

Fundamentalism and Forgiveness

Parashat Nitzavim

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Friends, colleagues, fellow pilgrims on this sacred journey –
This morning in this safe space, I have a shocking confession to make:

I am a fundamentalist.

Yes, it's true. I discovered it last week while studying *Parashat Nitzavim*. But before you sound the alarm and release the trap door under the bima to send me somewhere horrible like the HUC bomb shelter, let me explain.

First of all, a bit about the word "fundamentalism" itself. In order to understand it fully, I looked up the word "fundament" on *dictionary.com*. I was surprised to find that the first definition is "anus" (true story). After musing to myself that maybe the problem with fundamentalists is that they're just too anal about tradition, I moved on to the useful definition: "a foundation; an underlying theoretical basis or principle." "Fundamentalism", then, is "a religious point of view characterized by a return to basic, essential, foundational principles" [adapted].

Inspired by the words of Moses in *Nitzavim*, I began to understand my religious quest in these terms – a Return to Essentials, Back to the Basics.

So, what, you ask, are the fundamentals upon which my faith rests? And I'm glad you asked, but before I answer, I need to set the stage.

I would like to ask you all to open up your Plaut Chumash to Deuteronomy 30:11-14, which you can find on page 1541, and please rise. I would like us to read responsively; your part is everything in quotes, and I will begin.

30: 11] Surely, this Instruction – literally, this Mitzvah – which I enjoin upon you this day is not too baffling for you, nor is it beyond reach. 12] It is not in the heavens, that you should say, "*Who among us can go up to the heavens and get it for*

us and impart it to us, that we may observe it?" 13] Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, *"Who among us can cross to the other side of the sea and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may observe it?"* 14] No, the thing is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to observe it.

(You may be seated.)

In the wake of the overwhelming display of God's power during the Exodus, Moses has to convince the Israelites that the Torah they are receiving will not be similarly overwhelming. It is almost as if he says:

Remember when we went across the sea on dry land on our way to receive the Torah? And remember when I ascended to God's very Presence in the heavens to receive the Law? Right, so from now on, *לֹא בַשָּׁמַיִם הוּא וְלֹא־מֵעֵבֶר לַיָּם הוּא*.

In other words, all that divine intervention was paving the way for human activation.

Here's where we get down to the Jewish fundamentals: the mouth-heart partnership. I want to suggest that this duality is a radical statement of our relationship to tradition, community, and ourselves.

The mouth is the locus of public discourse. It is the quintessential tool for interpersonal communication, and, therefore, the mouth is the fundamental building block of community. By locating the Torah in our mouths, Moses reminds us that Judaism cannot exist in a hermitage but requires the active engagement of a collective.

On the other hand, the heart is the locus of personal reflection, self-fulfillment, and autonomy. Individuality, even when it leads to disagreement, is essential for an authentic, thriving Judaism. Of course, there are limits to this autonomy, and Moses warns us that following our own willful hearts is abhorrent to God: the heart untempered by the mouth is idolatrous.

This interplay of individual and community is also illustrated in the way Moses addresses the Israelites. He locates the fundamentals of Judaism in *"your heart"* and *"your mouth"*, both in the singular. That singular, together with the plural *"You"* (or *"Y'all"* if you prefer) in the very first verses of the parasha, makes it clear that Moses is

speaking to the community in its radical entirety: the Torah is to be found in the mouth and heart of every man, woman, and child – and not just the Israelite, but the stranger, too. Therefore, to exclude *even one individual* is to limit ourselves from the covenant, to cut ourselves off from God.

That's what I mean when I say I'm a fundamentalist. My commitment to Others, within and without the Jewish community, is my first and my last. Consider: Moses did not say, "This thing is very close to you, right here in this Sefer Torah." If we are serious about the Torah, then we must guard against taking the pages of Torah too seriously and blinding ourselves to the Torah within and among us.

This is why it makes me furious when Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, Shas spiritual leader and former Sephardic Chief Rabbi, makes statements like the following:

There was a tsunami and there are terrible natural disasters, because there isn't enough Torah study... black people reside there (in New Orleans). Blacks will study the Torah? (God said) let's bring a tsunami and drown them.

[\[http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3138779,00.html\]](http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3138779,00.html)

I have struggled with this issue for some time now, especially since the tikkun we're using in cantillation class was certified by Rabbi Yosef. I had misgivings about using it, and, in a less than cool-headed moment, I considered pasting something about Rabbi Yosef's offensive words over the certification page. I wanted to react dramatically; I wanted to call him a racist, to declare him outside the bounds of Judaism. I wanted to rail against him because he does not seek the divine in the mouths and hearts of those Blacks whom he resigns to suffering and death. Up until a few weeks ago, I would have called him a fundamentalist and meant it as a criticism. I won't use that label for him anymore, because he disregards those fundamentals that Moses articulates in *Nitzavim*.

But then, in a more cool-headed moment, I pause to ask if my summary rejection of Rabbi Yosef is itself a violation of this fundamental principle of mouth and heart. Should I not seek some trace of the sweetness of Torah even in the bitterness of his words? In the wisdom of the Ramban and this Season of Repentance, I found the beginning of an answer.

Up to now, we have taken it for granted that “this Mitzvah” refers to the entire Torah. But the Ramban, in his commentary on Deuteronomy, takes it to refer to the specific commandment of תשובה a few verses earlier: “you shall return to the Eternal your God.”

The Ramban’s interpretation shifted my focus away from raging at Rabbi Yosef and toward reflecting on myself:

When have I abused Torah to justify my hatred or to hide my indifference? When have I clothed profane ulterior motives in pious garb? When have I complained without constructing, criticized without contributing? When have I deprived myself of experiencing God by excluding someone, knowingly or not? When have I been blinded by my own willful heart? When have I been deaf to the voices of my community? When have I been hesitant to ask forgiveness? When have I been slow to forgive?

These are the questions that I will carry with me through this season. The task before me – before each of us – is to bring the mouth and heart back into dialogue, back into balance. To turn those fundamentals into tools of forgiveness. By the way, I decided to use the tikkun *as is* and let it serve as a reminder of my own need for תשובה.

As we turn inward during this season of introspection, let’s not forget to keep looking outward, too. My hope for all of us is that we have the heart to reflect critically on our own souls, the openness of mind and mouth to share in that soul-searching with our community, and the wisdom to seek תשובה not in the heavens above us but *within* and *among* us, in every recess of the human encounter.

Ken y’hi ratzon, boker tov, and shana tova.