronomy 30:11-14. However, as we shall see, we will need to read the previous ten verses as well (30:1-10) to fully benefit from this discussion.

Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. It is not in heaven, that you should say, "Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?" Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, "Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us, and get it for us so that we may hear and observe it?" No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe. (Deut. 30:11-14).

Read 30:11-14 and note your reactions. To what exactly is the text referring when it says 'this commandment'? Which commandment? Is it the call to repentance in the foregoing verses? Or is it God's teachings as a whole? This is a question which has occupied Jewish commentators over the centuries.¹ Read 30:1-14 and offer your view.

If you and your Torah partner hold differing views, you are in good company; so do the sages! For instance, Nahmanides connects the commandment with *teshuvah* (Hebrew: 'repentance'). Conscious of the dispersion of the Jews throughout the world, he hears these verses as saying, whatever the geographic or cultural challenges, repentance is never inaccessible; it is freely embraced by one's resolve.

But most commentators, including Rashi, take a different approach; and in the writings of the Talmud we find sages who assume that these verses apply to the whole complex of Jewish observance. Does the question matter? What is to be gained by such a debate? How do you enter this discussion?

A further question arises in Jewish Torah discussions: What significance is added by verses 12-13? Wouldn't the meaning of the text remain intact if they were omitted? Test this for yourself by reading verses 11 & 14 only.

There are two interpretations that emerge on this question, says the *Be'er Yizhak*. We can hear the text as saying:

1. If the Torah were in heaven it would be inaccessible. But since it's not, we have no excuses to prevent us from reaching for it!
2. Even if the Torah were as far away as heaven, it is of such value that we would still be duty-bound to yearn for it, and we would be crying out 'Who will go up to get it?!' But since it is close, how much more duty-bound are we to embrace it!

And you? How do verses 12-13 speak to you? What subtle shades of meaning are illuminated by their presence in the text?

From the midrash

A people close to Torah is a people close to God, as this midrashic text succinctly puts it:

"...the word is very near to you' (Deut.30:14).

God said to Israel: 'My children, if the words of the Torah will be near to you, I too will call you 'near ones.' For so Scripture says, *'The children of Israel, a people close to him. Halleluyah!' (Ps.148.14).*"

Deut. Rabbah 8.7

1. Named in this issue are the great medieval Torah scholars: Nahmanides (13th c. Spain) and Rashi (11th c. France). *Be'er Yizhak* is a 19th c. commentary on Rashi. See Leibowitz, 321-325.

Bibliography: Eskenazi & Weiss, *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* (New York, 2008); Leibowitz, *Studies in Devarim* (New York, 1996). Scripture: NRSV.

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