

## Heaven is a Place on Earth

A *Talmudic* dispute: the *Talmud* tells of a dispute among scholars over a technical point of Jewish law. They go back and forth. Rabbi Eliezer starts, "If the law is like me, let the carob tree lean." And the tree leaned. The Sages responded, "We don't get our proof from a tree." Rabbi Eliezer continued, "If the law is like me, let this river turn directions of flow." And the river switched directions, but the Sages responded again, "We do not take proof from a river." Rabbi Eliezer continued, "If the law is like me, then let the walls of this *Beit Midrash*, house of study, start to lean." The walls began to lean. R. Yehoshua called out to the walls, "We are arguing over *Halachah*. This is not your affair!" The walls stopped falling, to honor R. Yehoshua. To this day they remain bent, in honor of R. Eliezer. R. Eliezer: If the law is like me, Heaven should show it. A voice from heaven calls out, "Why do you argue with R. Eliezer? The *Halachah* always follows him!" R. Yehoshua: "It is not in Heaven."

This story is a classic *Talmud* story, one of the first sections I learned in rabbinical school. At its heart is the conflict of government deciding on matters of religious domain such as circumcision or marriage rituals. While we have a strong hold to our *Torah*, the laws divinely inspired and passed from God to Moshe and humanly interpreted for our day, we might also find ourselves wondering why God, the heavens might be prescribing our daily lives, rituals and actions. Rabbi Eliezer appears as the staunch believer, putting his system of practice in line with the *Torah*, not taking into account the condition of present society. One can envision Rabbi Yehoshua enraged as he arises to make his statement. He replies that matters of *Halachah*, the Jewish legal system taken on by the rabbis to prescribe law and observance in our modern society, is not a matter for heaven to interfere with.

This statement, *lo bashamayim he*, meaning "it is not in heaven," has its roots in our *parshah* this week, *parshat Nitzavim-Vayelech*. These two *parshiyot* come together right before *Rosh HaShanah* as a means to allow us to reaffirm our covenant with God and with our religion, to secure our place in the land of Israel and to prepare us mentally for the work of repentance, repair and rebirth that happens with the *Yamim Noraim*, these coming days of awe.

In *D'varim* chapter 30, verses 12-14 we learn: "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?' Neither is it beyond the sea, that you could 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?' No, the thing is very close to you, in your mouth, and in your heart, to observe it." The text almost reads as a rebuke to the people building the Tower of Babel: Don't try to reach the heavens, that's not where you're meant to be. The laws, the passion and the beauty of Judaism are not meant to be out of reach, they are meant to be within our grasp, within our souls. *Torah*, God and *Mitzvot* are not for those who are overly pious and self restrained, they are for every human being and have been entrusted to us to study and to interpret.

The challenge of this idea is made clear a few verses later in 30:19. "I call heaven and earth to record this day against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both you and your seed may live." We have a choice. We can choose to leave ritual and Jewish practice for others, or we can choose to take on the responsibility of Jewish practice, striving to build a relationship with those around us, with God and with our heritage. We can choose to see the *Torah* as a book of the past, irrelevant to our lives, or we can rejoice in the blessings of connecting to our past and our future.

While the laws of the *Torah*, of *Kashrut*, of *Shabbat*, can seem overwhelming, we should remember that it is not out of reach, they are not in Heaven; rather, they are right here, waiting to be discovered, uncovered and learned and loved by each of us.

ללמוד **To Learn:** ללמד **To Teach:** Ask a Rabbi or Phone a friend. The best way to learn is with a guide to help you down the path. Pick up the book It's A Mitzvah to start your journey with step by step suggestions, or find a mentor to help teach you whichever *mitzvot* you choose to take on next.

לשמור **To Keep:** לעשות **To Do:** As we approach the Jewish New Year, make a resolution. What do you want to learn this year? What do you want to teach your children? Let me know how I can help make Judaism within reach to be loved by you.