



Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
Parashat Nitzavim - Vayelech
September 12, 2020 * 23 Elul, 5780**

Kol Rina – An Independent Minyan, is a traditional egalitarian community. We are haimish (homey/folksy), friendly, participatory, warm and welcoming. We hold weekly services in South Orange as well as holiday services and celebrations which are completely lay led. We welcome *all* to our services and programs from non-Hebrew readers to Jewish communal and education professionals.

Nitzavim - Vayelech in a Nutshell

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/58297/jewish/Nitzavim-Vayelech-in-a-Nutshell.htm

The Parshah of Nitzavim includes some of the most fundamental principles of the Jewish faith: The unity of Israel: "You stand today, all of you, before the L-rd your G-d: your heads, your tribes, your elders, your officers, and every Israelite man; your young ones, your wives, the stranger in your gate; from your wood-hewer to your water-drawer." The future redemption: Moses warns of the exile and desolation of the Land that will result if Israel abandons G-d's laws, but then he prophesies that in the end, "You will return to the L-rd your G-d . . . If your outcasts shall be at the ends of the heavens, from there will the L-rd your G-d gather you . . . and bring you into the Land which your fathers have possessed."

The practicality of Torah: "For the mitzvah which I command you this day, it is not beyond you, nor is it remote from you. It is not in heaven . . . It is not across the sea . . . Rather, it is very close to you, in your mouth, in your heart, that you may do it."

Freedom of choice: "I have set before you life and goodness, and death and evil: in that I command you this day to love G-d, to walk in His ways and to keep His commandments . . . Life and death I have set before you, blessing and curse. And you shall choose life."

Haftarah in a Nutshell: Isaiah 61:10 – 63:9

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/562389/jewish/Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm

This week's haftarah is the seventh and final installment of a series of seven "Haftarot of Consolation." These seven haftarot commence on the Shabbat following Tisha b'Av and continue until Rosh Hashanah.

The prophet begins on a high note, describing the great joy that we will experience with the Final Redemption, comparing it to the joy of a newly married couple.

Isaiah then declares his refusal to passively await the Redemption: "For Zion's sake I will not remain silent, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not be still, until her righteousness emerges like shining light..." He implores the stones of Jerusalem not to be silent, day or night, until G-d restores Jerusalem and establishes it in glory.

The haftarah then recounts G-d's oath to eventually redeem Zion, when the Jews will praise G-d in Jerusalem. The haftarah also contains a description of the punishment G-d will mete out to Edom and the enemies of Israel.

Isaiah concludes with the famous statement:

"In all [Israel's] afflictions, He, too, is afflicted, and the angel of His presence redeemed them..."

Like a loving father who shares the pain of his child, G-d, too, shares the pain of His people, and awaits the redemption along with them.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

[How to Renew a Nations \(Nitzavim – Vayelech 5780\) by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks](https://rabbisacks.org/nitzavim-vayelech-5780/)
<https://rabbisacks.org/nitzavim-vayelech-5780/>

The Talmud gives an ingenious reading to the line, “Moses commanded us a Torah, as a heritage of the congregation of Israel.” Noting that there are 613 commands, and that the numerical value of the word Torah is 611, it says that in fact Moses gave us 611 commands, while the other two – “I am the Lord your God,” and, “You shall have no other gods beside Me,” (the first 2 of the 10 commandments) – the Israelites received not from Moses but directly from God Himself.[1]

There is a different distinction the Sages might have made. Moses gave us 611 commands, and at the very end, in Vayelech, he gave us two meta-commands, commands about the commands. They are Hakhel, the command to assemble the people once every seven years for a public reading of (key parts of) the Torah, and “Now write for yourselves this song” (Deut. 31:19), interpreted by tradition as the command to write, or take part in writing, our own Sefer Torah.

These two commands are set apart from all the others. They were given after all the recapitulation of the Torah in the book of Devarim, the blessings and curses and the covenant renewal ceremony. They are embedded in the narrative in which Moses hands on leadership to his successor Joshua. The connection is that both the laws and the narrative are about continuity. The laws are intended to ensure that the Torah will never grow old, will be written afresh in every generation, will never be forgotten by the people and will never cease to be its active constitution as a nation. The nation will never abandon its founding principles, its history and identity, its guardianship of the past and its responsibility to the future.

Note the beautiful complementarity of the two commands. Hakhel, the national assembly, is directed at the people as a totality. Writing a Sefer Torah is directed at individuals. This is the essence of covenantal politics. We have individual responsibility and we have collective responsibility. In Hillel’s words, “If I am not for myself, who will be, but if I am only for myself, what am I?” In Judaism, the state is not all, as it is in authoritarian regimes. Nor is the individual all, as it is in the radically individualist liberal democracies of today. A covenantal society is made by each accepting responsibility for all, by individuals committing themselves to the common good. Hence the Sefer Torah – our written constitution as a nation – must be renewed in the life of the individual (command 613) and of the nation (command 612).

This is how the Torah describes the mitzvah of Hakhel:

“At the end of every seven years, in the year for cancelling debts, during the Festival of Tabernacles, when all Israel comes to appear before the Lord your God at the place He will choose, you shall read this Torah before them in their hearing. Assemble the people—men, women and children, and the strangers

in your towns—so they can listen and learn to revere the Lord your God and follow carefully all the words of this Torah. Their children, who do not know, shall hear it and learn to fear the Lord your God as long as you live in the land you are crossing the Jordan to possess.” (Deut 31:10-13).

Note the inclusivity of the event. It would be anachronistic to say that the Torah was egalitarian in the contemporary sense. After all, in 1776, the framers of the American Declaration of Independence could say, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal,” while slavery still existed, and no woman had a vote. Yet the Torah regarded it as essential that women, children and strangers should be included in the ceremony of citizenship in the republic of faith.

Who performed the reading? The Torah does not specify, but tradition ascribed the role to the King. That was extremely important. To be sure, the Torah separates religion and politics. The King was not High Priest, and the High Priest was not King. [2] This was revolutionary. In almost every other ancient society, the head of state was the head of the religion; this was not accidental but essential to the pagan vision of religion as power. But the King was bound by the Torah. He was commanded to have a special Torah scroll written for him; he was to keep it with him when he sat on the throne and read it “all the days of his life” (Deut. 17:18-20). Here too, by reading the Torah to the assembled people every seven years, he was showing that the nation as a political entity existed under the sacred canopy of the Divine word. We are a people, the King was implicitly saying, formed by covenant. If we keep it, we will flourish; if not, we will fail.

This is how Maimonides describes the actual ceremony:

Trumpets were blown throughout Jerusalem to assemble the people; and a high platform, made of wood, was brought and set up in the centre of the Court of Women. The King went up and sat there so that his reading might be heard ... The chazzan of the synagogue would take a Sefer Torah and hand it to the head of the synagogue, and the head of the synagogue would hand it to the deputy high priest, and the deputy high priest to the High Priest, and the High Priest to the King, to honour him by the service of many persons ... The King would read the sections we have mentioned until he would come to the end. Then he would roll up the Sefer Torah and recite a blessing after the reading, the way it is recited in the synagogue ... Proselytes who did not know Hebrew were required to direct their hearts and listen with utmost awe and reverence, as on the day the Torah was given at Sinai. Even great scholars who knew the entire Torah were required to listen with utmost attention ... Each had to regard himself as if he had been charged with the Torah now for the first time, and as though he had heard it from the mouth of God, for the King was an ambassador proclaiming the words of God.[3]

Apart from giving us a sense of the grandeur of the occasion, Maimonides is making a radical suggestion: that Hakhel is a re-enactment of the Giving of the Torah at Sinai –

“as on the day the Torah was given,” “as though he had heard it from the mouth of God” – and thus a covenant renewal ceremony. How did he arrive at such an idea? Almost certainly it was because of Moses’ description of the Giving of the Torah in Va’etchanan:

The day you stood before the Lord your God at Horeb, when the Lord said to me, “Assemble [hakhel] the people to Me that I may let them hear My words, in order that they may learn to revere Me as long as they live on earth, and may so teach their children.” (Deut. 4:10).

The italicised words are all echoed in the Hakhel command, especially the word Hakhel itself, which only appears in one other place in the Torah. Thus was Sinai recreated in the Temple in Jerusalem every seven years, and thus was the nation, men, women, children and strangers, renewed in its commitment to its founding principles.

Tanach gives us vivid descriptions of actual covenant renewal ceremonies, in the days of Joshua (Josh. 24), Josiah (2 Kings 23), Asa (2 Chron. 15) and Ezra and Nehemiah (Neh. 8-10). These were historic moments when the nation consciously rededicated itself after a long period of religious relapse. Because of Hakhel and covenant renewal, Israel was eternally capable of becoming young again, recovering what Jeremiah called “the devotion of your youth” (Jer. 2:2).

What happened to Hakhel during the almost 2000 years in which Israel had no king, no country, no Temple and no Jerusalem? Some scholars have made the intriguing suggestion that the minhag Eretz Yisrael, the custom of Jews in and from Israel, which lasted until about the thirteenth century, of reading the Torah not once every year but every three or three-and-a-half years, was intended to create a seven year cycle, so that the second reading would end at the same time as Hakhel, namely on the Succot following a sabbatical year (a kind of septennial Simchat Torah).[4]

I would suggest a quite different answer. The institution of the reading of the Torah on Shabbat morning, which goes back to antiquity, acquired new significance at times of exile and dispersion. There are customs that remind us of Hakhel. The Torah is read, as it was by the King on Hakhel and Ezra at his assembly, standing on a bimah, a raised wooden platform. The Torah reader never stands alone: there are usually three people on the bimah, the segan, the reader and the person called to the Torah, representing respectively God, Moses, and the Israelites.[5] According to most halachists, the reading of the Torah is chovat tzibbur, an obligation of the community, as opposed to the study of Torah which is chovat yachid, an obligation of the individual.[6] So, I believe, keriat ha-Torah should be translated not as “the Reading of the Torah” but as “the Proclaiming of Torah.” It is our equivalent of Hakhel, transposed from the seventh year to the seventh day.

It is hard for individuals, let alone nations, to stay perennially young. We drift, lose our way, become distracted, lose our sense of purpose and with it our energy and drive. I believe the best way to stay young is never to forget “the devotion of our youth,” the defining experiences that made us who we are, the dreams we had long ago of how we

might change the world to make it a better, fairer, more spiritually beautiful place. Hakhel was Moses' parting gift to us, showing us how it might be done. Shabbat Shalom [1] Makkot 23b-24a. [2] This rule was broken by some of the Hasmonean Kings, with disastrous long-term consequences. [3] Mishneh Torah Haggigah 3:4-6. [4] See R. Elhanan Samet, *Iyyunim be-Parshot ha-Shevua*, 2nd series, 2009, vol. 2, 442-461. [5] Shulchan Aruch, Orach Hayim 141:4, and commentary of Levush ad loc. [6] This is the view, regarded by most as normative, of Ramban. See e.g. Yalkut Yosef, Hilchot Keriat ha-Torah.

Democratizing Education: Lessons from this Weeks Parasha by Michal Raucher
<http://www.jtsa.edu/democratizing-education>

Since the start of the stay-at-home orders in March, my eight-year-old son, Naftali, has studied Mishnah on Zoom in a "Mishnah Club" for kids, taught by Rabbi Ethan Tucker (KS '06) of Hadar Institute. While my spouse teaches Mishnah to middle school students and my own scholarship involves a healthy feminist critique of the talmudic Rabbis, Naftali had never encountered rabbinic literature. I feared that Naftali might get lost in the complexity, become overwhelmed with the details, or confused by the logic of rabbis from 2000 years ago. I was also curious as to whether he would actually see himself in this discourse.

To my surprise, Naftali has become invested in learning the intricacies of which fruits (bikkurim) to bring to the Temple in Jerusalem and how to behave on Hol Hamoed. I was struck that one of his first questions in the class was "What if I got to Jerusalem and realized I had forgotten my bikkurim at home?" We had never spoken about bikkurim in our house, but just by learning about these laws, he felt that they pertained to him. When he learned about the laws of fasting, Naftali was puzzled that so many laws existed that were only for adults. He assumed that if he was learning about these laws, then he too must be obligated to follow them.

Nafi's experience learning Mishnah is a testament to what happens when we expand access to education. There are few opportunities for students as young as Nafi to learn Mishnah, and as I listened in to some of the classes, I learned that this was the first time many of the students had engaged in daily study of rabbinic literature. Rabbi Tucker made the lessons accessible without oversimplifying them. He made them fun with music and polls, and he gave students ample opportunity to ask questions. The pandemic has brought on unimaginable death and revealed the depths of our inequality, and I hope that it teaches us some lessons about how to make our educational systems more equitable.

This week's parashah offers us some guidance. Nitzavim-Vayeilekh is one of Moses's last warnings to the Israelites. At the very beginning of the parashah, Moses speaks to everyone. "You stand this day, all of you, before the Lord your God—your tribal heads, your elders, your officials, all the men of Israel, your children, your wives, even the

stranger within your camp, from woodchopper to waterdrawer . . ." (Deut. 29:9–10). All of these people have a choice. They can either choose to love God by obeying God's commandments, or they can follow other gods, praise idols, and disobey the commandments. The former will result in fertility, food, and prosperity. The latter will result in destruction and exile. The Israelites have heard this refrain throughout the book of Deuteronomy, and even though Moses seems convinced that they will sin, he provides these warnings once again.

Moses insists that these instructions are not so complicated. "Surely this Instruction which I enjoin upon you this day is not too baffling for you, nor is it beyond reach. 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 should 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" (Deut. 30:11–14). Moses is pointing out that the laws are accessible. Everyone can know them and everyone can follow them. Despite Moses's insistence that the teachings are not that complicated, we have established a norm where we see these laws as, in fact, very complicated. The Rabbis of the Mishnah, Talmud, and subsequent rabbinic literature established a system where they alone were capable of interpreting God's laws. In "The Oven of Akhnai," a Talmudic dispute over a point of Jewish law, Rabbi Eliezer calls out to God to affirm his position, while another Sage responds by quoting our parashah, "the Torah is not in the heavens," meaning God has no role in their disagreement (BT Bava Metzia 59a–59b). This dispute, like all others, would be solved by humans as interpreters of God's laws.

But the Rabbis didn't intend for every person to be able to interpret God's laws. Rabbinic literature has long been seen as the "rocket science" of the Jewish academic world. For most of Jewish history, only men could be rabbinic scholars, but even now, the ability to interpret the laws is reserved for those who have received extensive training. Being knowledgeable in rabbinic literature indicates one's high academic skill and Jewish literacy. It often also connotes a lineage of ancestors who were also scholars of rabbinic literature.

While this Talmudic story is often brought to authorize the Rabbis as interpreters of God's laws, Moses understands God's laws to be already within the hearts and mouths of all of Israel. The laws are not far away across the sea or in the heavens, to be reached and transmitted through interpreters. Instead, Moses says that everyone can access the laws.

To be sure, the audience for Moses's speech in Nitzavim-Vayeilekh is adult men of Israel, as all the other participants are described in relation to adult men. Nonetheless, Nitzavim-Vayeilekh can be read as presenting a democratic covenant. The open invitation at the start of the parashah, combined with Moses's insistence that the laws are not complicated, imply that the Covenant is open for understanding and

implementation by everyone. Moses does not distinguish between those who are religious leaders and those who are not. All people are instructed to hear the laws and enter into the Covenant: women, children, and people from different socioeconomic groups. Moses names those in leadership positions and those who are strangers and laborers. Here, all of these people enter into the Covenant; religious leaders and the educated possess no special status or unique access to the laws.

Nitzavim-Vayelevh posits an ideal where all are educated and given the opportunity to participate fully in the community. During the course of Jewish history we lost this egalitarian educational system. Think of all the private Jewish schools that are able to open right now because they have the resources to protect students and teachers from the coronavirus, while the public schools that surround them remain shuttered. The coronavirus pandemic has exacerbated many problems with the American educational system, and I am aware of the immense privilege I have that my children's education will not suffer at this time. I hope that we can all rethink our educational systems to increase equality and equity inside and outside of the classroom in light of the lessons from this week's parashah. *(Michal Raucher is Assistant Professor of Jewish Studies, Rutgers University and JTS Fellow)*

Vayelevh: Naming Rights by Rabbi Jay Kelman

<https://www.torahinmotion.org/civcrm/mailling/view?reset=1&id=2952>

We tend to think that the names of the weekly parshiot have little intrinsic meaning; they are just taken from the opening word or two of the parsha. Thus, breisheet, being the first word of the Bible, becomes the name for both the first book and the weekly parsha. Upon closer examination we begin to realize that it might not be quite that simple. For example, two of the parshiot in sefer Breisheet begin *eleh toldot* Noach and *eleh toldot* Yitzchak, these are the generations of Noach and Yitzchak. Yet the first of these is known as Noach, whereas the second one is referred to as Toldot. It could just as easily have been the reverse; we would first read parshat Toldot, followed a few weeks later by parshat Yitzchak, strange as that may sound to us today. Similarly, parshiot Yitro, Korach and Balak could just as easily have been named Vayishma, and Yitro heard, Vayikach, and Korach took, and Vaya'ar, and Balak saw, in accordance with the first words in their respective parshiot. Those verbs would fit in nicely with such parshiot as Vayetze, and Yaakov left, Vayishlach, and Yaakov sent, Vayeshev, and Yaakov sat, and Vayigash, and Yehuda approached. This week's parsha, which begins "Vayelevh Moshe", and Moshe went, is known as Vayelevh, not Moshe. Would it not have been fitting to name one parsha after Moshe Rabbeinu? While in all of the above parshiot it is either the first or second word which is chosen, there does seem to be a most interesting pattern. Those parshiot in which the subject is either a non-Jew, Noach, Balak, Yitro or someone unworthy of emulation, Korach, are called by that subject's name. In those parshiot that refer to our Jewish role models, be they Yitzchak, Yaakov or Moshe, the parshiot take the name of the word preceding the proper name. Vayishlach Yaakov, Eleh Toldot Yitzchak, Vayigash Yehudah, Vayelevh Moshe. Perhaps this is a lesson in humility. While the wicked want their name front and centre, for the righteous it is not the name that counts, but rather one's actions. As our Sages teach, "The primary legacy of the righteous is their good deeds" (Rashi, Breisheet 6:9). It is not people themselves, but rather their actions that must inspire us. Moshe may have lacked charisma, but he was the consummate man of

action.

This year, like many others, parshat Vayelech is read in conjunction with parshat Nitzavim. The terms nitzavim and vayelech are actually contradictory. Nitzav means to stand still while vayelech means to go. In other words, we read about standing still and moving about.

This is not an accident and reflects the themes of the individual parshiot. In parshat Nitzavim, Moshe reiterates that the Sinaitic covenant is binding on all generations and warns of the dire consequences that will befall the Jews if they abandon the path of Torah. Moshe then offers words of comfort, promising that one day the Jewish people will do complete teshuvah, repentance, allowing us to fulfil our historic mission. Faith in the ultimate righteousness of the Jewish people is part and parcel of the belief system accepted at Sinai. This is a most serious message, which requires much thought and reflection. We can only absorb its message if we are nitzavim, if we pause and reflect on the task at hand.

However, reflection must lead to action. In parshat Vayelech Moshe passes the torch of leadership to Yehoshua, exhorting the people to display courage as they ready themselves to conquer the land. Moshe then taught the people the last two mitzvot of the Torah: that of Hakhel, the gathering together of the entire Jewish nation once every seven years for the reading of the Torah by the monarch, and the command for each individual to personally commission the writing of a sefer Torah. The three themes of the parsha, leadership, community cohesiveness and personal growth, require much action and little talk.

On Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur we are nitzavim, spending many hours in shul, contemplating ways to learn and grow from our mistakes. Immediately thereafter follows Sukkot, the festival of joyous celebration. We move around the bimah, we dance and we leave the comfort of our homes. We are proactive as we invite the poor, the stranger, the widow and the orphan to celebrate with us.

A Jew has to know when to stand still and listen and when to move forward and act. We must pause both before and after we move forward. Hence Vayelech is followed by Ha'azinu, to listen carefully. If we can successfully manage the inherent tension between Nitzavim and Vayelech, then we can look forward to V'zot Habracha, the blessings of Torah.

Postscript: There are two other parshiot referred to by the name of their subjects, Pinchas and Chayei Sarah, which do not seem to fit this model.

Regarding parshat Pinchas, perhaps here, too, our tradition is giving us a subtle hint that while in Pinchas' unique circumstances his zealotry was warranted, it must not be a model for us. Regarding Chayei Sarah, I am at a loss to explain why, based on my theory above, our first matriarch has a parsha named for her. One could suggest that we do not call it Sarah, but Chayei Sarah, reflecting the rabbinic teaching that the legacy of the righteous endures after their physical demise. I welcome other possible suggestions.

[Contributed by Erwin Mevorah:](#)

[Perasha - Nisabim - Vayleach - rav Fischel Schacter shilita](#)

The rabbi began his talk this week by explaining that the last Mitzva in the Torah is the Mitzva to write a sefer Torah . The first Mitzva in the beginning of sefer Beresheet is the Mitzva to have children . The common demonomiter in both mitzvot is that they are both done with a celebration - when one donates a sefer Torah there is a big celebration - when a baby is born there is tremendous simcha - says the rabbi we have to know - the same applies to each and every Mitzva - each time we have an

opportunity to do any of the other mitzvot - it should be done with a celebration as well . Each and every Mitzva we have the ability to connect with HASHEM .

The rabbi told over a story about parents of a teenage girl that was going through a difficult time . The parents were told to set a cerfew at midnight . The first night she came home exactly 12 am . The next night she came home 12.10- the parents didn't react . The next night she came home at 2 am . The doors were locked . She banged on the door and the father came out with a plate of food and a Gemara . She asked what's that for - the father said the food is for you - the Gemara is for me - you can't come inside that's the rules . But I can't let you stay outside by yourself- so I will stay up and learn next to you . Says the rabbi - this had a positive effect on the girl . Continues the rabbi - the period that we went through with the pandemic - HASHEM was telling us - I can't let you back inside the house - but I am not letting you stay by yourself - I'm staying right next you . We have to know just how close HASHEM is to us - now and always .

The world is not the same world as we know it . We have to know that last year when we were all being judged - and HASHEM wrote for each person exactly what they will have - nothing that happened changed that . What was written - happened exactly as planned .

The rabbi said that there was a widow that went over to rav Shelomo Zaalman Auerbach zsl and asked for his advice . She recently became widowed and she felt guilty that she didn't do enough for her husband in his lifetime . She wanted the rabbi to tell her how she could make up for not doing more . The rabbi told her I'm going to give you three things to do - first go out each week and buy presents for your children . Second - once a week take your children out to a special place and the third thing the rabbi told her is that she must try her best to do what ever it takes to make her home full of simcha - even though it is difficult . She told the rabbi - I wanted you to give me something difficult to do - to make up for not doing more for my husband . The rabbi told her - the best thing you can do for your husband right now is to raise your children - with simcha . This will give him the biggest merit .

HASHEM wants us fix ourselves during these days - he wants us to know that he's right next to us . In the Perasha the passok tells us - to do teshuba - it is not a hard as we think it is - it's very close for us to do . As far away as we think we strayed - we have to know that he's right here next to us . The first step is for us to say to him - HASHEM - I want to do teshuba - please help me . Once this is established - we can then go to the next level of actually fixing up our mistakes . Zoning in where we need to correct . We must now start this process . We have to know - when we call out to HASHEM - he will be right there to pull us in .

What we have to is to grab on to him and make that connection .

We all believe with all our heart says reb Moshe - that HASHEM sees each one of us - he knows what we did wrong - this we believe . What we have to also believe is that he

is waiting for us to come back to him . He never left us - we might have drifted away from him . Teshuba is for us to return to that point - where we are smart enough to hold on to him for life .

Shabbat shalom

[Pandemic reminds us to honour life, protect each other, Winnipeg rabbi says ahead of High Holidays by Rabbi Kliel Rose](https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/opinion-kliel-rose-high-holidays-pandemic-1.5708184)

<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/opinion-kliel-rose-high-holidays-pandemic-1.5708184>

Over the last five months of this global pandemic, our lives have been filled with ambiguity and upheaval.

Many folks are struggling to get through the crisis in which we find ourselves — fraught with having to make difficult choices about issues that used to seem so mundane.

The fragility of life is very much a present reality for all of us.

In response to this and with the impending arrival of the High Holidays or the Days of Awe — less than two weeks away — synagogues around the world want to serve the Jewish people (and others who want to join) as a beacon of hope and a source of comfort.

Sacred Holidays

We do so as we prepare for the arrival of the most sacred time on our Jewish calendar — Rosh Hashanah (the New Year) and Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement) — as well as the Ten Days of Repentance (the Days of Awe) that occur between these two momentous holidays.

I am currently facilitating an online class which focuses on the spiritual preparation required before the arrival of the High Holidays.

We are reading and analyzing a powerful book written by Rabbi Alan Lew, of blessed memory, which is aptly titled *This is Real and You Are Completely Unprepared*. It is a guide for personal introspection through the High Holiday season.

Rabbi Lew asserts that the Jewish conception of atonement (or, in Hebrew, teshuvah) changed from the ancient propitiatory sacrifice to an internally based, personal transformative offering.

He reminds us that the work of the Days of Awe cannot simply be contained within a 10-day period. The process works best within the context of the two-month time frame — from Tisha b'Av/the 9th of Av (a major fast day that is considered to be the most sombre day on the Jewish calendar) through to the autumnal holiday of Sukkot (the Feast of Booths).

But his most poignant idea is that the real work of teshuvah happens over a much longer time frame than that:

"It became clear that this was a process that never ended, that rather it stretched out to the infinite horizon.... It never stopped. The two-month period in question was merely a time when we focused on it, when we gave form to something invisible that lay dormant, yet was possible to awaken at every moment of our lives."

In this way, the process of teshuvah (atonement) is constant and ongoing. In fact, it is a daily practice.

My congregation has chosen its theme for this year's High Holidays: "Living consciously in a time of uncertainty."

This theme is deeply connected to one of the traditional and core tenets of the High Holiday period — Zochreinu l'Chayim — "Remember us for life."

Book of Life

This is a refrain where we pray that we will be written into the Book of Life for this coming year. And every moment we are keenly aware that our own actions will help

determine our fate.

This book — the Book of Life — lies on a table before God. It has many pages — as many pages as there are people in the world. Each of us has a page dedicated just to us.

Written on that page, by our own hand, in our own writing, are all the things we have done during the past year.

God considers those things — weighs the good against the bad, and then, as the prayers declare, decides "who shall live and who shall die."

[Live consciously](#)

This year, as Rabbi Gilah Langer suggests, "perhaps we translate 'zochreinu l'chaim' to keep reminding us to choose life! We are choosing to remind ourselves to live consciously — every time we put on a mask, every time we keep physically distant, every ounce of patience we muster as we take precautions — we say to ourselves: 'zochreinu l'chaim' ... keep reminding us to choose life, remind us it's for the sake of life."

In this New Year of 5781 — one filled with a plethora of unknowns — may we all be blessed by knowing that we have the choice to "choose life."

To be able to make the life we have — for as long as we have — imbued with meaning. *(Rabbi Kliel Rose was born in Israel and grew up in Winnipeg. After being away for 26 years, last year he returned home with his family. He is the rabbi and spiritual leader of Congregation Etz Chayim.)*

[How to get the most out of virtual High Holiday Services by Irene Connelly](#)

[https://forward.com/life/453493/how-to-get-the-most-out-of-virtual-high-holiday-services/?utm_source=PostUp&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Afternoon%20Newsletter%20\(Sunday%20RSS\)&utm_maildate=09/10/2020](https://forward.com/life/453493/how-to-get-the-most-out-of-virtual-high-holiday-services/?utm_source=PostUp&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Afternoon%20Newsletter%20(Sunday%20RSS)&utm_maildate=09/10/2020)

If you're planning to attend High Holiday services virtually, like thousands of American Jews, welcoming the new year might seem easier than ever before. There's no need to wriggle into pantyhose, find parking, or put up with your in-laws at dinner. In fact, all you need to do is roll out of bed, turn on your computer, and stream services in pajamas from the couch.

That is, if you want the experience to provide the same spiritual sustenance as the conference calls you've been streaming in pajamas from the couch for the last five months.

On a scale of one to braiding enough round challahs for your entire extended family, virtual services are a pretty low-effort endeavor. But if you don't want to spend the most reflective days of the Jewish year in a haze of Zoom fatigue, you'll want to do a little planning before you tune in.

We asked three rabbis — Rabbi Nathan Weiner of Congregation Beth Tikvah, a Conservative synagogue in Marlton, N.J.; Rabbi Yohanna Kinberg of Congregation Kol Ami, a Reform synagogue in Kirkland, Wash.; and Rabbi Lizzi Heydemann of Mishkan, a non-denominational synagogue in Chicago — how congregants can get the most out of virtual services. Ahead of a High Holiday season different from all others, here's what you need to know.

Before services

Pre-service planning doesn't need to be a hassle — but rabbis stressed that this year, a little forethought goes a long way. Here's what you need to do before the High Holidays begin:

Prepare your space. Designate a comfortable place in your home as this year's "sanctuary." Choose a space you normally use for relaxing, like a living room, said Rabbi Weiner, and steer clear of home offices. Remove distractions — think iPads and unfolded laundry — from that space. Then, fill it with things that help you feel calm and reflective, even if you wouldn't normally find those things in a synagogue. You may want to light scented candles, sit on a yoga mat or under a blanket, or surround yourself with family photos.

If you have kids, invite them to decorate the "sanctuary" with artwork. Rabbi Kinberg is teaching families in her congregation to create a mizrach, a wall ornament that hangs on a room's eastern wall to indicate the direction of Jerusalem. Make your own with this template from the Jewish National Fund, or supply your kids with some High Holiday-themed coloringpages.

Prepare your tech: Don't hunch over your laptop for the duration of the High Holidays. Stream services on a television or place your computer some distance from where you're sitting. To mimic the feeling of watching the rabbi at the bima, you can even place your streaming device on a stand or over your best table cloth. For a no-stress start to the holiday, be sure to practice connecting to the streaming platform the day before — and if you're doing a reading or participating in the service from home, use these tricks to look and sound like a pro.

Prepare your mind. The month of Elul, which includes the High Holidays, is traditionally a time of learning and spiritual preparation for the new year. Yes, we know, "learning and spiritual preparation" isn't everyone's cup of tea. But a few hours of reflection can be a helpful reminder that though it sometimes feels like "real life" went on pause in March, the Jewish new year is really here. Check out these video teachings from the Women's Rabbinic Network or The Shofar Project, a four-week program including meditation and Torah study from the Institute for Jewish Spirituality. For the young people in your pod, BBYO is running an Elul "Kindness Calendar" that includes daily challenges, and Hillel International has teamed up with Reboot to produce "Higher Holidays," a slate of streamed events that students can view at their own pace.

Prepare your stuff. Don't underestimate the importance of evocative physical objects, said Rabbi Kinberg. Like many other synagogues, Kol Ami is delivering prayer books to each family ahead of the High Holidays. If this is an option at your synagogue, make sure to obtain a prayer book before services; if not, download and print the service liturgy, rather than following along on your phone. Dust off your candlesticks and light candles on the night before Rosh Hashanah. Have apples, honey and challah on hand. You can even set up a special table to display these items during services.

During services

Now that you've prepared a space for worship at home, you have to actually attend virtual shul. While services will look different at every synagogue, there are some things you can do to make your experience participatory — not passive.

The rules of shul still apply. No matter how accustomed you are to hosting Zoom meetings in your pajamas, putting on something formal will help you “be as present as you can,” said Heydemann. If you normally wear a kippah or tallis, make sure you have it on hand now. And though no one may see it, checking email is still a no-no. Leave your devices at the (living room) door.

Watch with others. If you feel comfortable, and if your regional coronavirus guidelines allow it, consider rigging up an outdoor projector and hosting a socially distanced streaming gathering with friends. But don't worry if in-person gatherings are a no-go. Rabbi Heydemann is encouraging congregants to form virtual “watch parties” and stream services together; if you're not sure how to do that, here's a quick tutorial.

Belt it out. It can feel odd to daven without a crowd, but don't be afraid to sing along or pray out loud — if you've never been a confident crooner, this may even be your moment to shine. At many synagogues, virtual services will include interactive components: Rabbi Weiner will ask congregants to answer discussion questions using Zoom's chat functions, and Rabbi Kinberg will allow congregants to chat in breakout rooms. (If breakout rooms still confuse you, here's a helpful primer.) Embrace whatever options your synagogue offers. They might not be part of the “traditional” synagogue experience, but it can still be a meaningful one.

Take care of yourself. At an in-person service, you'd probably duck out of the sanctuary for coffee or a quick chat with a friend. So don't feel guilty about taking a break at home, whether that means stretching your legs or (except on Yom Kippur) grabbing a snack. Like many other synagogues, Rabbi Weiner's Beth Tikvah is offering a virtual “lobby,” or unmoderated breakout room, where congregants can schmooze with each other at any point during the service. If this is an option for you, be sure to take advantage!

After services

In a normal year, festive dinners and family gatherings would complement somber services. For many of us, those get-togethers just aren't possible this year, but your High Holiday experience doesn't need to end when streaming does. Rabbi Kinberg is encouraging congregants to treat Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur as day-long “retreats” filled with meaningful activities. That could be as simple as doing a yoga video, performing a DIY tashlich ritual with your family, or tuning into an online song session (for a comprehensive calendar of virtual events, check out Jewish Live, a clearinghouse of pandemic-era Jewish life).

Looking for something more structured? Check out the Union for Reform Judaism's Reflection Project, an online resource created just for this year, which includes a set of spiritual “check-in” questions, at-home rituals for remembering lost

loved ones, and several different meditation exercises. Or head over to JewBelong, where you can print out a Rosh Hashanah “roadmap” with questions to help you reflect on the year behind us and helpful scripts for any apologies you want to make before the new one begins. There’s even an online tashlich ritual for those of you that don’t have a body of water at hand.

The TLDR: No question about it, the High Holidays will feel different this year. But virtual services can be more than a “decent enough replacement” for in-person ones, said Rabbi Weiner. All it takes is an internet connection, a machzor, and a willingness to listen to your own singing voice. Onward! *(Irene Katz Connelly is an editorial fellow at the Forward.)*

Yahrtzeits

Treasure Cohen, Rachel Rose-Siwoff, and Rebecca Lubetkin remember their mother Jessica D. Levin (Yiskah bat Yaakov u'Penina) on Saturday September 12th (Elul 23).
Rabbi Lisa Vernon remembers her mother Lillian R. Vernon on September 16th (Elul 27)
Rebecca and Peter Greene remembers their son Ethan Greene on Friday September 18th (Elul 29)