

Parashat Nitzavim/Vayeilekh: Avoidance of Challenge

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Devarim 30:12	
<p>לֹא בַשָּׁמַיִם הוּא לֵאמֹר מִי יַעֲלֶה-לָנוּ הַשָּׁמַיִם וְיִקְחֶהָ לָנוּ וְיִשְׁמְעֵנוּ אֶתְּהָ וְנַעֲשֶׂנָּה:</p>	<p>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?"</p>

1. It is Not in Heaven

Midrash Devarim Rabbah 8:6	
<p>דָּבָר אֲחֵר, כִּי הַמִּצְוָה וגו' לֹא בַשָּׁמַיִם הוּא. אָמַר לָהֶן מֹשֶׁה שֶׁלֹּא תֵאמְרוּ מֹשֶׁה אֲחֵר עֹמֵד וּמֵבִיא לָנוּ תּוֹרָה אַחֶרֶת מִן הַשָּׁמַיִם, כִּבְרַת אֲנִי מוֹדִיעַ אֲתֶכֶם לֹא בַשָּׁמַיִם הוּא, שֶׁלֹּא נִשְׁתַּיֵּיר הַיְמָנָה בַּשָּׁמַיִם.</p>	<p>"It is not in the heavens, to say: Who will ascend for us to the heavens, and take it for us, and communicate it to us, that we will perform it" (Devarim 30:12). Another matter, "for [this] mitzva...it is not in the heavens" – Moses said to them: 'So you will not say: Another Moses will stand and bring us another Torah from Heaven, I am already informing you: "It is not in the heavens," as nothing of it remained in Heaven.'</p>
<p>דָּבָר אֲחֵר, אָמַר רַבִּי חֲנִינָא הִיא וְכָל כְּלֵי אֲמֻנָתָה נִתְּנָה, עֲנוּתָנוּתָהּ, צִדְקָה וְיִשְׁרוּתָהּ וּמִתֵּן שְׂכָרָהּ.</p>	<p>Another matter, Rabbi Hanina said: It and all the tools of its craft were given; its humility, its righteousness, its uprightness, and the giving of its reward.</p>
<p>דָּבָר אֲחֵר, מֵהוּ לֹא בַשָּׁמַיִם הוּא. שְׁמוּאֵל אָמַר אֵין הַתּוֹרָה מְצוּיָה בְּאִסְטְרוֹלוֹגִין שְׂאֲמֻנָּתוֹן בַּשָּׁמַיִם, אָמַר לָהֶן לְשְׁמוּאֵל הִרִי אֶתְּהָ אִסְטְרוֹלוֹגִין וְגָדוֹל בַּתּוֹרָה, אָמַר לָהֶן לֹא הֵייתִי מְבִיט בְּאִסְטְרוֹלוֹגִים אֶלָּא בְּשַׁעַר שְׁהֵייתִי פָּנוּי מִן הַתּוֹרָה, אֵימַתִּי כְּשֶׁהֵייתִי נִכְנָס לְבֵית הַמֵּיִם.</p>	<p>Another matter, what is "it is not in the heavens"? Shmuel said: The Torah cannot be found among the astrologers, whose craft is in the heavens. They said to Shmuel: 'But you are an astrologer and a Torah giant.' He said to them: 'I would look into astrology only when I was unoccupied in Torah. When? It is when I would enter the bathhouse.'</p>

Bavli Eruvin 55a	
<p>וְהֵינּוּ דְאָמַר אַבְדִּימִי בַר חָמָא בַר דּוֹסָא, מֵאִי דְכְּתִיב: "לֹא בַשָּׁמַיִם הִיא וְלֹא מֵעֵבֶר לַיָּם הִיא." "לֹא בַשָּׁמַיִם הִיא," שְׂאֵם בַּשָּׁמַיִם הִיא — אֶתְּהָ צָרִיךְ לַעֲלוֹת אַחֲרֶיהָ, וְאֵם מֵעֵבֶר לַיָּם הִיא — אֶתְּהָ צָרִיךְ לַעֲבוֹר אַחֲרֶיהָ.</p>	<p>And this idea, that one must exert great effort to retain one's Torah knowledge, is in accordance with what Avdimi bar Hama bar Dosa said: What is the meaning of that which is written: "It is not in heaven...nor is it beyond the sea" (Deuteronomy 30:12–13)? "It is not in heaven" indicates that if it were in heaven, you would have to ascend after it, and if it were beyond the sea, you would have to cross after it, as one must expend whatever effort is necessary in order to study Torah.</p>

¹ All translations are from Sefaria, unless otherwise noted.

<p>רַבָּא אָמַר: "לֹא בְּשָׁמַיִם הִיא" — לֹא תִמְצָא בְּמִי שְׂמִיגְבִּיהָ דְּעֵתוֹ עָלֶיהָ כְּשָׁמַיִם, וְלֹא תִמְצָא בְּמִי שְׂמִרְחִיב דְּעֵתוֹ עָלֶיהָ כֵּיָם.</p>	<p>Expounding the verse differently, Rava said: "It is not in heaven" means that Torah is not to be found in someone who raises his mind over it, like the heavens, i.e., he thinks his mind is above the Torah and he does not need a teacher; nor is it to be found in someone who expands his mind over it, like the sea, i.e., he thinks he knows everything.</p>
<p>רַבִּי יוֹחָנָן אָמַר: "לֹא בְּשָׁמַיִם הִיא" — לֹא תִמְצָא בְּגִסֵּי רוּחַ, "וְלֹא מֵעֵבֶר לַיָּם הִיא" — לֹא תִמְצָא לֹא בְּסַחְרָנִים וְלֹא בְּתַגְרִים.</p>	<p>Rabbi Yohanan said: "It is not in heaven" means that Torah is not to be found in the haughty. "Nor is it beyond the sea" means that it is not to be found among merchants or traders who are constantly traveling and do not have the time to study Torah.</p>

2. Passing the Buck

Rashi on Devarim 30:12	
<p>לֹא בְּשָׁמַיִם הוּא. שְׂאֵלוֹ הִיְתָה בְּשָׁמַיִם, הִיִּית צָרִיךְ לַעֲלוֹת אַחֲרֶיהָ לְלַמְדָּהּ:</p>	<p>It is not in Heaven: for were it in heaven it would still be your duty to go up after it and to learn it (Eruvin 55a).</p>
Ibn Ezra on Devarim 30:11	
<p>נִפְלְאוֹת. נִסְתַּתֶּר אוֹ דְּבַר פֶּלֶא שֶׁתִּלָּאָה לַעֲשׂוֹתוֹ:</p>	<p>Too Hard: The word <i>niflet</i> (too hard) means concealed. Or its meaning is, wondrous, that is, something that will cause you to grow weary while trying to accomplish it.</p>
Seforno on Devarim 30:12	
<p>לֹא בְּשָׁמַיִם הוּא לֵאמֹר. לֹא יִקְרָה לְךָ בְּעֵינֵי הַתְּשׁוּבָה שֶׁתִּצְטָרֵךְ בָּהּ לְהַגִּידֵת נְבִיא.</p>	<p>It is not in Heaven, to repent, you do not need to turn to a prophet who represents heaven,</p>
Sefat Emet on Devarim 30:12	
<p>וְהַכֵּל אַחֵר הִיְגִיעָה מִתְקָרֵב עַד שֶׁקְרֹב אֵלָיו שֶׁנֶּאֱמָר: שֶׁלֹּא הִי' רְחוֹק מֵעוֹלָם מִמֶּנּוּ. וּבִלִּי יִגִּיעָה נִדְמָה שֶׁרְחוֹק:</p>	<p>Everything depends on the person's effort. When one toils to seek out the Torah, they realize it was never far from them. However, without effort, it will always seem distant.</p>

3. Avoidance of Challenge

Adam Gopnik, <i>The Real Work: On The Mystery of Mastery</i>	
<p>Whatever sense of professional competence we feel in adult life is less the sum of accomplishment than the absence of impossibility: it's really our relief at no longer having to do things we were never any good at doing in the first place—relief at never again having to dissect a frog or memorize the periodic table.</p>	
<p>Much of what feels like mastery in adult life is actually the avoidance of a challenge. The "flow" in which, if we're lucky, our daily work is situated, is a narrow current within a broad river that we ceased navigating adventurously long ago, having capsized too many times to try again. The moment we steer back out, we're in white water, knuckles up. The feeling of impotent helplessness that all of us know from some piece of our early education—and that for the unlucky remains the dominant memory of schooling—is escaped not by becoming any less helpless but by doing only those things that don't need help.</p>	