

Parshas Nitzavim 5772 ATTAINABLE

There is a beautiful set of verses in this week's *parshah* that seems to be intended to inspire and encourage:

כִּי הַמִּצְוָה הַזֹּאת אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי מְצַוֶּה הַיּוֹם לֹא-נִפְלְאת הוּא מִמֶּנּוּ וְלֹא-רַחֲקָה הוּא. לֹא בַשָּׁמַיִם הוּא לֵאמֹר מִי יַעֲלֶה-לָנוּ הַשָּׁמַיְמָה וְיִקְחֶהָ לָנוּ וְיִשְׁמַעֲנוּ אֶתְּךָ וְנַעֲשֶׂהָ... כִּי-קָרֹב אֵלֶיךָ הַדָּבָר מְאֹד בְּפִיךָ וּבְלִבְבְּךָ לַעֲשׂוֹתוֹ.

“Concerning this mitzvah that I am commanding you today — it is not removed from you, nor is it too distant. It is not found in the Heavens, such that you would have to say: ‘Who could ascend Heavenward to acquire it for us, and tell us of it, and (then) we would fulfill it...’ Rather, the matter is extremely close to you; it is in your mouth and your heart, to do it” (*Devarim 30:11-14*).

Many commentators understand that the “endeavor” spoken of in these lines — “this mitzvah” — refers to Torah: its study and fulfillment. Mastering Torah study is not an unattainable goal but is “extremely close” at hand.

There is an issue that arises often in connection with this idea: how do we reconcile the reality we seem to encounter on an almost daily basis with the lofty sentiments expressed here?

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The saintly and sagacious R' Shmuel Birnbaum was

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by his son, R' Sholom Chayim Schneider, Brooklyn, NY

one of the most diligent Torah scholars of modern times. His love for Torah and dedication to its study under even the most trying of circumstances was legendary, as was his zestful demeanor powered by his drive to learn. He expressed the question in this way: David Hamelech states: “They (words of Torah) are more precious than gold and much platinum; they are sweeter than honey...” (*Tehillim 19:11*). Now we believe that all the words of the prophets and all the Scriptures are true, of course. So why don't people use Torah for their tea? If Torah is the sweetest possible entity — more than honey or sugar — why don't people take R' Chaim Soloveitchik's commentary and mix it with their coffee to drink? (*cf. Bekor'ei Shemo, Sefer Shemos*).

The answer, in truth, should come as no surprise. Torah, of course, is inherently perfect and good. As the Mishnah in Avos (6:3) states so succinctly:

“Torah is the paradigm of ‘goodness’; as it states (*Mishlei 4:2*): ‘For I have given you a good portion; do not forsake My Torah.’”

The *Ohr Hachaim* famously remarks (*Devarim 26:11*): “If people were to recognize the true sweetness of the Torah's inherent goodness, they would go absolutely crazy in a frenzied attempt to attain mastery of Torah knowledge.” What, then, is the problem? Torah is inherently sweet and perfect; why do so many of us seem to be unable to catch this “taste”? And can anything be done to rectify the situation?

Kindly take a moment to study MISHNAS CHAYIM in the merit of
הַבְּרָכָה בֵּת יוֹסֵף ע"ה, a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives
to arrange Torah study on behalf of her neshamah.

PRESERVE YOUR PALATE

Consider the following story:

A certain individual — a coal miner by profession — has a friend who appreciates a good meal. This friend has discovered a spectacular restaurant and raves about it to his coal miner acquaintance. “You have to eat there,” he declares, “the food is simply marvelous! You’ve never experienced a tastier meal!”

And the day came; the coal-miner, having saved up for this special occasion, makes his way to the eatery that had garnered such rave reviews. With great anticipation, he orders what his friend assured him is the most savory dish.

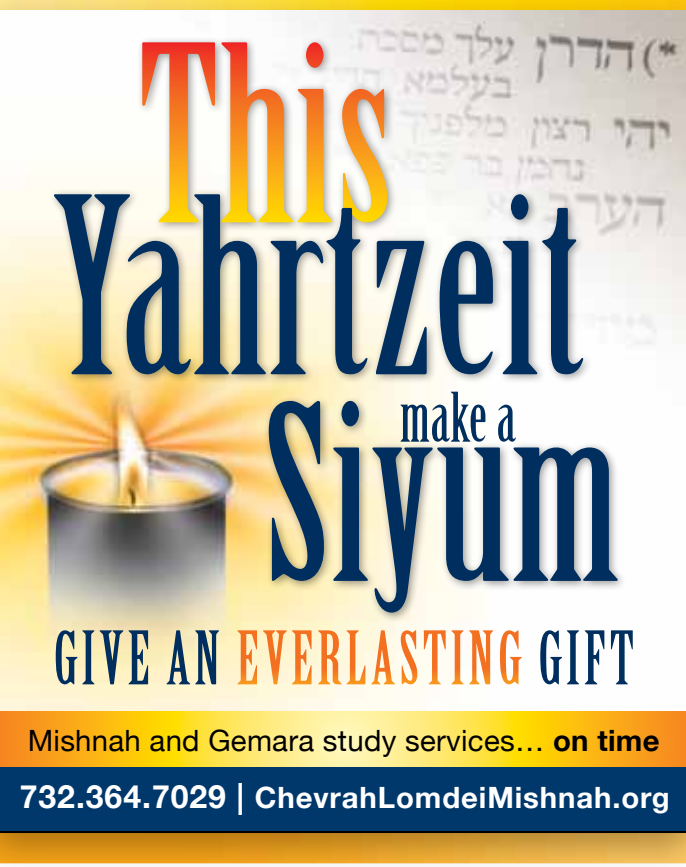
Some time later, his friend asks how he enjoyed the meal. “To tell you the truth,” states the simple man, “I didn’t see what all the rage was about. To me, the food seemed quite bland.”

The man’s friend — who had made the recommendation in the first place — was flabbergasted. “How could it be?” he wondered. “Their food is objectively the best around!”

Then he thought for a bit. “Wait a minute,” he said to his friend the coal miner. “Open your mouth; let me examine your tongue.” Not knowing exactly what to make of this request, the simple man complied. Sure enough, the mystery was solved.

“Your tongue,” explained the connoisseur, “is all black; it’s covered with soot. Of course you couldn’t discern the great taste of the food; it was blocked by all of that black film! Now, go remove all that *shmutz* (dirt) and go back to that restaurant. Only then will you be able to gain a real appreciation!”

Our relationship to Torah — explained R’ Elya Weintraub — follows a similar pattern. As David



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Hamelech has stated, Torah is inherently the sweetest entity in the universe. But we must bear in mind that Torah knowledge is not like any other discipline. Its Divine quality necessitates a certain approach and preparatory measures on our part. Someone who is steeped in material pleasures and pursuits can become a great mathematician or scientist; but such a lifestyle can interfere with his spiritual tastes. Over-exposure to negative influences can affect one’s ability to appreciate and “taste” the sweetness of Torah and attain its mastery.

Yes, the truth is that “the matter (of Torah study) is extremely close to you; it is in your mouth and your heart.” We must only take care — through prayer, *mussar* study and a large dose of *yiras Shamayim* (fear of Heaven) — to keep our spiritual palates clear and pristine.