

Knowing Our Place and Our Power

Nitzavim, 5777

There once was an old man lived with his only son, in his son's house with his daughter in law and grandchildren. Life was pleasant enough for him. He had his own room, which had a place for his books and enough quiet so he could study. When it came time for each meal, the whole family gathered around a big dining room table to eat together. The son and his wife treated the older man well. His grandson and granddaughter looked up to him, and the man took great pleasure in watching them grow. He loved nothing more than taking the young boy and girl in his lap and telling them stories.

As the years went by, the man's health faded, and his hands began to shake, only a little at first, but soon most of the time. Sometimes, he would spill his tea or drop a morsel of food because of his trembling hands. And little by little, his son grew impatient with his father.

One day, as the whole family was sitting down to dinner, the old man accidentally dropped his soup spoon into his bowl, which shattered and spilled soup all over the tablecloth and his son's lap. The son threw down the spoon and jumped up angrily, shouting, "If you can't eat like a mensch, then eat alone! I'm tired of your spilling food on our good tablecloths and breaking our good dishes!"

The next day, the son brought home a wooden plate. He set a table for his father in the old man's bedroom using an old sheet as a tablecloth, and served him his food on the simple wooden plate.

The old man said nothing, and ate his meals alone in his room day after day. But to be separated from his family at what used to be their most treasured time together hurt him deeply.

One day, when the son came home from work, he noticed his daughter and son working diligently in the corner of their play room. "Well," he asked them both, "what is keeping you both so hard at work today?"

"We are making plates, carving them from wood together," answered his son.

The man was surprised. "Plates of wood? What will you use them for? We have plenty of very fine dishes in the house already."

His daughter spoke up, saying, "We know that, Father. But we are making these plates for you and Mother, when you grow old like Grandfather. And when your hands begin to shake, then we'll have these wooden plates ready to give you in your little room."

When the father heard this, he ran to let HIS father and quietly sobbed. "Forgive me," he said. "I forgot myself for just a moment; and in that instant, I forgot you too." The father placed a hand upon his son, and forgave him. And that night, the family gathered again around their big dining room table for dinner, with the old man at the place of honor.

We often think, at this time of the year, about the things we have done wrong, those actions and words for which we need to make amends, or about letting go of how we have been wronged, and forgiving others. But I did not choose this story today to talk about either of those themes. For me today, this story is not about the father, realizing his misdeeds and seeking forgiveness, nor is it about the old man, who looks at his repentant son and grants him atonement. No, this story, as they say, is all about the children.

When we look at the world around us, it is often far easier to see what needs to be done, to point out the misdeeds of others than it is to look inside and correct our own behavior. And yet, do we always speak out when we see others doing what we know to be wrong?

We are responsible for what others do- כל ישראל ארבים זה לזה (Kol Yisrael Arveim zeh lazeh). And at the end of the 3rd aliyah that we just read in Parashat Nitzavim, we get an even clearer understanding of that very point:

הַנְּסֻתָּוֹת—לִי אֱלֹהֵינוּ; וְהַגְּלוֹת לָנוּ וּלְבָנֵינוּ, עַד-עוֹלָם--לַעֲשׂוֹת, אֶת-כָּל-דִּבְרֵי הַתּוֹרָה הַזֹּאת.

“And the hidden sins belong to Adonai, our God, and the revealed sins are for us and for our children, to carry out all the words of Torah forever.

On the one hand, this is great news. The hidden sins are for God, which Rashi takes to mean that anything we did wrong, but were actually unaware of, we are not really held liable for. Not only this, but Rashi goes onto explain that we cannot be punished for wrongs that others committed, even if they were very bad, if we had no knowledge of what occurred.

But the flipside, however, is also true. If we know that someone has done wrong, we are obligated to speak up. In Masechet Shabbat (54b) of the Talmud Bavli, Rav and R. Hanina, R. Johanan and R. Habiba taught:

“Whoever can prevent their household from committing a sin but does not, is responsible for the sins of their household; if they can prevent their fellow citizens, they are responsible for the sins of their fellow citizens; if the whole world, they are responsible for the sins of the whole world.”

This is one reason why we will be saying the Al Chet prayers collectively in just a few days. Even the wrongdoing that we did not ourselves commit, but we could have stopped, becomes, in effect our responsibility. In matters of justice and righteousness, when there is a moral imperative, we cannot sit quietly by. Whether we hear a friend or neighbor, or even a stranger, shaming another person, engaging in violence, or hating an individual or group with a different ethnicity, religion, sexual identity, gender identity, political affiliation, or even simple opinion, how can we stay silent and let such hatreds persist?!

Often we stay silent because it is easier to do so. Speaking up takes a courage that we don't always have the energy or faith in ourselves to muster. Often, we stay silent because we downplay the wrongdoing, saying, "It's not so bad," or "What can I do?" But by speaking out to protect others, we not only correct wrongdoing, but we can help nurture the souls of those others who, being just as flawed as each of us are, stray off the path and in the darkness lash out at those around them, even as a part of them still seeks the light.

This past week, the world laid to rest great Shimon Peres, former president and Prime Minister of Israel. As a person who worked tirelessly for peace, who saw the impossible and worked to make it practical, who sought allies where others saw only danger, hate, and enmity, his life and work served as an amazing

example for all of us. He once famously described the very precepts that I have been discussing in the following way: *“The Jews’ greatest contribution to history is dissatisfaction! We’re a nation born to be discontented. Whatever exists, we believe can be changed for the better.”* No matter the state of ourselves, our lives, our communities, our nation, or the world in which we live, we strive always to create something better for ourselves and everyone around us, and that can only be done through words and deeds which reflect our values and adhere to our deepest principles. And none of them are more profoundly ingrained in the Jewish soul than the drive to make our world a more welcoming, just, and holy place.

We cannot fight hate with more hate, anger with more anger, terrible wrongdoing by committing wrongs of our own. We owe it to one another to look for ways to carry out these words of Torah, for “its ways are ways of pleasantness, and all its paths are peace.” (Proverbs 3:17)

Shabbat Shalom