

**Kol Rina**  
*An Independent Minyan*  
**Parashat Nitzavim - Vayelech**  
**September 9, 2023 \*\*\* 23 Elul, 5783**

**Nitzavim - Vayelech in a Nutshell**

[https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article\\_cdo/aid/58297/jewish/Nitzavim-Vayelech-in-a-Nutshell.htm](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/58297/jewish/Nitzavim-Vayelech-in-a-Nutshell.htm)

The name of the Parshah, "Nitzavim," means "Standing," and it is found in Deuteronomy 29:9. The name of the Parshah, "Vayelech," means "And [Moses] went," and it is found in Deuteronomy 31:1.

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."

**The Parshah of Vayelech** ("and he went") recounts the events of Moses' last day of earthly life. "I am one hundred and twenty years old today," he says to the people, "and I can no longer go forth and come in." He transfers the leadership to Joshua, and writes (or concludes writing) the Torah in a scroll which he entrusts to the Levites for safekeeping in the Ark of the Covenant.

The mitzvah of Hakhel ("gather") is given: every seven years, during the festival of Sukkot of the first year of the shemittah cycle, the entire people of

Israel—men, women and children—should gather at the Holy Temple in Jerusalem, where the king should read to them from the Torah.

Vayelech concludes with the prediction that the people of Israel will turn away from their covenant with G-d, causing Him to hide His face from them, but also with the promise that the words of the Torah “shall not be forgotten out of the mouths of their descendants.”

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

[https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article\\_cdo/aid/562458/jewish/Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/562458/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

[To Renew our Days: Nitzavim, Vayelech by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z"l](https://www.rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/nitzavim/to-renew-our-days/)

<https://www.rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/nitzavim/to-renew-our-days/>

The moment had come. Moses was about to die. He had seen his sister Miriam and brother Aaron pre-decease him. He had prayed to God – not to live forever, not even to live longer, but simply, “**Let me go over and see the**

**good land beyond the Jordan” (Deut. 3:25). Let me complete the journey. Let me reach the destination. But God said no:**

**“That is enough,” the Lord said. “Do not speak to Me anymore about this matter.” Deut. 3:26**

**God, who had acceded to almost every other prayer Moses prayed, refused him this.[1]**

**What then did Moses do on these last days of his life? He issued two instructions, the last of the 613 commands, that were to have significant consequences for the future of Judaism and the Jewish people. The first is known as Hakhel, the command that the king should summon the people to gather during Succot following the seventh, Shemittah year:**

**“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 law before them in their hearing. Assemble the people – men, women and children, and the foreigners residing in your towns – so they can listen and learn to fear the Lord your God and follow carefully all the words of this law. Their children, who do not know this law, must 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**

**There is no specific reference to this command in the later books of Tanach, but there are accounts of very similar gatherings: covenant renewal ceremonies, in which the king or his equivalent assembled the nation, reading from the Torah or reminding the people of their history, and calling on them to reaffirm the terms of their destiny as a people in covenant with God.**

**That, in fact, is what Moses had been doing for the last month of his life. The book of Deuteronomy as a whole is a restatement of the covenant, almost forty years and one generation after the original covenant at Mount Sinai. There is another example in the last chapter of the book of Joshua (see chapter 24 of the book of Joshua), once Joshua had fulfilled his mandate as Moses’ successor, bringing the people across the Jordan, leading them in their battles, and settling the land.**

**Another occurred many centuries later in the reign of King Josiah. His grandfather, Menasseh, who reigned for fifty-five years, was one of the worst of Judah’s kings, introducing various forms of idolatry, including child sacrifice. Josiah sought to return the nation to its faith, ordering among other things the cleansing and repair of the Temple. It was in the course of**

this restoration that a copy of the Torah was discovered,[2] sealed in a hiding place, to prevent it being destroyed during the many decades in which idolatry flourished and the Torah was almost forgotten. The king, deeply affected by this discovery, convened a Hakhel-type national assembly:

“Then the king called together all the elders of Judah and Jerusalem. He went up to the Temple of the Lord with the people of Judah, the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the priests and the prophets – all the people from the least to the greatest. He read in their hearing all the words of the Book of the Covenant, which had been found in the temple of the Lord. The king stood by the pillar and renewed the covenant in the presence of the Lord – to follow the Lord and keep his commands, statutes, and decrees with all his heart and all his soul, thus confirming the words of the Covenant written in this book. Then all the people pledged themselves to the Covenant.”

2 Kings 23:1-3

The most famous Hakhel-type ceremony was the national gathering convened by Ezra and Nehemiah after the second wave of returnees from Babylon (Neh. 8-10). Standing on a platform by one of the gates to the Temple, Ezra read the Torah to the assembly, having positioned Levites throughout the crowd so that they could explain to the people what was being said. The ceremony that began on Rosh Hashanah, culminated after Succot when the people collectively “bound themselves with a curse and an oath to follow the Law of God given through Moses the servant of God and to obey carefully all the commands, regulations and decrees of the Lord our Lord” (Neh. 10:29).

The other command – the last Moses gave the people – was contained in the words: “Now write down this song and teach it to the Israelites,” understood by rabbinic tradition to be the command to write, or at least take part in writing, a Sefer Torah. Why specifically these two commands, at this time? Something profound was being transacted here. Recall that God had seemed brusque in His dismissal of Moses’ request to be allowed to cross the Jordan. “That is enough ... Do not speak to Me anymore about this matter.” Is this the Torah and this its reward? Is this how God repaid the greatest of the prophets? Surely not.

In these last two commands God was teaching Moses, and through him Jews throughout the ages, what immortality is – on earth, not just in heaven. We are mortal because we are physical, and no physical organism lives forever. We grow up, we grow old, we grow frail, we die. But we are not only

physical. We are also spiritual. In these last two commands, we are taught what it is to be part of a spirit that has not died in four thousand years and will not die so long as there is a sun, moon, and stars.[3]

God showed Moses, and through him us, how to become part of a civilisation that never grows old. It stays young because it repeatedly renews itself. The last two commands of the Torah are about renewal: first collective, then individual.

Hakhel, the covenant renewal ceremony every seven years, ensured that the nation would regularly rededicate itself to its mission. I have often argued that there is one place in the world where this covenant renewal ceremony still takes place: the United States of America.

The concept of covenant played a decisive role in European politics in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, especially in Calvin's Geneva and in Scotland, Holland, and England. Its longest-lasting impact, though, was on America, where it was taken by the early Puritan settlers and remains part of its political culture even today. Almost every Presidential Inaugural Address – every four years since 1789 – has been, explicitly or implicitly, a covenant renewal ceremony, a contemporary form of Hakhel. In 1987, speaking at the bicentennial celebration of the American Constitution, President Ronald Reagan described the constitution as a kind of “covenant we've made not only with ourselves but with all of mankind... It's a human covenant; yes, and beyond that, a covenant with the Supreme Being to whom our founding fathers did constantly appeal for assistance.” America's duty, he said, is “to constantly renew their covenant with humanity... to complete the work begun 200 years ago, that grand noble work that is America's particular calling – the triumph of human freedom, the triumph of human freedom under God.”[4]

If Hakhel is national renewal, the command that we should each take part in the writing of a new Sefer Torah is personal renewal. It was Moses' way of saying to all future generations: It is not enough for you to say, I received the Torah from my parents (or grandparents or great-grandparents). You have to take it and make it new in every generation.

One of the most striking features of Jewish life is that from Israel to Palo Alto, Jews are among the world's most enthusiastic users of information technology and have contributed disproportionately to its development (Google, Facebook, Waze). But we still write the Torah exactly as it was done thousands of years ago – by hand, with a quill, on a parchment scroll. This is



not a paradox; it is a profound truth. People who carry their past with them, can build the future without fear.

Renewal is one of the hardest of human undertakings. Some years ago, I sat with the man who was about to become Prime Minister of Britain. In the course of our conversation he said, "What I most pray for is that when we get there (he meant, 10 Downing Street), I never forget why I wanted to get there." I suspect he had in mind the famous words of Harold Macmillan, British Prime Minister between 1957 and 1963, who, when asked what he most feared in politics, replied, "Events, dear boy, events."

Things happen. We are blown by passing winds, caught up in problems not of our making, and we drift. When that happens, whether to individuals, institutions, or nations, we grow old. We forget who we are and why.

Eventually we are overtaken by people (or organisations or cultures) that are younger, hungrier, or more driven than us.

The only way to stay young, hungry, and driven is through periodic renewal, reminding ourselves of where we came from, where we are going, and why.

To what ideals are we committed? What journey are we called on to continue? Of what story are we a part?

How precisely timed, therefore, and how beautiful, that at the very moment when the greatest of prophets faced his own mortality, that God should give him, and us, the secret of immortality – not just in heaven but down here on earth. For when we keep to the terms of the covenant, and making it new again in our lives, we live on in those who come after us, whether through our children or our disciples or those we have helped or influenced. We "renew our days as of old" (Lamentations 5:21). Moses died, but what he taught and what he sought lives on.

[1] There is an important lesson here: It is the prayers we pray for others, and others pray for us, that are answered; not always those we pray for ourselves. That is why when we pray for the healing of the sick or the comfort of the mourners we do so specifically "in the midst of others" who are ill or bereaved. As Judah Halevi pointed out in *The Kuzari*, the interests of individuals may conflict with one another, which is why we pray communally, seeking the collective good. [2] This is Radak and Ralbag's understanding of the event. Abarbanel finds it difficult to believe that there were no other copies of the Torah preserved even during the idolatrous periods of the nation's history, and suggests that what was discovered sealed in the Temple was Moses' own Torah, written by his hand. [3] See Jeremiah 31. [4] *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States*, Ronald Reagan, 1987, 1040-43.

# Nitzavim-Vayeilech: To Examine the Past Unflinchingly, We Need Community

By Rabbi Rena Blumenthal

[https://truah.org/resources/rena-blumenthal-nitzavim-vayeilech-moraltorah\\_2023/](https://truah.org/resources/rena-blumenthal-nitzavim-vayeilech-moraltorah_2023/)

When I was nine years old, I visited Israel for the first time with my parents. On a guided tour of the desert, the bus suddenly stopped in the middle of nowhere and the tour guide pointed to rock formations in the distance.

“There’s Lot’s wife,” he said, with absolute authority.

“Where?” I cried, excitedly. One by one, everyone on the bus was able to make out her form. “Where?” I kept crying. My parents pointed and tried to show me; the other passengers pointed and tried to show me. But no matter how hard I looked, I could make out no human form in those rocky pillars.

Finally, the bus moved on. I was the only one who had not seen Lot’s wife. I was reminded of Lot’s wife when reflecting on the opening of this week’s Torah portion: Atem nitzavim hayom kulkhem lifnei YHVH. You are nitzavim, today, every one of you, before the divine Source of Life. In one of the most dramatic moments of Torah, as the grand finale approaches, we stand ready to receive the covenant. But what does it actually mean to be nitzavim?

Clearly, to be nitzav is a great deal more than to be “standing.” It is not a posture but a stance. It suggests standing tall, standing proud, solid as a pillar.

And so, I am wondering if perhaps the word is a nod to that great and elusive netziv melakh, the unnamed woman with the courage to look back and witness the horrors of her own home’s destruction. (Genesis 19:26)

(This is not just me free-associating. In next week’s parshah, Moses mentions Sodom: “Ah! The vine for them is from Sodom, From the vineyards of Gomorrah.” [Deuteronomy 32:32] That story is clearly hovering in the air here.)

But if so, what is the connection? I admire her bravery, to be sure, but she is no model for living. Her turning back to look is an ending, not a beginning. Looking back can be terrifying. But the great difference between Lot’s wife and the community assembled in this week’s parshah is that Lot’s wife, brave as she was, was not embedded in the covenant. Looking back could only overwhelm her, swamp her with despair, transform her into a pillar of desiccated tears.

In this week’s parshah, we are a different kind of nitzav. The allusion suggests that we will now be protected by a freely accepted covenant with the Eternal and Infinite Source of Life. And we are further protected by being a part of the covenantal community, stretching backward and forward

through time. Thus cushioned, we can look back safely, unflinchingly, to the very real horrors that have shaped our communities and our lives.

We can look back and see the centuries of Jewish persecution and not be paralyzed by our inherited traumas.

We can look back on the genocide, enslavement, and systematic racism that have formed this country, and not lose the hope and dream that America also represents.

We can look back and see the Nakba, feel the tragedy of it in our bones, and not lose sight of the astonishing accomplishments and dream-fulfillment that were also a part of Israel's founding.

And as the High Holy Days approach, we can look back at our own personal failings, the ways in which we have failed ourselves and our loved ones, and not be immobilized by regret.

Protected by covenant, we can be nitzavim, in the image of the divine presence that is nitzav over Jacob as he conjures magnificent dreams, nitzav above the lesser deities in Psalm 82 in order to declare justice as the centerpiece of the divine will.

I look back now and imagine that I can finally see Lot's wife emerging from the desert: a warning against turning back alone, without the support of the divine Mystery positioned before us, without the support of the covenantal community surrounding us.

As we enter these awe-filled days devoted to looking back on our lives, may we stand secure as pillars, fortified by covenantal love. May our looking back be a spur to action, a beginning and not an ending. May we be nitzavim, every one of us, in our honesty, our courage, and our commitment to bringing healing and reparation to the sins of the past. May we see clearly the choices that are laid before us, and may we accustom ourselves and our communities to always choose life. (*Rabbi Rena Blumenthal is a freelance rabbi based in New Paltz, New York. From 2003-2014, she served as the Assistant Director of the Office of Religious & Spiritual Life and Advisor to Jewish Students at Vassar College. Prior to attending rabbinical school, Rena worked as a psychologist for 15 years in New York City and Jerusalem. She is the author of the novel, "The Book of Israela."*)

[Returning with God: Nitzavim – Vayeilekh by Mychal Springer](https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/returning-with-god-2/)

<https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/returning-with-god-2/>

This week's Torah Portion, Nitzavim, speaks profoundly about teshuvah, the literal and figurative struggle to return to God. When we turn back to God "with all [our] heart and soul," the parashah tells us, then God "will bring you together again from all the peoples where the Lord your God has scattered



**you” (Deut 30:3). Being scattered is a state of disorientation and disconnection. Teshuvah represents a coming home. There’s an organic connection between the return to the Land of Israel—the land at the center of the Jewish soul, from which we have been banished—and the return that involves changing our ways and opening our hearts to God.**

**The next verse says: “Even if your outcasts are at the ends of the world, from there the Lord your God will gather you, from there He will fetch you” (Deut 30:4). There is no place that is too far away for God to reach us, either literally or figuratively. Even those of us who live on the edges of society will be gathered up. In this teshuvah process, God’s passionate commitment to the marginalized is front and center.**

**The Hebrew reads “biktzeh hashamayim”, the ends of the heavens. How is it that “the ends of the heavens” is translated as “the ends of the world”? In Psalm 19, the sun moves from one end of heaven to the other, crossing the sky in an arch:**

**His rising-place is at one end of heaven,  
And his circuit reaches the other;  
Nothing escapes his heat (v. 7).**

**As the sun moves across the heavens each day, it also moves from one end of the earth to the other. So the ends of the heavens and the ends of the earth are the same. This is a beautiful image of interconnectedness and reconciliation. At the ends—and in the end—the divine world and the human world come together. The outcasts are gathered in. Teshuvah is the space in which out and in are reconciled. The promise that we will be gathered up by God can offer a profound comfort for those of us who experience ourselves in far-flung places, whether emotionally, spiritually, or physically.**

**If we return to our original verse, we see something interesting in the language. The New JPS translation I quoted earlier says: “He will bring you together again from all the peoples where the Lord your God has scattered you.” But the word that is being translated as “bring you” is actually “veshav”, which means “He will return.” (“Bring you” is the causative form of the same Hebrew root.) The translation skips over the problem, but the rabbis in the Talmud do not.**

***And when they will be redeemed in the future, the Shekhinah will be with them, as it says, “Then the Lord your God will return [with] your captivity” (Deut. 30:3). It does not say here veheshiv [and He shall bring back] but veshav [and He shall return]. This teaches us that the Holy One, blessed be He, will return with them from the places of exile. (BT Megillah 29a)***

The verses in the parashah seem to convey that we are the outcasts and God is eternally at the center. But this Talmudic midrash complicates the picture. Just as we are outcasts, God is an outcast. Somehow, God, in the form of the Shekhinah, God's in-dwelling presence, is also in need of return. The image of God returning us, bringing us back, conveys one kind of power. But the image of God coming back with us, alongside us, conveys a different kind of power. I cannot pretend to understand this power fully, but I understand the Rabbis to be teaching us that this power is rooted in connectedness, in being with the outcast, dwelling inside the "not yet." There's something about being joined by the divine in this place on the edge that has the potential to shore us up as we long to return. Perhaps it is the experience of being joined in this way which enables us to open up "with all [our] heart and soul" and return at last. *(Mychal Springer is Adjunct Instructor of Professional and Pastoral Skills at JTS)*

### **The Big Bad Wolf: Isaiah 61-63 by Bex Stern Rosenblatt**

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1A9ICN8aud00g-6hPIVof3d1VmsC2tIFi/view?pli=1>

Our haftarah, Isaiah 61-63, is the final of the seven haftarot of consolation. We've made it now. We have survived Tisha B'Av, come back into the land of Israel, and begun the process of teshuva in preparation for the holidays. We might have thought that our haftarah would tie the process up with a bow, ending neatly and happily. But we are not a people for fairytale endings. Instead of thanking God for returning us to the land, we quiz God about why God's clothes are so dirty. In the manner of Little Red Riding Hood noting her Grandmother's awfully big teeth, we approach God and inquire after God's clothing. We read, as translated by Robert Alter, "Who is this coming from Edom, in ensanguined garments?... Why is there red on your garments and your clothes like one treading a winepress? It is a crazy set of questions. We are approaching the most powerful ruler in the world and asking why he is covered in blood.

God's answer spares us no details. We read, as translated by Alter, "In the vat I have trodden alone— of the peoples, no one was with Me, and I trampled them in My wrath, stomped on them in My fury, and their lifeblood splattered My garments, all My clothes I have befouled... And I trampled peoples in My wrath and made them drunk with My fury, and shed their lifeblood on the ground."

There is a confluence of images here. Wine and blood become synonymous. God becomes a winemaker, making wine out of the blood of humans, and God then makes the humans drunk. The word that Alter translates as

“lifeblood” is netzach, usually understood to mean something eternal, enduring, and strong. Ibn Ezra explains that we should read nezach as blood, because the span of human life is measured by how long blood endures, flowing through a human’s veins. God is playing with human lives, exposing that the netzach, the duration, of each human life is not netzach, eternal, as God is, but rather as easily disposed of as a grape. But human death does affect God. The remnants of our lives have made a mess of God’s clothes. Of course, it is a bizarre thing to imagine a clothed God in the first place. In the image here in Isaiah, God is taking on distinctly human characteristics, wearing clothing and making wine. But this is happening on a divine scale. The consolation we find is that God understands us, God knows what it is to have dirty clothes and a broken heart. Moreover, God is on our side. The blood on God’s clothing is not our own. Faced with the enormity of our loss and our return, we find comfort in God’s ability to be like us, to understand us, while still being totally alien in God’s netzach, God’s strength. *(Bex Stern Rosenblatt is the Conservative Yeshiva’s Faculty-in-Residence for the Mid-Atlantic Region of the United States, teaching Tanach, using the techniques of close-reading, theater, feminist readings, and traditional commentators)*

### Yahrtzeits

Rabbi Lisa Vernon remembers her mother Lillian R. Vernon on Wednesday  
September 13th