Thoughts About Thinking: Thoughts on Parashat Nitzavim

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Nitzavim
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The Torah calls on us to think, to evaluate, and to act righteously. It challenges us to serve the Almighty with our intelligence and personal responsibility; not from blind obedience.

In this week's Torah portion, we read: "For this command that I command you today is not a wonder to you, and it is not distant....For the thing is very near to you, in your mouth, and in your heart, to do it." The Torah is not an esoteric document that can be deciphered only by an elite group of prophets or sages; rather, it is the heritage of the entire people. Each of us has access to the truths of the Torah by means of our own intellectual and emotional efforts.

In his book, "The Philosophy of Hebrew Scripture," (Cambridge University Press, 2012) Dr. Yoram Hazony makes an impassioned case that the Bible is essentially a reasonable and philosophically sound literary corpus. While so many have mistakenly characterized the Hebrew Bible as a simplistic work that demands nothing but blind obedience to the word of God, Dr. Hazony demonstrates that the Bible is actually a very sophisticated intellectual enterprise. If one is able to study the Bible on its own terms, understanding its own literary and philosophical methods, then one will find it to be not only a magnificent collection of literature and laws, but also a profound exploration of ideas and ethics.

The Hebrew Bible includes a wide range of texts, with varying—and sometimes contradictory—viewpoints. Rather than presenting us with dogmatic "truths" in the form of a catechism, it offers historical narratives, laws, prophetic orations, wisdom literature. Dr. Hazony notes that "the purpose of the biblical editors, in gathering together such diverse and often sharply conflicting texts, was not to construct a unitary work with an unequivocal message. It was rather to assemble a work capable of capturing and reflecting a given tradition of inquiry so readers could strive to understand the various perspectives embraced by this tradition,

and in so doing build up an understanding of their own.…The reader who takes up the Hebrew Bible is thus invited and challenged to take up a place within this tradition of inquiry, and to continue its elaboration out of his or her own resources." (p. 65)

Judaism calls on us to engage in this "tradition of inquiry," to be seekers of truth. Certainly, the Torah offers laws that we are commanded to obey. But it offers vastly more than this: it offers a spiritual context for life, a respect for our personal religious and philosophic strivings, a realistic and humble awareness of our strengths and limitations as human beings.

Judaism is at its best when its adherents are intellectually and emotionally engaged with its teachings. It is far below its best when its adherents sink into the abyss of blind obedience.

Several years ago, Forbes Magazine published a list of the 10 richest rabbis in Israel. The rabbis' net worths ranged from 9 million dollars to 335 million dollars! It appears that all (or nearly all) of these rabbis have reputations as wonder workers, Sephardic kabbalists, Hassidic Rebbes of huge dynasties. These rabbis have amassed huge fortunes because the public is willing to pay them for their blessings, amulets, holy water etc. It seems that a considerable segment of the public does not believe in its own ability to pray to God, but wants the intercession of holy men who supposedly have an inside track with God. Many people aren't interested in a "spirit of inquiry"—they want "truth" as promised to them by wonder working rabbis.

If these wonder working rabbis indeed have such magical powers and can control God, then why don't they use these powers to disarm Israel's enemies; to uproot anti-Semitism; to punish the wicked; to provide for all the sick, poor and hungry of the world?

A tendency has arisen in segments of the Jewish world that grants magical, even infallible, powers to certain "sages". This tendency leads to a vast perversion of Judaism, and veers in the direction of superstition and cultic behavior. It fosters authoritarianism, obscurantism, and dogmatism. It undermines freedom of thought, religious inquiry, independence of spirit. The fact that cultic rabbinic figures can amass so many millions of dollars is an indication of how deeply this negative tendency has taken root.

It is essential that we reclaim Judaism as an intellectually vibrant, creative and dynamic religious way of life. This entails personal commitment, a sense of responsibility, and a commitment to the "spirit of inquiry" that characterizes a

healthy Judaism. We need to have the self-respect and religious dignity to think...and to keep thinking.

Angel for Shabbat