

Samantha Pinkes on *Nitzavim*

Shabbat Shalom. In this weeks *Parashah, Parashat Nitzavim*, Moses has assembled the Israelites on the eve of entering the land of Israel and asks them to enter into the covenant with G-d. Moses has just explained that if the Israelites heed the word of G-d then they will be prosperous anywhere they go, G-d will protect them, and they will have many children, successful crops and healthy animals. Moses also states the consequences of disobeying G-d. Moses tells the Israelites that if they fail to follow G-d's commandments they will be cursed everywhere they go, they will have nothing to eat, they will lose every battle, and fail at anything they try to accomplish. The time has come for the Israelites to stand and accept the covenant promised by G-d. Moses ends his speech by saying, "I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life." *Uvacharta bachayim.*

Many scholars have commented on what is meant by the instruction "choose life." Choosing life doesn't just mean living, it means believing, observing and acting in accordance with the values and ideas of the Torah. Some examples are *tzedakah* or giving to charity, *tikun olam* or working to repair the world, visiting the sick, being fair and honest, and welcoming the stranger; and there are many more. A person who is not living in accordance with the lessons or rules in the Torah is like a zombie, says Pinchas Peli, a modern Israeli rabbi and scholar; his body is alive, yet his soul is dead. In order to "choose life" it is necessary to not only speak of the lessons from the Torah or believe in them, but to make your actions follow them. It was Moses who relayed G-d's message that we have this choice; but it is our job to make the right choice, one that will lead us to take action. When we act in good ways we make for a better life, both for us and for our families as well as for the larger community.

The fact that Jewish people for thousands of years have been "choosing life" has kept our religion alive, many times in the face of tremendous hardship. Passing on the many lessons found in the Torah from one generation to another enables the next generation to have the information they need to "choose life."

Up until now it has been decided by my parents whether I would live by the values of the Torah and, therefore choose life, or be spiritually dead. Now it is my turn to choose. My parents have always taught me Torah in ways that made Judaism one of my top priorities. I believe that everyone should be taught in such effective ways.

There are many ways to successfully teach and learn Torah. When a parent is studying the teachings of the Torah with their child, they need to be open to interpretation and questions, and make the subject relevant to the child's life. It needs to be taught in ways that are easily accessible for the child but not in an overbearing manner. Rabbi Menahem Mendel of Kotzk said, "If you truly wish your children to study Torah, study it yourself in their presence. They will follow your example. Otherwise, they will not themselves study Torah but will simply instruct their children to do so." I was taught Torah without even knowing it beginning when I was very young. Every day some of the rules and lessons that are in the Torah were modeled such as respect for elders, kindness and gratitude.

The child has to be taught in a way that makes them want to continue to learn the lessons of the Torah. The Torah needs to be studied in small amounts. One shouldn't try to process too much information at one time. For example: In this *D'var Torah* I chose to focus on one verse even though I have a double *parashah*. I have learned so much from just this single verse, that I am amazed at how much meaning there is in the whole Torah and I look forward to studying in more depth.

Reading is crucial to the study of Torah, and studying Torah changes lives. I feel that reading has the ability to change lives too. Reading has exposed me to different ideas and cultures. For my *tikun olam* project I am collecting gently used children's books for a program called Read To Grow so that children who would not have the chance to learn to read will get that chance. Read To Grow gives books to mothers with young children who wouldn't be able to buy their own books. When children are able to read, many doors are opened. It is

easier to get jobs and support families. Then the cycle can just keep on going, parents teach their children to read, then the child grows up and has a family and teaches his or her children to read. In this way not only is the child helped but the whole family and society.

Through my studies I have realized how many people have learned these same words of Torah before me. I understand how timeless the lessons of Torah are and I hope that other people will learn from my ideas. My parents have started me on the right path and I will continue to not only learn from them and my teachers but also from the people who came before me.

I'd like to thank the clergy and teachers of the Emanuel Synagogue for helping me learn what I needed to know for this day. I would especially like to thank Cantor Cohn and Rabbi Small for working with me on preparing for this service. I would also like to thank Barbara Becker for being an inspiring Torah study partner. And most of all, thank my parents and brothers for their love and support.