

“Committing to Torah”
דבר תורה (sermon) for Kol Nidre 5778/2017
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Thank you to Rabbi Robert Pilavin who suggested the idea of conversion and Ramban Deuteronomy 27: 20 at a discussion of potential sermon topics at a meeting of Morashah, the rabbinic fellowship of the Union for Traditional Judaism.

Toward the end of the Torah, Moses provides the people with ceremonies through which they will affirm the Torah upon their entry into the land of Israel. Certain tribes would stand on certain mountains, “וְעָנוּ הַלְוִיִּם וְאָמְרוּ אֶל-כָּל-אִישׁ יִשְׂרָאֵל קוֹל גָּם” And all the Levites shall proclaim and say to every Israelite in a loud voice” a list of curses upon those who violate certain laws, including idolatry, insulting parents, and subverting justice.¹ The ceremony concludes:

אָרוּר אֲשֶׁר לֹא-יִקְיָם אֶת-דְּבַר הַתּוֹרָה-הַזֹּאת לַעֲשׂוֹת אוֹתָם וְאָמַר כָּל-הָעָם אָמֵן.
Cursed be the person who does not uphold the words of this Torah to do them, and the whole nation shall respond: Amen.²

The famed biblical commentator Rashi tells us that the intent of this verse is to represent the Israelites’ acceptance of all of the Torah’s commandments.³ Rashi’s explanation of the verse seems overbearing. Does Rashi mean to tell us that anyone who fails to observe a single one of God’s commandments is to be cursed? Ramban (Nachmanides) explains otherwise by analyzing what it means to accept the words of the Torah:

ולפי דעתי, כי הקבלה הזאת, שיודה במצות בלבו ויהיו בעיניו אמת ויאמין שהעושה אותן יהיה לו שכר וטובה והעובר עליהן יענש, ואם יכפור באחת מהן או תהיה בעיניו בטלה לעולם הנה הוא ארוּר. אבל אם עבר על אחת מהן, כגון שאכל החזיר והשקץ לתאווה או שלא עשה סוכה ולולב לעצלה, איננו בחרם הזה, כי לא אמר הכתוב אשר לא יעשה את דברי התורה הזאת, אלא אמר אשר לא יקיים את דברי התורה הזאת . . .

In my opinion, the acceptance indicated here is that one should accept the mitzvot in one’s heart and one should see them as truth and believe that one who does them will have reward and good and one who transgresses them will be punished, but if one denies one of them or one of them be eternally void in one’s eyes, that person is cursed. However, if one transgresses any one of the commandments, for instance [if] one eats swine or an insect out of lust, or [one] who does not fulfill [the mitzvah of] sukkah or lulav out of laziness, [that person] is not within this excommunication (i.e. the curse), because the verse did not say (i.e. did not pronounce curse on),

¹ Deuteronomy 27:11-26.

² Deuteronomy 27:26.

³ Rashi on Deuteronomy 27:26 (“כאן כלל את כל התורה כולה וקבלוה עליהם באלה ובשבועה”).

“who does not fulfill the words of this Torah,” but rather said, “who does not uphold the words of this Torah.”⁴

It is impossible for any mortal to get everything right at all times, and Ramban tells us that the Torah doesn't expect that from us. What the Torah expects is that we accept the fact that God has expectations of us and that we will be better off if we live up to God's expectations.

My teacher Rabbi David Novak, a professor of Jewish philosophy at the University of Toronto and president of my beloved Union for Traditional Judaism, notes that the fact that the Torah asks us to “buy in to the system,” so to speak, rather than expecting us to fulfill every one of its requirements, applies not only to Jews from birth but to Jews of choice, as found in the *halakhah* (Jewish law) regarding conversion,⁵ which I'd like to discuss briefly, both as a window into understanding what is expected of all Jews and also to dispel some of the deeply troubling attitudes toward converts that have become common in some circles of Orthodoxy.⁶ In the Babylonian Talmud, we are told:

עובד כוכבים שבא לקבל דברי תורה חוץ מדבר אחד - אין מקבלין אותו, ר' יוסי בר' יהודה אומר:
אפי' דקדוק אחד מדברי סופרים

An idolater who came to accept the words of the Torah except [with regard to] one matter, we do not accept him. Rabbi Yose said: Even [if the idolater only wishes to exclude] one detail from the words of the sages [the idolater is not accepted].⁷

Rabbi Novak explains:

This does not mean that the convert is expected to observe every aspect of Jewish law--clearly an impossible demand, intellectually, morally and religiously. Rather, it means that conversion must involve an unconditional acceptance of the valid authority of Jewish law and an initial rejection of none of its specifics. This general acceptance is not invalidated by subsequent laxity in the observance of specific commandments.⁸

⁴ Ramban on Deuteronomy 27:26. Note that Ramban is explaining the term קבלה, which is a term introduced into the conversation by Rashi's commentary as opposed to the verse itself.

⁵ “The Status of Non-Halakhic Conversions,” available at <https://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/sites/default/files/public/halakhah/teshuvot/20012004/16.pdf>. See in particular p. 83-84 and footnote 17 referencing Ramban's commentary. Note that in case this responsum is taken off the internet, I have maintained a pdf and can make it available on request.

⁶ For an excellent review of halakhic sources regarding conversion and in particular issues regarding expectations of post-conversion halakhic observance, see chapter 4 of Rabbi Marc Angel's Choosing to Be Jewish: The Orthodox Road to Conversion, Jersey City, Ktav Publishing House, 2005.

⁷ Babylonian Talmud Bekhorot 30b, cf Tosefta Kifshuta Demai, Lieberman edition, 2:5.

⁸ “The Status of Non-Halakhic Conversions,” available at <https://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/sites/default/files/public/halakhah/teshuvot/20012004/16.pdf> p. 84. Footnotes omitted.

Rabbi Novak's analysis mirrors that of Hakham Ben Zion Uziel, the first Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Israel.⁹ Both Rabbi Novak and Hakham Uziel note that any standard that required post-facto observance of mitzvot in order to invalidate a conversion would be completely untenable. Hakham Uziel observes that if it were the case that a convert's failure to observe the mitzvot invalidated the conversion, " בטלת מצות גרות דאין צדיק בארץ " The entire mitzvah of accepting converts would be voided, for there is no 'righteous person on earth who [only] does good and does not sin.'¹⁰ Hakham Uziel concludes:

גר שקבל עליו המצות ועונשן אעפ"י שידוע שלא יקיים אותם מקבלים אותו אחרי שהודיעו לו מצות קלות וחמורות ענשן ושכרן. שגם אם יחטא ויענש מכל מקום זכות היא לו לזכות באותן המצות שיקיים אותן ומשום דילמא נפיק מהם זרעא מעליא.

A convert who accepted upon himself the mitzvot and their consequences (lit: punishments), even though it is known that he will not fulfill them, we accept him provided they (the Jewish court) explained to him some light mitzvot and some weighty mitzvot and their punishments and rewards. For even if he sins and is punished, nonetheless it is a benefit for him to be rewarded for all the mitzvot he fulfills and because [furthermore] perhaps wonderful progeny will come from him.¹¹

As I have already quoted, Rabbi Novak notes that conversion requires "an unconditional acceptance of the valid authority of Jewish law and an initial rejection of none of its specifics." In a footnote, he suggest that, "Perhaps this is why instruction in the commandments for conversion is deliberately random,"¹² referencing the Talmud in Menakhot 47a which tells us that the prospective convert is taught, " מקצת מצות קלות ומקצת " Some light mitzvot and some heavy mitzvot," meaning that the convert is not expected to know all of the details of Jewish law, but rather be sufficiently familiar to know "what s/he is getting into." It seems to me that this standard also reflects the experience of the Jewish people in general, who stood at Sinai and said, " נעשה ונשמע – We will do and we will listen."¹³ The people knew that a benevolent and just God had redeemed them from Egypt and was prepared to give them a Torah that would operate to their eternal benefit. They did not need to know all the details of the law, nor even whether they would think themselves capable of fulfilling the law before they were prepared to commit to the obligations of that law. In turn, they received the " חקים ומשפטים צדיקים " Just and righteous laws" that are our Torah.¹⁴

⁹ אבל אם קבל כל התורה ושכרן ועונשן של מצות אלא שהוא נמשך " שו"ת משפטי עוזיאל כרך ב - יורה דעה סימן נח . But if one accepted all of the Torah and the reward and punishment for mitzvot but continued with behaviors (lit. "things") to which one were accustomed in one's gentile state, one is a sinful convert, but we do not forebear from accepting him/her because of this."

¹⁰ Id. quoting Ecclesiastes 7:20.

¹¹ Id.

¹² <https://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/sites/default/files/public/halakhah/teshuvot/20012004/16.pdf> footnote 17.

¹³ Exodus 24:7,

¹⁴ Deuteronomy 4:8.

Hakham Uziel explained that even if a person converts and then does not fulfill all the mitzvot, the conversion is still a benefit for the person, “זכות היא לו לזכות באותן המצות,” “It is a benefit for him to be rewarded for all the mitzvot he fulfills.” The same is true for us. While we may not have the fortune of fulfilling every mitzvah, each of us can share in the many blessings that come with fulfilling the mitzvot that we do observe. Torah and mitzvot guide us on a path toward holiness and righteousness. Each time we do a mitzvah we affirm our connection to God and to the Jewish people. When we do a mitzvah out of a sense that God has commanded us to do so, we affirm that we have control over our lives, that we can overcome our instincts in order to fulfill the benevolent dictates of our creator and we can choose between good and evil, between right and wrong.¹⁵ We inspire ourselves in many ways, some of which we may not even understand. As my teacher Rabbi David Weiss Halivni wrote, explaining the importance of accepting a commitment to the dictates of halakhah:

A Jew knows no other way of reaching out to God other than through halakhah (the latter taken in the widest possible sense). He knows no way to penetrate the highest recesses of spirituality other than through a structured pattern of behavior. In the course of that engagement he may experience a sense of elevation, a touch of ecstasy, a feeling of being near to God. That is the highest reward. While it lasts, he is desirous of nothing more. Indeed, nothing else exists.

How does a mitzvah catapult one into such religious heights? What is prayer? Nobody knows, any more than we know when looking at the sunset, or at a smiling child, how and why we are gripped, riveted to the scene, transformed in a foretaste of the world to come. Our religious and aesthetic experiences are shrouded in mystery. We are put on fire, but do not know how the fire is being kindled. The mistake of reform is that it claims that it knows how the fire is being kindled; that, as a result, it can control the flame. When it actually tried to control the flame, alas there was no fire; everything was so cold!¹⁶

We are gathered here tonight for the fabled כל נדרי service, which expresses our concerns for the many commitments we have made that we have not fulfilled, as well as the commitments we might make in the future and might fail to fulfill. Often, a “new year’s resolution” is seen as a good way to improve the way we live in the future. Unfortunately, many times we ask of ourselves more than we are capable of and then fall short of those resolutions, resulting in disappointment and a feeling that the exercise was futile. Perhaps the halakhah conversion and Ramban’s explanation of the one who “does not uphold the words of this Torah” points us in another direction. Perhaps what we should

¹⁵ CF Tosafot on Babylonian Talmud Avodah Zarah 3b s.v. *gadol hametsuveh v’oseh*.

¹⁶ Rabbi David Weiss Halivni’s letter to the JTS faculty regarding the vote on ordaining women, reproduced in [The Book and The Sword: A Life of Learning In the Shadow of Destruction](#), New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996, p. 112-113. Please note that UTJ is a participant in the Amazon Services LLC Associates Program, an affiliate advertising program designed to provide a means for us to earn fees by linking to Amazon.com and affiliated sites.

really be doing is renewing our faith in Jewish beliefs, values, and laws, and striving to move forward as much as possible in a manner that is consistent with that commitment.

Renewing our commitment to the Torah even while we know that we will fall short, however, should not be an empty gesture. While we can't expect to fulfill every mitzvah tomorrow, I think we need to at least take some concrete steps to make the commitment meaningful. I am reminded of the old New York Lottery commercial, which used to tell us, "All you need is a dollar and a dream." There's a lot of wisdom there. Dreams are wonderful. They can really take you places. However, dreams will get you nowhere if you don't at least invest something, if you don't at least do something to turn that dream into reality. Sometimes, with just a small step, you can "strike it rich." But if you don't invest that dollar, you might as well forget about having your dream.

If your dream is to add meaning to your life, to grow in your commitment in Judaism, to take greater advantage of all that is on offer from a life of increased spirituality, that's a wonderful dream. But what will your dollar be? There are so many great ways to invest in that dream, wonderful mitzvot, both great and small. In five days it will be Sukkot. What about building a sukkah this year? How about purchasing a lulav and etrog? A week after Sukkot begins is Simchat Torah, with joyous revelry celebrating the gift of Torah and the opportunity to study it over and over again. What can you do to bring just a little bit more of Shabbat's holiness into your life or to establish a daily sense of spirituality through daily prayer and/or study of Torah? If you want to have more God in your life, if you want your life to have deeper meaning than the monotony of the every day grind, then renew your commitment to that which connects you to God and to the many generations of the Jewish people. Let us echo the words of our ancestors who stood at Sinai saying "נעשה ונשמע – we will do and we will listen" and walk in the path of our holy converts who joined us at Sinai by immersing in the waters of the mikvah for conversion by recommitting to our obligations under our biblical covenant with God and finding at least one thing we can do to start moving forward in that commitment. Will it work? Of course it will. All you need is a mitzvah, and a dream.

CLOSING PRAYER FOR END OF SERVICE

מודים אנחנו לך שאתה הוא ה' א-להינו וא-להי אבותינו

We affirm before you, Oh God, that you are Adonay our God and God of our ancestors who stood before you at Sinai and declared "נעשה ונשמע" We will do and we will hear." We pray that our hearts and minds remain committed to your Torah and that we grow each and every day in observance of your mitzvot. Inspire us, we pray, לשמר חקיך ולעשות רצונך, to follow your statutes, to do your will, and to serve you with a sincere heart. May we learn to follow your chosen path for us, keeping you at our side at all times, in accordance with the words of your prophet Micah:

הגיד לך אדם מה טוב ומה יקוּק דוֹרשׁ מִמֶּךָ כִּי אִם עֲשׂוֹת מִשְׁפָּט וְאַהֲבַת חֶסֶד וְהִצַּנֵּעַ לְכַת עִם אֱלֹהֶיךָ
Oh mortal, [God] has told you what is good and what the LORD asks of you, only do justice and love kindness, and walk humbly with your God.¹⁷

And let us say, Amen.

¹⁷ Micah 6:8.