

Parashat Nitzavim/Vayelech, Deuteronomy 29:9-31:30

STANDING STILL SO WE CAN GO INTO THE NEW YEAR

Joseph Edelheit

On Shabbat morning before the night of the Selichot service, before Rosh Hashanah, we read a Torah portion that uniquely prepares us for the Days of Awe. Parashat Nitzavim-Vayelech (Deut. 29:9-31:30) is quite dramatic, including as it does Moses' final oration and his preparation for death. Reform Jews will hear sections of Nitzavim again on Yom Kippur morning, including the oft quoted expression *uvacharta bachayim*--"and therefore choose life." (Deut. 30:20)

We learn a great deal from just the two words Nitzavim-Vayelech as they are used in their respective opening verses of this *mechubar* ("connected") portion. Although the word *nitzavim* is usually translated as "standing there," it describes a stance taken by the entire people of Israel assembled to hear Moses. A form of the verb *nitzav* is used several times to refer both to the people and to Moses as they present themselves for God's revelation. (Exod. 19:17, Exod. 34:2, Exod. 34:5) The verb implies something very different than *omed*, which also means "to stand." *Nitzav* suggests an act of will, a physical statement of *hineni*--"here I am, prepared to respond to Your call." In Deuteronomy 29:9, the entire people "stand" prepared to enter the Land of Israel and actively engage in meeting the demands of the covenant.

In these final days of Elul we, too, "stand" ready-to move into a new Jewish year. We, too, once again "stand" as an entire people prepared to reaffirm our covenantal relationship with God and each other. We must not merely "stand around" waiting but rather use this sacred time to "take a stand" on the religious fundamentals that have always defined our destiny, and to heed the warning that when we turn away from our identity we choose the curse over the blessing.

It is hard to "stand still"; we become distracted and look around, shifting back and forth on our feet. We find it uncomfortable to so restrict ourselves. I very much identify with this struggle because, as a rabbi who is addicted to work, "standing still" has always seemed to be "doing nothing." It requires a strong act of will to overcome this inability and stop moving long enough to allow oneself to be in the presence of God. If we accomplish nothing else before the Days of Awe than learning to "stand still," we will yet have established the spiritual foundation for making our ultimate choices. We must find the strength and wisdom to "stand still" in a world that moves faster and faster.

That Vayelech comes right after Nitzavim teaches us that it is only after we have learned how to stand still that we can "go forth." According to tradition, this passage tells us about the day Moses was to die, when he "went out" among the people, going from tribe to tribe and tent to tent to console them and prepare them for their future. The Zohar teaches us that only the most holy and righteous are so sensitive to spirituality that they are aware of when their soul is about to return to its Maker. Thus, on the very day he was to die, Moses "went out" once again to teach and touch the people with his presence. It reminds us that it was Moses' first going out to be among the people and experience their oppression (Exod. 2:11) that eventually led him into the desert and his experience at the burning bush. As a teacher, Moses was distinguished by his ability to go into the community and reach out to the people.

Moses' actions that day should serve us as a model for our own on Yom Kippur, a day which tradition likens to our preparing ourselves for death. If we use Yom Kippur as the day on which each of us must go out into our own lives, families, and communities as if we were preparing to die, then how would we want to be remembered? We can "go forth," if we have learned to "stand still" in the presence of God. Yom Kippur can be a true day of reckoning, if Rosh Hashanah is a day of presenting ourselves before God.

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BRINGING THE TORAH HOME

Robert Orkand

This week's Torah portion, Nitzavim, tells us something that may seem obvious: The Torah is not in space. That is, we do not have to travel to the heavens nor cross the seas to learn Torah. It is close to our hearts and our lips to live and observe (Deuteronomy 30:11-14). Although the Torah is not in the heavens, that is not always the case with us Jews. We read this week that sometimes the Jewish people will be so dispersed that "Even if your outcasts are at the ends of the world, from there Adonai your God will gather you, from there God will fetch you." (Deuteronomy 30:4)

These two verses provide an amazing contrast. Although the People of Book may be as far-flung as the heavens themselves, the Book is always within our reach. Ultimately both the far-flung Jew and the Torah will be joined.

What does the Torah mean when it tells us that it is not in the heavens? Isn't that obvious? Aren't we reading it here on earth this Shabbat?

Rashi explains that the Torah is telling us that if it were actually in the heavens we would have to find a way to retrieve it, bring it back to earth, and study it. Was Rashi, who lived in the Middle Ages (eleventh century), predicting space travel, or was he suggesting something else?

Perhaps an old Jewish story will help us better understand what the Torah is telling us in this parashah.

The tale is told about Reb Chaikel, a poor tailor from Lodz, who had the same recurring dreams. Each night his father would appear to him and tell him about a secret fortune. All Reb Chaikel had to do was travel to Vienna and go to the royal palace. Exactly fifty yards from the palace, his father said, was an old oak tree. Under that tree, his father told him, lies a great treasure. All Reb Chaikel had to do was dig under the tree, and all his financial problems would be solved.

At first, Reb Chaikel ignored the dreams, but they recurred night after night. And so, he decided to go to Vienna and seek his fortune.

He camped out near the palace and waited for an opportune time to begin digging for the fortune. At midnight on a moonless night, he stealthily crept up to the tree and began to dig. His shovel had not even had a chance to strike dirt when he felt a rough hand squeeze the back of his neck.

"Jew!" shouted the palace guard. "What on earth are you doing at midnight, fifty yards from the palace gates, shoveling dirt?"

Reb Chaikel had no choice but to tell the story of his dreams about the great fortune that lay beneath the oak tree that he was about to dig up. He even offered to split the booty if the guard would let him go. "You idiot!" laughed the guard. "Everyone has dreams. In fact, I myself dreamed that if I were to go to the city of Lodz in Poland and dig in the basement of some Jewish tailor named Chaikel, I, too, would find a fortune! Hah! Now get lost!"

Legend has it that Reb Chaikel returned to Lodz and, after a little digging in the basement of his own home, became a very wealthy man.

Sometimes we look at the Torah's values and precepts and regard them as being way up in space, beyond our reach. We look at the Torah's expectations of us as impossible tasks that are as difficult to achieve as landing on the moon was. We view them as hurdles that are impossible to overcome, as if we were being asked to travel to distant lands to perform difficult tasks.

The Torah assures us twice (Deuteronomy 30:11-14) that what it teaches us is within our reach. Even if a Jewish soul is lost in space, coming home to Judaism is always possible. And, we are told, the Torah, our manual of instruction, is more accessible than we may think.

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Compiled by Brattleboro Area Jewish Community, Elul 5767.

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ACCEPTING THE COVENANT

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According to the Sephardic tradition, during the entire month of Elul, the shofar is sounded each morning. The sound of the shofar helps us prepare for the Days of Awe. Each year as the High Holy Days approach, we reflect upon personal commitments concerning our work, our family life, and social issues. The Jewish calendar allows for the preparations we need to make in order to stand before ourselves in self-reflection. We may also prepare to invest time in trying to understand the portions read at the end of the month prior to Selichot services, a collection of special penitential prayers.

The parashah read on the Shabbat morning before Rosh Hashanah is Nitzavim. This portion contains the oration given by Moshe before the tribes of Israel proceed to the Promised Land. Nitzavim, meaning "you stand before," refers to all of Israel, from the simple woodchopper to the bearers of the Holy Ark. Moshe addresses his people for the last time prior to his death and confronts them with a task: "You stand this day, all of you, before Adonai your God... to enter into the covenant of Adonai your God, which God is concluding with you this day...." (Deuteronomy 29:9,11)

According to Rabbi Gunther Plaut, the discussion in Nitzavim reiterates "the covenantal framework: Israel had heretofore not fully understood the extent of God's works, because it had not had 'a mind to understand or eyes to see or ears to hear' (Deuteronomy 29:3)." (The Torah: A Modern Commentary, p. 1,535) Moshe had been responsible for preparing Israel to accept the covenant as a framework by which to live. God tested Israel. God found them to be wanting, not fully accepting of God's guidance and covenant.

How would we have reacted to Moshe as he stood before Israel proposing the covenant? Are we challenged by the same choice today? Our lives are filled with tremendous conflicts we confront and choices we make each day. As the New Year approaches, do we contemplate making new commitments or do we feel that we must strengthen those we have already made?

Nitzavim clearly defines God's intent for the people of Israel to accept the covenant. God has challenged the people throughout their wandering in the desert. Now they must make a commitment and signal their acceptance. The French commentator Rashi (eleventh century) remarks that God "undertakes so much trouble in making another covenant with you so that Adonai may keep you for a people in [the Divine] Presence." (Deuteronomy 29:12) The path of the people of Israel, although very complicated and sometimes unforgiving, has reached a turning point. Moshe presents future knowledge and understanding of Adonai's commitment to the Children of Israel.

Just as Moshe stood before Israel-in the same way we approach the Days of Awe-all people confront the choice to make a commitment. We find the choice as challenging today as those who had wandered for forty years waiting to enter the Promised Land did then. We must listen to the voice of the shofar as we stand before our own commitments in order to proceed to a life of covenant and peace.

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REPENTANCE and REDEMPTION: WHO MAKES the FIRST MOVE? By Sally Finestone

It is no coincidence that the parashah that comes just two weeks before Rosh Hashanah, parashat Nitzavim/Vayelech, deals with the concepts of teshuvah ("repentance," literally "returning") and ge'ulah ("redemption"). If we look at Chapter 30 of Devarim 30:1-10 we find a description of the relationship of between these two concepts:

When all these things befall you--the blessing and the curse that I have set before you--and you return them to your heart amidst the various nations to which the Eternal your God has banished you, and you return to the Eternal your God, and you and your children heed God's command with all your heart and soul, just as I enjoin upon you this day, then the Eternal your God will return you to your place and have compassion upon you, and will return you and gather you together again from all the peoples where the Eternal your God has scattered you You, however, will return and heed the Eternal and obey God's commandments which I enjoin upon you this day. . . . For the Eternal will return to delight in your well-being, as God rejoiced in that of your fathers, since you will be heeding the Eternal your God and keeping God's commandments and laws that are recorded in this book of the Teaching--once you return to the Eternal your God with all your heart and soul.

There are several striking features about this passage. We first note that various forms of the Hebrew root shuv, which means "return," occurs no less than seven times in this passage all in italics above, marking it as the key word. The number seven has, as we know, great symbolic significance in our tradition, representing creation, completion, and perfection. The sevenfold use of word shuv thus hints at the ultimate goals of human "returning," of human repentance: the creation of a new self, the completion of our better natures, and the perfection of our relationship with God. With the coming of Rosh Hashanah, we will once again seek to begin this process, striving to return God's blessings to our hearts, to hearken to God's commandments, and to return to God with all our heart and soul--just as our ancestors are bidden to do in this passage.

Yet 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--returning our exiled people from captivity, and returning "to delight" in the people of Israel. 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.

Furthermore, we note that this passage does not describe the expected, simple progression wherein humans return and repent, and when repentance is completed, God then responds with redemption. Instead, 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. This reciprocity occurs from below to above (human to divine) and then from above to below (divine to human), and then the pattern is repeated. The people first recall God's words to their hearts, and then follow this with their first tentative step toward God. This initial, small act of teshuvah is all it takes for God to respond with ge'ulah, with a redemption that is, by contrast, not small but great in its scope: the ingathering of the exiles from the farthest corners of the earth, the granting of renewed prosperity to the newly gathered people, and the punishment of their foes. But God's response to the people's initial act of teshuvah is not limited to actions in the world; God also acts within the people's hearts, opening them up with the love of God and the motivation for life.

This incredible redemptive response by God triggers the next step in the people's teshuvah: the heeding and doing of God's commandments. Sincerity of the heart is the crucial first step, but it is not enough--it must be followed by sincerity of deeds, by the sincere commitment to God's laws and guidelines. And once again, this act of returning on the part of the people brings about the second act of returning on the part of God, with further promises of prosperity and well being, and with divine joy and delight.

We return just a little, God returns a lot; such is the great and lasting love of God for the people, and for the sincere process of teshuvah.

But there is one last critical point made in this passage. The first returning, that first movement, must be ours. It is our task, and not God's, to initiate the reciprocal dialogue between earth and heaven. We may feel that this is expecting too much of human nature; we may argue that there are times when we need God to call to us first. Perhaps this is our test, to see if we are strong enough, and loving enough, to make the first move. Perhaps this is our lesson, telling us that in human reconciliation, as in divine, it is better to be the one who makes the first move towards forgiveness. Yet regardless of our reaction, it is clear that for the author of Devarim, we must make the first move. God is indeed, in the words of Abraham Joshua Heschel, "in search of man"--in search of our first step, waiting and wanting to respond.

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Passing the Torch

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Transitions are inevitable but rarely easy. Psychologists inform us that the loss of a loved one, a change of residence, or a new job are among the most traumatic events a human being can experience. For a community or nation, the installment of a new political leader can be no less unsettling. Only if that transition is thoughtfully planned does everyone benefit.

During the middle years of the twentieth century, a number of African nations were granted their independence from colonial rule. The transition was smooth in those nations that were properly prepared for leadership. In many of the others, however, where the colonial powers simply left, freedom and democracy have still not been established.

The example of Moses in this week's double Torah portion, Parashat Nitzavim/Vayelech, teaches us a timely and timeless lesson on how to effect a positive and productive transition of leadership. Chapter 31 of Deuteronomy provides a step-by-step guide on the correct way to pass the torch.

1. Knowing When to Call It Quits

It is an art to know when to retire. Not only can extending one's tenure beyond the time of effective leadership result in damage to the community, it also tends to erase all memory of the good that the leader had performed in the past. Moses is not afraid to admit that he "can no longer be active." (Deuteronomy 31:2) He himself acknowledges that it is time for change.

2. Giving Support to One's Successor

Nothing is more damaging to the process of transition than the undermining of the authority of one's successor by a retiring leader. Moses proclaims publicly that Joshua is the ideal person to succeed him and in so doing, Moses also affirms the decision of the "top management." "Joshua," Moses tells the assembly, "is the one who shall cross before you, as God has spoken." (Deuteronomy 31:3)

3. Providing Public Support for One's Successor

"In the sight of all Israel," Moses bestows his blessing upon Joshua, giving him encouragement and affirmation, essentially assuring him that he is perfect for the task. (Deuteronomy 31:7) At the same time, Moses is careful not to offer too much advice, being wise enough to exit with grace and dignity.

Moses' greatness as a human being and community leader is revealed in his consecration of Joshua. The thoughtfulness and prudence he demonstrates guarantee Joshua's ultimate effectiveness as successor to Moses. The great lawgiver can now ascend Mount Nebo in peace, without regret and concern. He knows that he was the best possible leader during the time he served and that he had done everything he could have to insure that leadership would be transferred to the best person for the job.

Disraeli once said that "change is inevitable in a progressive society." Moses teaches us that it also takes a special sensitivity to know when the time for change has come, a special insight to know how to effect that change, and the grace to help that transition take place without displaying any hurt feelings or resentment.

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THE STANDING JEW PLAN

Leigh Lerner

Atem nitzavim hayom, "You are standing this day...." (Deuteronomy 29:9) In this week's parashah, Nitzavim, all Israel stands as a sign of respect, just as we do during the Amidah, the worship service's central prayer. But there is another reason why we, like the ancient Israelites, might stand at significant moments. Perhaps there is truly something different that happens emotionally and sociologically when we stand as opposed to when we sit. In the 1950s, Harry Golden, the editor of *The Carolina Israelite*, noted an interesting fact about integration. In his editorial with the then politically correct title of "The Standing Negro Plan," Golden observed that Southerners were already integrated when they were on their feet: People stood in line together to board the bus, to receive polio shots, and to check out at the supermarket. The problem was not how to integrate standing people but seated ones. So Golden proposed that schools be integrated by removing the seats. Hence, if every child stood, then who could object to integration?

Golden touched upon something important: We're willing to stand with people we dislike, but we won't sit with them. It is impossible to believe that after forty years of wandering together in the desert, all the Israelites were friends. And precisely because Moses knew that when we stand, our emotions of dislike for others do not tend to get in the way and we can concentrate on our common humanity, he stood the people before God.

As the Ten Days of Penitence approach, let us think about the fact that we, too, have made our share of enemies and that we, too, find some people not to our liking. Nevertheless, we shall stand before our God united as a people, and spiritually-just because we are standing-we'll disregard our differences and draw closer to the promise of shalom.

In addition, Moses knew that a standing congregation appears larger than a seated one. He understood that a larger assembly creates a greater impression and that standing together generates a sense of sharing something greater than ourselves. When four thousand Jews rise to honor the Torah at a UAHC biennial, as will be the case in Boston this December, the sheer power of numbers will create a unique and awesome experience for each participating individual. It takes a core number of people in any worship space to combine their energy, warmth, and yearning to form a whole greater than the sum of its parts. Perhaps that's why on the High Holy Days so many rabbis invite the congregation to rise as the service begins. As we stand, our number seems to swell before our eyes, and the spiritual possibilities of the Great Days grow ever more impressive. Moses also bade the people to rise because when we stand, we attain our full physical height, thus symbolically encouraging us to achieve our full spiritual stature.

The words *Da lifnei mi atah omed*, "Know before whom you stand," appear above many arks. How would you feel about "Know before whom you sit"? There is no majesty, no inspiration, in that exhortation. In contrast, when we are on our feet, we are ready to act, to move or turn in any direction, willing to follow, able to lead. When Isaiah speaks about Israel's redemption, he urges: "Rise, shine, for your light is come." (Isaiah 60:1) Isaiah's exhortation to stand is a call to us to attain our full human potential, to meet God as a beacon of hope, and to stand up for all that reflects those hopes.

On this, the Shabbat before Rosh HaShanah, we prepare to stand as one congregation beside those whom we love as well as those whom we do not, ready to lift the power of the moment with our very presence, building the great minyan that marks the Days of Awe. May we resolve now to rise to our full human and spiritual height.

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