

Parshat Netzavim: Gaining Perspective, A Theme of Shabbat and of the High Holidays

Meditation by Rabbi Debra Orenstein

In our fast-paced society, days have a way of running together. By contrast, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote:

Judaism is a *religion of time* aiming at the *sanctification of time*. Unlike the space-minded man to whom time is unvaried, iterative, homogeneous, to whom all hours are alike, qualitiless, empty shells, the Bible senses the diversified character of time. There are no two hours alike. Every hour is unique and the only one given at the moment, exclusive and endlessly precious.

Heschel writes this in *The Sabbath*, because Shabbat prioritizes time and the awareness of time over space and the things of space. Those who observe Shabbat discover that time can only run together for up to six days. Shabbat punctuates the week. It causes us to slow down, become aware, and reflect. In that sense, the High Holidays do for the year what Shabbat does for the week.

Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan put it this way:

An artist cannot be continually wielding a brush. Artists must stop at times in their painting to refresh their vision of the object, the meaning of which they wish to express on canvas. Living is also an art... The Sabbath represents those moments when we pause in our brushwork to renew our vision of [life].

The High Holiday Season imposes a lengthy pause in our “brushwork.” Counting Elul and the Ten Days of Repentance (but not Sukkot), we take 40 days – approximately 11% of our year – to gain the perspective we need in order to use all the other days wisely.

Parashat Nitzavim demands that we take responsibility for the action and the pause, the words and the deeds, our own choices and the legacy we leave our children:

I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore choose life, that you and your children may live. – Deuteronomy 30:19

The following are meditations, exercises, and discussion questions to help you gain perspective this Shabbat and increase your ability to take account of your choices and conduct a year-in-review for your soul:

1. In what area of your life do you most need to gain distance and perspective?
2. What is the most fruitful pause you have taken in the past year?
3. As you look ahead to the New Year, what is one small change you could make that would incline you toward life and away from death?
4. Sit in front of a painting that you love. (Or find an art book and open to a page that speaks to you.) Begin by sitting very close to picture. Look at it and use it as an object of your focus for meditation. After five to ten minutes, move your chair back and continue to meditate. (You can use an alarm to alert you to the passage of time.) Repeat the same pattern, moving backwards every five to ten minutes for at least fifteen minutes and up to an hour.
 - After completing the meditation, consider: What came up for you? What perspective does this exercise give you on perspective?
5. In writing or in conversation, name the three most important decisions you made in the past year.
 - How did each one incline you toward life and/or death?
 - What did you do to gain perspective before making each of the three decisions?