To Repent or Not to Repent, That is the Question--Thoughts for Parashat Nitsavim

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Nitsavim

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

It has been pointed out that each person is part scientist and part lawyer. The scientist within us pursues facts. It strives to be objective and points out our strengths and our weaknesses. Sometimes the scientific examination produces data we really do not want to know about: it reveals flaws in our character, mistakes, sins.

But then we have the lawyer within who is quick to argue in our defense. The lawyer finds justifications for our shortcomings and even turns them into strengths. While our inner scientist is striving for truth, our inner lawyer is working to put us in the best possible light.

In most cases, our inner lawyer wins.

Various studies have shown that people routinely judge themselves as being far better than they actually are. Doctors, lawyers, rabbis, teachers, business people etc. all tend to rank themselves in the top percentiles of their professions. Few rate themselves as average and even fewer rate themselves in the bottom percentage categories. 90 per cent of us rank ourselves in the top ten or twenty percent.

Our inner scientists and lawyers are also busy when we judge ourselves Jewishly. Are we “good” Jews? The scientist will evaluate our attitudes and behaviors; our religious observance (or lack thereof); our participation in Jewish communal life, etc. It will reveal things that are praiseworthy, but also things (and perhaps many things) that are not at all praiseworthy. So our inner lawyer will come to our rescue. Yes, we have this or that failing—but we’re so much better than many others. Yes, we have been careless or uncharitable or irreverent—but we are good Jews at heart. Yes, we don’t give too much time thinking about God, or praying, or studying Torah—but we know that God appreciates our basic goodness.

And again, the lawyer almost always wins. We continue in our usual course of conduct feeling pretty good about ourselves. Surely, we are in the top 10 or 20 percent of all the Jews in the world.

But then comes the month of Elul, Rosh Hashana, the days of penitence, Yom Kippur. A dominant theme of the season is: Repentance. Repentance means we’ve done something wrong that needs to be

corrected. Our liturgy overflows with prayers of confession of sins and pleas for atonement. This season is meant to arouse our inner scientist to evaluate ourselves carefully. What are our shortcomings? What character traits need improvement? How have we fallen short in our religious observance?

Our inner lawyer strives to keep coming up with defenses for us, making excuses, providing alibis. If the inner lawyer succeeds in keeping us from confronting our shortcomings, then the holiday season is a failure for us. We just continue thinking that all is well, no need to change, no need to ponder seriously about improving our religiosity or our relationship with God.

The challenge of this season is for us to listen more carefully to our inner scientist and to ask our inner lawyer to stop making excuses for us. Prayers of confession are not meant to weaken us but to give us confidence that we can change for the better, we can grow spiritually, we can overcome past shortcomings. If we let our inner scientist win, the holy day season will be a success.

As our inner scientists and lawyers battle it out, the Torah assures us that the day will come when righteousness will prevail, when the people of Israel will repent: “You will return to the Lord your God and listen to God’s voice according to all I have commanded you today, you and your children, with all your heart and all your soul.”

Amen, Kein Yehi Ratson.