

A Daily Bread

Date: 23 Elul 5782 (September 17, 2025)

Torah Portion: Nitzavim

Topic: It Is Not in Heaven

In Deuteronomy 30:12–14 says: It is not in the heavens, to say, ‘Who shall ascend into the heavens for us, and bring it to us, and cause us to hear it, so that we do it?’ Nor is it beyond the sea, to say, ‘Who shall go over the sea for us, and bring it to us, and cause us to hear it, so that we do it?’ For the Word is very near you, in your mouth and in your heart – to do it.” Once Moshe brought the Torah down to the people at Mount Sinai, it is evident to the people that the Torah was no longer in heaven. So, why was it necessary for Moshe to say, “It is not in the heavens”?

King Shlemono said seven things regarding the lazy person who is slothful in his pursuit of Torah study. Yet what Moshe said is greater than all of them. How is this so? The Midrash explains: (1) People say to a lazy person, “Your teacher is in the adjacent town! Go and study Torah from him!” He answers, “I am afraid of the lion on the road.” For it is stated (Prov. 26:13), “The lazy one says, ‘There is a lion in the way!’” (2) People say, “Look, your teacher is in the city! Arise and go to him!” He says (ibid), “A fierce lion is in the streets!” (3) People say, “Loo, your teacher lives next to your house, and it is not necessary to walk on any streets at all!” He says, “There is a lion outside” (ibid., 22:13). (4) They say, “Your teacher is inside the same house as you! So you can reach the teacher without going on any dangerous open roads!” He says, “If I go and find the door locked, I will return and come back!” But they said, “The door is open!” (26:14). The verse states that the door of the teacher’s room is open and yet the lazy person turns a blind eye and goes back to sleep. (5) In the end, he runs out of excuses and does not know what to answer, so he says to them, “Whether the door is open or locked, I just want to sleep a little longer.” They say, “How long would you lie down, O lazy one? When do you arise from your sleep?” (6:9). (6) He arises from his sleep in the morning and they place food before him to eat, but he is too lazy to put it into his mouth (26:15). (7) “The lazy one does not plough after the autumn; At harvest time he inquires – there is none!” (20:4). What does it mean by, “The lazy one does not plough after the autumn”? It is a metaphor for one who does not study Torah in his youth. He then seeks to study Torah in his old age but is not able, and that is the metaphorical meaning of the end of the verse, “At harvest time he inquires – there is none” (ibid.).

Yet, what Moshe said is greater than all of them. His statement to the lazy person was more powerful than all of King Shlemono’s statements. For it is stated, “For the Word is very near you, in your mouth and in your heart – to do it” (above). This implies that to fulfill the requirement of Torah study all that is necessary is to speak a word from your mouth. Moshe points out that one does not have to walk in any streets or anticipate any locked doors, or even get out of bed to engage in Torah learning. All he needs to do is open his own mouth and heart and allow the words of the Torah to emanate from them.

According to Maharzu, Shlemono and Moshe are addressing two different types of students. The “lazy person” of Proverbs is someone who has never been exposed to Torah study and is being urged to do so for the first time. Whereas Moshe was speaking to individuals on the caliber of his own generation, who were already well versed in Torah and were being urged to maintain their knowledge through constant review. Understanding material for the first time is a difficult and sometimes frustrating process, but reviewing concepts already mastered is much easier. Moshe’s admonition is therefore is stronger in its own way than the statements of Shlemono, for the accomplished student has no excuse to refrain from review.

Shalom.