

## Beyond Inherited Merit (Nitzavim)

*“Tradition is not the worship of ashes, but the preservation of fire.” – Gustav Mahler*

In preparation for the Jewish New Year, Rosh Hashana (which this year falls on September 22-24) and the following Yom Kippur (October 1-2), there is a tradition of soul-searching. We take time to reflect on our choices, our relationships, and our responsibilities, standing before God with humility. We contemplate our actions, beg for Divine compassion, and pray for another chance to do what is right in the coming year.

One of the central themes in the Rosh Hashana prayers is our reliance on the “merit of our forefathers” (zechut avot) when we plead for mercy. The prayers often remind us of the faith, courage, and devotion of those who came before us, and we ask that their merit stand in our favor.

Yet Rabbi Ovadia Sforno challenges us not to lean too heavily on that inheritance. He insists that God asks more of us than to rest on the spiritual achievements of our ancestors.

Deuteronomy 30:8-9 teaches:

“You shall return and listen to the voice of Hashem, and perform all His commandments that I command you today. Hashem will make you abundant in all your handiwork – in the fruit of your womb, the fruit of your animals, and the fruit of your Land – for good, when Hashem will return to rejoice over you for good, as He rejoiced over your forefathers.”

Building on these verses, Sforno explains that when we repent sincerely, setting aside misguided notions and ways, and when we embrace God’s path with the full measure of our understanding and ability, then remarkable things take place:

- Our sins will be forgiven.
- Those sins will not only be erased but transformed into merits.
- God will rejoice in us and shower us with goodness.
- The blessings we receive will surpass anything we have known before.
- Most importantly, our standing before God will be based on our own merits, not borrowed from the greatness of our forefathers.

This vision of renewal is deeply empowering. It reminds us that while heritage is precious, what truly counts is the effort we make in our own lives. Every person can rise, every soul can return, and every sincere step toward God is met with Divine joy.

I have been privileged to know families where each generation has produced role models in their own right, people who embody the values of integrity, kindness, and devotion. May they continue to inspire, and may we all find opportunities to learn from such examples as we enter the New Year with hope and resolve.

Shabbat Shalom and Ktiva Ve' chatima Tova,

Ben-Tzion

*Dedication*

*To the fascinating Israeli-led study on diet and brain aging: <https://www.jpost.com/health-and-wellness/article-867578>*