

Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
Parashat Nitzavim-Vayelech
September 28, 2024 *** 25 Elul, 5784

Nitzavim-Vayeilech in a Nutshell

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

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.

Leadership: Consensus or Command – Nitzavim, Vayelech by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z"l 5771

The great transition is about to take place. Moses' career as a leader is coming to an end, and Joshua's leadership is about to begin. Moses blesses his successor. Then God does. Listen carefully to what they say, and to the subtle difference between. This is what Moses says:

“Be strong and courageous, for you must *go with* this people into the land that the Lord swore to their ancestors to give them, and you must divide it among them as their inheritance.” Deut. 31:7

And this is what God says: “Be strong and courageous, for you will *bring* the Israelites into the land I promised them on oath, and I Myself will be with you.” Deut. 31:23

The difference in Hebrew is even slighter than it is in English. Moses uses the verb *tavo*, "go with." God uses the verb *tavi*, "bring." It is the slightest of nuances, but Rashi tells us the words are worlds apart in their significance. They refer to two utterly different styles of leadership. Here is Rashi's comment: **Moses said to Joshua, "Make sure that the elders of the generation are with you. Always act according to their opinion and advice."** However, the Holy One blessed be He said to Joshua, **"For you will *bring* the Israelites into the land I promised them" – meaning, "Bring them even against their will. It all depends on you. If necessary, take a stick and beat them over the head. There is only one leader for a generation, not two."** [Rashi on Deuteronomy 31:7](#)

Moses advises his successor to lead by consultation and consensus. God tells Joshua to lead firmly and with authority. Even if people do not agree with you, He counsels him, you must lead from the front. Be clear. Be decisive. Be forceful. Be strong.

Now this is a strange comment from Rashi, considering what we learned elsewhere about the leadership styles, respectively, of God and Moses. Listen first to the comment of Rashi on the words of God immediately prior to the creation of humanity: **"Let Us make man in our image after our likeness"** ([Gen. 1:26](#)). Who are the "Us"? To whom is God speaking and why? Rashi says: **From here we learn the humility of God. Since man was [created] in the image of the angels they might become jealous of him. He, therefore, consulted them. Similarly, when He judges Kings, He consults His heavenly court . . . Though they [the angels] did not help in his creation and [the wording of the verse] may give the heretics an opportunity to rebel, [nevertheless,] Scripture does not refrain from teaching courtesy and the attribute of humility, that the greater should consult and ask permission of the smaller** ([Genesis Rabbah 8:9](#)). [Rashi on Gen. 1:26](#)

This is a remarkable statement. Rashi is saying that, before creating man, God consulted with the angels. He did so not because He needed their help: clearly He did not. Nor was it because He needed their advice: He had already resolved to create humankind. It was to show them respect, to pre-empt their jealousy of man, to avoid their resentment at not being consulted on so fateful a decision, and to show us – the readers – the fundamental truth that greatness goes hand in hand with humility. So it was God who acted according to the advice Moses gave Joshua: **"Make sure that others are with you. Consult. Take**

their advice.”

On the other hand, Moses acted the way God advised Joshua to do. “If necessary, take a stick and beat them over the head.” Is that not figuratively what Moses did at Kadesh, when he hit the people with his words and the rock with his staff ([Num. 20:1-12](#)), for which he was condemned by God not to enter the Promised Land?

So we seem to have God saying words we associate with Moses’ type of leadership – firm, strong, decisive – and Moses advocating the kind of leadership – consensual, consultative – that Rashi associates with God. Surely it should have been the other way around.

However, perhaps Rashi is telling us something profound. At the end of his life, Moses recognised one great failure of his leadership. He had taken the Israelites out of Egypt, but he had not taken Egypt out of the Israelites. He had changed his people's fate, but he hadn't changed their character.[\[1\]](#)

He now realised that for this to happen there would have to be a different kind of leadership, one that handed back responsibility to the people as a whole, and to the elders in particular.

So long as there is a Moses performing miracles, the people do not have to accept responsibility for themselves. In order for them to grow, Joshua would have to engage in participative leadership, encouraging diverse views and listening to them, even if that meant going more slowly.

That is transformative leadership and it requires the leader to engage in what the kabbalists called *tsimtsum*, self-effacement.

Or as Rashi puts it: “Make sure that the elders of the generation are with you. Always act according to their opinion and advice” (Rashi to [Deuteronomy 31:7](#))

As for God, He was not changing His mind. He was not suggesting that Joshua should become, in general, an authoritarian leader. He was suggesting that Joshua needed to do this just once. Listen carefully to the verse: “For you will bring the Israelites into the land” ([Deut. 31:23](#)) Recall that there was one occasion that condemned an entire generation to die in the wilderness – the episode of the spies, in which the people lacked the faith and courage to enter and take possession of the land. It was then that two men – Joshua and Caleb – stood firm, insisting

against the other 10 spies, that they could conquer the land and defeat their enemies. God was saying to Joshua that there will be one future trial in which you must stand firm, even against the majority, and that will come when you are about to cross the Jordan. That is when the people are in danger of giving way to fear.

That is when your leadership will consist, not in consultation and consensus, but in allowing no dissent. That is when "it will all depend on you . . . There is only one leader for a generation, not two." Sometimes even the most consensual leaders must lead from the front and bring the people with them.

There is a time to discuss and a time to act, a time to seek agreement and a time to move ahead without waiting for agreement. That is what both God and Moses were telling Joshua in their different ways.

A leader must have the courage to lead, the patience to consult, and the wisdom to know when the time is right for each. [1] For a deeper discussion on Moses' actions at Kadesh and how the people's need for a leader was evolving, see Covenant & Conversation essay on Chukat, 'Why was Moses not destined to enter the land?' <https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/chukat/why-was-moses-not-destined-to-enter-the-land/>.

[Nitzavim: Interrogating the Society We Build by Rabbi Suzanne Singer](https://truah.org/resources/suzanne-singer-nitzavim-moraltorah_2024/)
https://truah.org/resources/suzanne-singer-nitzavim-moraltorah_2024/

October 7 shook us to our very core, raising profound questions about the place of Jews and of Israel in the world. Are Jews and Israel to be eternal pariahs? Is the problem of antisemitism insoluble? How do we create legitimacy for ourselves? But October 7, and the virtual civil war over the judicial reform in Israel that preceded it, also prompted important self-reflection questions. Is Israel the country that represents the key Jewish values we dreamed of? As a Jewish and democratic state, what does Israel owe its minority populations, in particular the Palestinians who are citizens within the Green Line and those living stateless in the occupied West Bank? This moment is an auspicious time for us to contemplate these matters as we are in the month of Elul leading up to the High Holy Days, a period in which to engage in an accounting of our souls.

This week's Torah portion, Parshat Nitzavim, which is read right before Rosh Hashanah and during Yom Kippur, concerns the renewal and reaffirmation of our covenant with God. Elsewhere, at the center of this

covenant is the injunction that we be a holy people by emulating God's holiness. (Leviticus 19) What does it mean to be holy? It means to pursue justice and to treat others as we want to be treated. It means to care for the orphan, the widow, and the stranger, those who are most vulnerable in our society. In Nitzavim, God's covenant is made with every single person in the community, from the leaders to the very least among them — "from wood chopper to water drawer." (Deuteronomy 29:10) And, crucially, it is also made with "the stranger within your camp." The "stranger" — the non-Israelite or non-Jew — is a member of the larger community, not to be left out, not to be mistreated or exploited.

The stance taken by the people in Nitzavim as they reiterate their commitment to God is significant. As Rabbi Joseph Edelheit explains:

Although the word *nitzavim* is usually translated as "standing there"... [t]he verb implies something very different than *omed*, which also means "to stand." *Nitzav* suggests an act of will, a physical statement of *hineini* — "Here I am, prepared to respond to Your call." ("Torat Hayim," Nitzavim/Vayeilech, "Standing Still So We Can Go into the New Year," 5757)

We are to *actively* interrogate the society we have created to ensure it meets the standards we have set for it.

As several commentators have noted, the root "*shuv*" is repeated seven times in this portion, suggesting that we are to return again and again, year after year, to the principles articulated in our relationship with God. We must constantly ask: Have we created and sustained an equitable society, one that cares for its poor and one that offers equal rights to all? Do we privilege certain groups of people over others? Do our leaders place the good of the country ahead of their own personal gain? These are matters that are never finally resolved. We must continuously strive to implement justice, as it is so easy to backslide when our attention and our resolve falter.

Rabbi Sally Finestone points out that this is an ongoing process that involves a give and take with God:

...we should also note that not every use of the root *shuv* in our passage refers to the returning of the human heart and mind; in several verses, it is the Divine heart and mind that is doing the returning... This turning is not *teshuvah* but *ge'ulah*, "redemption"; it is the divine response to the sincere turning back (returning) of God's

people to their Creator.. [We] find a pattern of acts of returning followed immediately by redemption, followed by more returning, followed by more redemption. It is like a dialogue of the human and the Divine responding to each other. ("Torat Hayim," Nitzavim/Vayeilech, "Repentance and Redemption: Who Makes the First Move?" 5759)

Our task is never-ending. Even during a time of war, when we are at our most vulnerable, we must still check ourselves to see if our conduct is as moral as possible. Are we fighting a just war justly? Do we have a plan for the "day after" that will offer dignity to both sides? We should not avoid these questions or their tough answers. As Rabbi Tarfon tells us: "The work is great...You are not required to finish the work, but neither are you permitted to desist from it." (Pirkei Avot 2:15-16) Let us endeavor to return to the values that make us proud to be Jews."

(Rabbi Suzanne Singer served Temple Beth El in Riverside, CA, for 15 years. In her retirement, she serves a monthly congregation in Temecula, teaches Introduction to Judaism classes, and is very involved in social justice issues in her community.)

[Nitzavim-Vayeilech: You Can Do This from the Accidental Talmudist](https://www.accidentaltalmudist.org/torah/2024/09/24/nitzavim-vayeilech-you-can-do-this-2/)
<https://www.accidentaltalmudist.org/torah/2024/09/24/nitzavim-vayeilech-you-can-do-this-2/>

"For this commandment that I command you today, it is not hidden from you and it is not distant. It is not in the heavens, so you could say 'Who can possibly go up to the heavens for us and take it for us, then we'll hear and perform it!?' Nor is it across the sea, so you could say 'Who can cross to the other side of the sea for us and take it for us, and then we'll hear it, and perform it!?' Rather, the Torah is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to perform it." (Deut. 30:11-1)

Before Moses dies, he exhorts the Jewish people to follow God's laws and assures them that the task is not too difficult for them to accomplish. Huh?? Living a Torah life requires extensive knowledge as well as significant sacrifice. Especially for those of us who did not grow up religious, the task is indeed difficult! How can Moses say that it's "not hidden from you and it is not distant" when it often feels impenetrable and beyond our reach?

Rabbi Israel Salanter (1810-1883), the influential founder of the Mussar

movement of Torah-based self-improvement, provides a different perspective. Yes, those new to Jewish practice can feel discouraged. Yes, even those who've been religious their whole lives find this time of year daunting, as we try to impress God before Rosh Hashanah so that we'll be inscribed for another year of life.

Rav Salanter says we're looking at teshuva (repentance) all wrong. We want God to bless us so we try to make big changes. However, when we bite off more than we can chew, we often wind up chewing nothing. Rav Salanter tells us to focus on small things, things that we know we can achieve. Don't try to undertake the entirety of spiritual transformation all at once. Instead, take one manageable step after another.

Yahrtzeits

Rabbi Lisa Vernon remembers her mother Lillian R. Vernon on Mon. Sept. 30

Erwin Mevorah remembers his mother Esther Mevorah on Wed. Oct. 2