

Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
Parashat Nitzavim
September 24, 2022 *** 28 Elul, 5782
Parashat Nitzavim

[Nitzavim in a Nutshell](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/3078/jewish/Nitzavim-in-a-Nutshell.htm)

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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)

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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

Why Judaism? Nitzavim by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z"l

<https://www.rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/nitzavim/why-judaism/>

This week's parsha raises a question that goes to the heart of Judaism, but which was not asked for many centuries until raised by a great Spanish scholar of the fifteenth century, Rabbi Isaac Arama. Moses is almost at the end of his life. The people are about to cross the Jordan and enter the Promised Land. Moses knows he must do one thing more before he dies. He must renew the covenant between the people and God.

This nation's parents had entered into that commitment almost forty years before when they stood at Mount Sinai and said, "All that the Lord has spoken we shall do and we shall heed." (Ex. 24:7) But now Moses has to ensure that the next generation and all future generations will be bound by it. He wanted no-one to be able to say, "God made a covenant with my ancestors but not with me. I did not give my consent. I was not there. I am not bound." That is why Moses says:

Not with you alone am I making this covenant and oath; with you who are standing here with us today before the Lord our God I make it, and with those, too, who are not with us today. Deut. 29:13-14

"Those who are not with us today" cannot mean Israelites alive at the time who were somewhere else. The entire nation was present at the assembly. It means "generations not yet born." That is why the Talmud says: we are all *mushba ve-omed meHar Sinai*, "foresworn from Sinai." (Yoma 73b, Nedarim 8a)

Hence one of the most fundamental facts about Judaism: converts excepted, we do not choose to be Jews. We are born as Jews. We become legal adults, subject to the commands, at age twelve for girls, thirteen for boys. But we are part of the covenant from birth. A bat or bar mitzvah is not a "confirmation". It involves no voluntary acceptance of Jewish identity. That choice took place more than three thousand years ago when Moses said "Not with you alone am I making this covenant and oath... with those, too, who are not with us today," meaning all future generations.

But how can this be so? There is no obligation without consent. How can we be subject to a commitment on the basis of a decision taken long ago by our distant ancestors? To be sure, in Jewish law you can confer a benefit on someone else without their consent. But though it is surely a benefit to be a Jew, it is also in some sense a liability, a restriction on our range of legitimate choices. Why then are we bound now by what the Israelites said then?

Jewishly, this is the ultimate question. How can religious identity be passed on from parent to child? If identity were merely ethnic, we could understand it. We inherit many things from our parents – most obviously our genes. But **being Jewish** is not a genetic condition. It is a set of religious obligations.

The Sages gave an answer in the form of a tradition about today's parsha. They said that the souls of all future generations were present at Sinai. As souls, they freely gave their consent, generations before they were born. (**Shevuot 39a**)

However, Arama argues that this cannot answer our question, since God's covenant is not with souls only, but also with embodied human beings. We are physical beings with physical desires. We can understand that the soul would agree to the covenant. What does the soul desire if not closeness to God?[1] But the assent that counts is that of living, breathing human beings with bodies, and we cannot assume that they would agree to the Torah with its many restrictions on eating, drinking, sexual relations and the rest. Not until we are born, and are old enough to understand what is being asked of us can we give our consent in a way that binds us. Therefore the fact that the unborn generations were present at Moses' covenant ceremony does not give us the answer we need.

In essence, Arama was asking: **Why be Jewish?** What is fascinating is that he was the first to ask this question since the age of the Talmud. Why was it not asked before? Why was it first asked in fifteenth century Spain? For many centuries the question, "Why be Jewish?" did not arise. The answer was self-evident. I am Jewish because that is what my parents were and theirs before them, back to the dawn of Jewish time. Existential questions arise only when we feel there is a choice. For much of history, Jewish identity was not a choice. It was a fact of birth, a fate, a destiny. It was not something you chose, any more than you choose to be born.

In fifteenth-century Spain, Jews were faced with a choice. Spanish Jewry experienced its Kristallnacht in 1391, and from then on until the expulsion in 1492, Jews found themselves excluded from more and more areas of public life. There were immense pressures on them to convert, and some did so. Of these, some maintained their Jewish identity in secret, but others did not. For the first time in many centuries, staying Jewish came to be seen not just as a fate but as a choice. That is why Arama raised the question that had been unasked for so long. It is also why, in an age in which everything significant seems open to choice, it is being asked again in our time.

Arama gave one answer. I gave my own in my book *A Letter in the Scroll*. [2] But I also believe a large part of the answer lies in what Moses himself said at the end of his address:

"I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you today. I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. Choose life – so that you and your children may live..." Deut. 30:19

Choose life. No religion, no civilisation, has insisted so strenuously and consistently that we can choose. We have it in us, says Maimonides, to be as righteous as Moses or as evil as Jeroboam.[3] We can be great. We can be small. We can choose.

The ancients – with their belief in fate, fortune, Moira, Ananke, the influence of the stars or the arbitrariness of nature – did not fully believe in human freedom. For them true freedom meant, if you were religious, accepting fate, or if you were philosophical, the consciousness of necessity. Nor do most scientific atheists believe in it today. We are determined, they say, by our genes. Our fate is scripted in our DNA. Choice is an illusion of the conscious mind. It is the fiction we tell ourselves.

Judaism says no. Choice is like a muscle: use it or lose it. Jewish law is an ongoing training regime in willpower. Can you eat this and not that? Can you exercise spiritually three times a day? Can you rest one day in seven? Can you defer the gratification of instinct – what Freud took to be the mark of civilisation? Can you practise self-control (which, according to the “[Marshmallow Test](#)”, is the surest sign of future success in life)?[4] To be a Jew means not going with the flow, not doing what others do just because they are doing it. It gives us 613 exercises in the power of will to shape our choices. That is how we, with God, become co-authors of our lives. “We have to be free”, said Isaac Bashevis Singer, “we have no choice!”

Choose life. In many other faiths, life down here on earth with its loves, losses, triumphs, and defeats, is not the highest value. Heaven is to be found in life after death, or the soul in unbroken communion with God, or in acceptance of the world-that-is. Life is eternity, life is serenity, life is free of pain. But that, for Judaism, is not quite life. It may be noble, spiritual, sublime, but it is not life in all its passion, responsibility, and risk.

Judaism teaches us how to find God down here on earth not up there in heaven. It means engaging with life, not taking refuge from it. It seeks not so much happiness as joy: the joy of being with others and together with them making a blessing over life. It means taking the risk of love, commitment, loyalty. It means living for something larger than the pursuit of pleasure or success. It means daring greatly. Judaism does not deny pleasure, for it is not ascetic. It does not worship pleasure. Judaism is not hedonist. Instead it sanctifies pleasure. It brings the Divine Presence into the most physical acts: eating, drinking, intimacy. We find God not just in the synagogue but in the home, the house of study, and acts of kindness; we find God in community, hospitality, and wherever we mend some of the fractures of our human world.

No religion has ever held the human person in higher regard. We are not tainted by original sin. We are not a mere bundle of selfish genes. We are not an inconsequential life-form lost in the vastness of the universe. We are the being on

whom God has set His image and likeness. We are the people God has chosen to be His partners in the work of creation. We are the nation God married at Sinai with the Torah as our marriage contract. We are the people God called on to be His witnesses. We are the ambassadors of heaven in the country called earth. We are not better, or worse, than others. We are simply different, because God values difference whereas for most of the time, human beings have sought to eliminate difference by imposing one faith, one regime or one empire on all humanity. Ours is one of the few faiths to hold that the righteous of all nations have a share in heaven because of what they do on earth.

Choose life. Nothing sounds easier yet nothing has proved more difficult over time. Instead, people choose substitutes for life. They pursue wealth, possessions, status, power, fame, and to these gods they make the supreme sacrifice, realising too late that true wealth is not what you own but what you are thankful for, that the highest status is not to care about status, and that influence is more powerful than power.

That is why, though few faiths are more demanding, most Jews at most times have stayed faithful to Judaism, living Jewish lives, building Jewish homes, and continuing the Jewish story. That is why, with a faith as unshakeable as it has proved true, Moses was convinced that “not with you alone am I making this covenant and oath... with those, too, who are not with us today.” His gift to us is that through worshipping something so much **greater than ourselves** we become so much greater than we would otherwise have been.

Why Judaism? Because there is no more challenging way of choosing life.

[1] Isaac Arama, *Akeidat Yitzhak*, Deuteronomy, Nitzavim. [2] A Letter in the Scroll: Understanding Our Jewish Identity and Exploring the Legacy of the World’s Oldest Religion (New York: Free Press, 2000). Published in Britain as *Radical Then, Radical Now: The Legacy of the World’s Oldest Religion* (London: HarperCollins, 2001).

[3] *Hilchot Teshuvah* 5:2. [4] Walter Mischel, *The Marshmallow Test*, Bantam Press, 2014.

Confronting Our “Concealed Things” - Nitzavim – Rosh Hashanah – Yom Kippur by Gordon Tucker

<https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/confronting-our-concealed-things/>

The concealed things concern the Lord our God; but with overt matters, it is for us and our children ever to apply all the provisions of this Teaching.

(Deut. 29:28)

Standard readings of this quite enigmatic verse from Parashat Nitzavim include these:

- Don’t fret over the fact that we have no control over the sinful thoughts that are harbored by others, or even over the sinful acts committed by others in secret. We should just pay attention to the things others do in our vicinity over which we do have control, and work to right them.

- We are charged with dealing with evil that is done in our presence and is known to us, for “areivim zeh la-zeh” means not only that we are responsible for one another’s welfare, but that we are also accountable for the behavior of other people in our community and society. Heschel famously wrote that “in a free society, few are guilty but all are responsible.” The concealed things belong to God. They are not your province. Stick to that which is done openly, and that therefore can be addressed and healed to the benefit of all.

There is, however, another reading of this verse, given by Nahmanides (Ramban), in the 13th century, and it is one that forces us to a certain deeper level of introspection at this time of year.

Here’s a paraphrase of what he says:

The “concealed things” are not sins committed by others that are out of our view, and thus out of our control. Rather, they are the sins committed by us, but that are nevertheless out of our view and awareness. As long as we are not aware of them, they will be known only to God. But they are only out of our control because they are not known to us.

Of what infractions are we speaking here? Much, for example, has been said in recent days in our society about “implicit prejudice.” One of the most direct and affecting articulations was given by President Obama, when he was first running for election in 2008. Circumstances involving his pastor impelled him to give a major address about race in this country. In that address, he made the following remarkable admission, when he described his white grandmother in these words: *“ . . . a woman who helped raise me, a woman who sacrificed again and again for me, a woman who loves me as much as she loves anything in this world, but a woman who once confessed her fear of black men who passed by her on the street, and who on more than one occasion has uttered racial or ethnic stereotypes that made me cringe.”*

How many of us are similarly willing to search out the kind of implicit prejudices that we cannot believe—or do not wish to believe—are living within us? Do we have the moral stamina to recognize the lazy stereotypes that keep us comfortable, but have real consequences for the people we stereotype? We identify someone as an ultra-Orthodox Jew by the way he or she dresses—which is fair enough—but then we may jump immediately, and almost unknowingly, to the easy assumption that this person is religiously coercive, isn’t involved in gainful employment, is certainly not a fan of democracy, etc. etc. Never imagining that just maybe this person is one of the Haredi Jews, both here and in Israel, who live their beliefs and let others live theirs, and whose progressive values lead them to promote secular education, women’s rights, and the institutions of civil society. Our heads, and our experience, should tell us about such people (and they exist in some numbers), but the concealed things in the gut eclipse that common sense and tell us otherwise.

How many times have those of us who would criticize any attempt to lump every member of an ethnic group into one bloc nevertheless reflexively hesitated when seeing a keffiyeh or hijab? We don't want to believe it is there, but can we be sure without looking more closely? What about people whose bumper stickers or lawn posters reflect a political stance with which we disagree? How much implicit prejudice do we actually have? We assume others have it, of course, when they see our bumper stickers, but can we honestly seek out the traps that we silently and secretly fall into? Can we imagine that we also are prone to implicit racism, even as it seems so comfortably arms-length to suggest that it's the problem of law enforcement officers, who are, after all, at greater risk than we are when we form our judgments? Note that this is not meant to excuse implicit (and certainly not explicit) racism. It is simply to sensitize us to our tendency to say "it's them," never thinking it might be us as well.

And what effect might those imperceptibly unfair judgments have on those who are being judged? In interviews for jobs and schools; in the willingness of the circles with access to social privilege to include them; in our readiness to listen to their narratives as peers, and not as people with an alien agenda?

This is what I love about Ramban's reading of the concealed things that belong to God. It may look as if Ramban is exonerating us of these implicit prejudices, because the verse says that only God can be expected to know the secret things. But the paradoxical truth is that by telling us that (too often) only God knows the secret things, Ramban is reminding us that they are there to be known, and thus of the grave and urgent fact that we all harbor hidden and secret things, things we would be ashamed to see. They are God's only as long as they are hidden. But now we are reminded that they are indubitably present, and it becomes our obligation to seek them out, to reveal them.

So the way to read the verse is this: "Those less than attractive traits and reflexes that we harbor and hide from ourselves are too often known only to God; but it is an ongoing obligation for us and our descendants to bring them to light, so that we will truly be able to live as the Torah hoped—and still hopes—that we learn to live." The mahzor that will guide us through the upcoming Days of Awe will confront us with the Ramban's reading quite explicitly. On Yom Kippur we will ask for forgiveness for "the breach of all commandments and prohibitions, whether known to us or not." A clear reminder that remaining unaware of things we can, by courageous effort, recognize in ourselves, requires forgiveness, atonement, and commitment to do better in the future. And this is hardly an insignificant thought to take with us into these upcoming days of introspection, as Jews and as Americans. *(Gordon Tucker is the Vice Chancellor for Religious Life and Engagement at JTS)*

[Parashat Nitzavim: Choosing Life by Michael R. Mantell, Ph.D.](https://www.sdjewishworld.com/2022/09/20/parashat-nitzavim-choosing-life-2/)

<https://www.sdjewishworld.com/2022/09/20/parashat-nitzavim-choosing-life-2/>

Happy birthday world. Here's to the beginning of a New Year, but first we read this week's parasha, *Nitzavim*, always read on the *Shabbat* before *Rosh Hashanah*. The Torah reading this *Shabbat* asks us where we stand as we set the tone for the rest of our lives. "I have set before you, life and death, the blessing, and the curse. You shall choose life, so that you and your offspring will live." The themes of *t'shuvah*, renewal, choosing life, and a recommitment to the covenant by everyone in our community resonate throughout *Nitzavim*.

There are many interpretations of what it means to choose life. For example, the *Yerushalmi* interprets it as an obligation to earn a livelihood. *Kohelet Rabba* interprets it as an obligation to teach a son to swim, to ensure his physical survival. Remember, it says, "...so that you and your offspring will live..." Choosing to live a Jewish life with pride and joy, not with "oy," benefits our offspring.

Choosing life means fully engaging with family and friends – physically, spiritually, socially, cognitively, professionally, and civically. It means continually learning, growing, volunteering, mentoring, traveling, maintaining an active spiritual/religious life. It also means pursuing a healthy lifestyle including good nutrition, exercise, mindfulness, and stress-prevention. This means using the inner strength, mentally and physically, to live a life of health.

Indeed, Judaism regards life as the highest good and we are obligated to live in a way that protects our health. *Choshen Mishpat* 427, *Yoreh De'ah* 116, and *Chulin* 9a make it clear that we are to be more particular about matters concerning danger to health than about ritual matters.

Choosing life means seeing beyond the material and connecting to the deeper essence of an experience. When we eat, we can focus on the taste of something or feel more deeply grateful for the ultimate source of the food we have, *Hashem*. We can look beyond the outside to see that which lies within, the connections in life, to see the links that bring us together, to recognize that everything happens FOR us in life, rather than TO us.

These days upon us, *Rosh Hashana*, the Fast of *Gedalia*, *Yom Kippur*, *Sukkot*, *Hoshana Rabah*, *Shmini Atzeret* and *Simchat Torah*, we contemplate our needs and our deeds, our hopes, and aspirations for the coming year. and in so doing, we choose life. This is a central message of the High Holidays...to choose life, to live a life filled with *mitzvot*, not just to pray to win a lottery or for the health of one's body, but ideally, for the needs of our soul as well. It is during these days that we are also most mindful of the choices we have made during the past year. We collectively and individually take a deep moral inventory, look at how we have behaved, we examine the faithfulness we have demonstrated in all our relationships with, and we make plans and promises for the new year to improve. The High Holy Days demonstrate the control we have – over ourselves. *T'shuva*, according to Maimonides, revolves around an elaborate,

verbal articulation, a clarification process to address the most fundamental questions of our lives:

Who do we really want to be in the world? What are the values that we most cherish and wish to nurture in ourselves? What would we have to do to best nurture these values? What are the things that keep us from embracing certain visions of our best selves? What are the most authentic parts of our identities? What type of community do we wish to be part of or do we aspire to create? Rabbi Hanina taught: “Everything is in the hands of Heaven — except for the fear/awe of Heaven.” We can choose what we think, how we respond and how we act...everything else is in His hands. *Nitzavim* reminds us that we have the mental and emotional tools with which to make good choices, choices that help us improve our lives, and perhaps the lives of others.

One tool, the essential tool, is our genuine prayer, described in contemporary terms as “mindfulness” and “meditation.” Indeed, the positive impact on our physical wellbeing (brain through gut) that meditation, prayerful practice, that has been around for thousands of years, has been demonstrated in a recent study published by Harvard University. This time of the year, with the prodding we have inside of *Nitzavim*, reminds us of the opportunity we have to set ourselves aside, to renew our mindfulness, our deeply concentrated meditative prayer, and reconnect ourselves with *Hashem*. Done well, we can eliminate our anxieties, our fears, and fill ourselves with faith.

Nitzavim opens with the words, *Atem nitzavim hayom* — that may be understood as, “You stand firm this day.” In the midrash *Tanchuma* it asks, “When (do the Jewish people stand firm)? “When you will be unified.” The *parasha* tells us that we are all standing before *Hashem*. In *Lidutey Halachot*, Reb Noson teaches that this points to the importance of *achdus*, of unity, for all Jews. All Jews...those who attend services, those who do not, those who keep that “law” and those who keep another “law,” those who dress that way or the other way. We are being urged to join together so that our prayers ascend to Heaven. From Reb Noson and Reb Nachman both, we are taught to always judge for the good, to look for the good points in each other. This year, aim to revere the divinity in every soul – every soul. Shhh, this year, recognize that nobody is actually better than another. That is how we nurture true peace and love everywhere.

Also at the beginning of the *parasha*, we see the discussion of *arvus*, that we are all responsible for each other. “The hidden *aveiros* are for *Hashem*, but the revealed ones are for us and our children forever.” We understand this to mean that if a fellow Jew does an *aveirah* publicly, and others can prevent it but do not, they are also held responsible. “*Kol Yisrael avreivim zeh bazeh*— all Jews are responsible for each other (*Shavuos* 39a).”

This is the mindset, actively and kindly participating as part of the *tzibbur*, that enhances one’s Rosh Hashana and elevates one’s prayers. Praying in the plural,

with the *tzibbur*, reminds us to daven not just for ourselves, but for others as well. The message is to create a congregation that authentically lives in solidarity, acting with purity of heart to all members.

It's not easy. No, we all know how we find ourselves in a mind fog as the words in the prayer book drone onward, babbling, garbling, mumbling forward. We all know how we'd like to think we are somehow magically elevated just sitting in services while we negatively judge others around us, only extend ourselves to certain people and ignore others, and see folks who've just heard the rabbi's sermon immediately do exactly what he/she urged not to do. We do not live in a "Good Yontif" or "Shabbat Shalom," kindness *economy*. You won't lose anything by using this High Holiday season to truly grow beyond where you are, to splurge and offer a genuine smile, a warm welcome, a heartfelt well wish to all. This year, may no human being be treated as "other."

We have in front of us an impressive opportunity to choose a deep, authentic, potent connection with *Hashem* in the coming weeks. As it says in Psalm 19, "The teaching of *Hashem* is perfect, renewing life...The precepts of *Hashem* are just, rejoicing the heart; the instruction of *Hashem* is lucid, making the eyes light up." It's not a time to be "show-mer" *Shabbat*. Faithfully looking inside and sincerely growing closer to *Hashem*, *Nitzavim* points out, will help us create a new year, a new life, with many more blessings than this past year. If we are sincere in our *davening*, if this year the *tzibbur* genuinely moves closer to truly include all, we will find that our common humanity will be woven together into a harmonious *tallit* of mutuality.

Wishing all – all – a "Ketivah v'chatima tovah," "A good inscription and sealing in the Book of Life, "Leshana tovah tikatev v'tichatem" "May you be written and sealed for a good year," and "A gut gebentsht yohr," "A good and blessed year." (Michael R. Mantell, Ph.D., prepares a weekly D'var Torah for Young Israel of San Diego, where he and his family are members. They are also active members of Congregation Adat Yeshurun.)

Yahrtzeits

Erwin Mevorah remembers his mother Esther Mevorah on Sun. Sept. 25 (Elul 29).
Rebecca and Peter Greene remember their son Ethan Greene on Sun. Sept 25 (Elul 29)
Rebecca Greene remembers her mother Anita Schwartz on Mon. Sept. 26 (Tishrei 1).
Willa Bruckner remembers her father Seymour Cohen on Wed. Sept. 28 (Tishrei 3).
Cindy Salisbury remembers her mother Lynne Rader Salisbury on Fri. Sept. 30 (Tishrei 5)
Blossom Primer remembers Irwin's father Joel Primer on Fri. Sept.30 (Tishrei 5).



SHANA TOVA U'METUKAH



