

A Few Thoughts on Parashah Nitzavim (Deuteronomy 29:9 - 30:20; Isaiah 61:10 - 63:9) September 3, 2021

"Atem nitzavim hayom kulachem lifnei adonai eloheichem – you are all standing this day before the Lord your God ...” *Nitzavim*, an unusual word for standing, implies standing actively, with purpose. Indeed, the opening words of our parashah extend from the moment of their pronouncement far into the future, and they include all who consider themselves part of our eternal covenant: leaders, elders, officers, and menial laborers; men, women, and children; native and those who have joined us by choice; eyewitnesses and “those who are not here with us today,” i.e., future generations. “... Because all the souls were there, even when their bodies had still not been created.” (Midrash Tanchuma, Nitzavim 3) With these words Moses is actively engaging us all in the name of HaShem and our eternal covenant. We all count, we all have a part to play, and we are all obligated, unequivocally. And lest we succumb to self-deception thinking that we can lead double lives, Moses issues a dire warning, reiterating the phrase, “Perhaps there is among you ...” The first time it continues with “a man, woman, family, or tribe whose heart strays this day from the Lord, our God, to go and worship the deities of those nations.” The second time it proceeds allegorically, “... a root that produces hemlock and wormwood.” (29:17) In other words, their behavior as a source of bitterness. Rashi explains the repetition as referring to two levels of disobeying HaShem: Serving other deities knowingly and willingly, and momentarily straying off the path. Both the intentional and the spontaneous sinner will only add insult to injury by taking refuge in denial. “He will bless himself in his heart, saying, ‘I will have peace in the stubbornness of my heart.’ In order to add the [punishment for the] unintentional sins to that of [his] intentional sins.” (29:18) The Hebrew text here is highly idiomatic. Literally, it means “sweeping away the watered with the dry” or, according to Rashi, “adding the watered to the dry.” In other words, making a bad situation worse by refusing to acknowledge wrongdoing. The Ramban (Nachmanides) focuses on “blessing himself in his heart” – the quintessence of believing that one is exempt from the rules that apply to everyone else, and therefore immune to the consequences. The deities to which Moses referred have vanished along with their civilizations, but other “deities” have taken their place: Wealth, power, fame, acceptance, success, comfort, and countless other unhealthy and unethical attractions are the perpetual traps into which the unwary stumble. Every generation has its own lures, its own deceptions, and its own punishments, and the foolhardy of each generation believe they have found new and wonderful ways to express the “freedom” they think they have invented and the acceptance they think they have won. Our Torah is prophetic indeed, for it foresees, and constantly warns against all of this. I came of age in the 1960s, when universities were not only full of student protests and drugs of all kinds, but also home to a whole cornucopia of religious and spiritual attractions. Our Hillel group had its share of “JewBus,” Jews looking for spiritual enlightenment in Buddhism, along with an assortment of anarchists and adherents of Timothy Leary and the psychedelic drugs he advocated – confused, discontented people searching for something they often could not even define, but obviously were not finding in the Judaism they knew. I was one of the fortunate ones, too focused on becoming an opera singer to pay attention to these distractions. (And my wise pharmacist father had instilled a healthy fear of drugs in me with one little offhand remark about the lack of information on the effects they might have on the human voice – I didn’t even dare to eat a “space cookie”!) But I did spend years dabbling in other religions and philosophies before I finally settled down and listened to my own Jewish soul. (There’s that word again: *sh-m-a* – listening with understanding, i.e., reacting – *sh’mah Yisrael*) Chapter 30 talks about return. After every generation’s detours, with their often tragic consequences, we will always return, drawn back by the promises and obligations of our eternal covenant. The answers we have been looking for are closer than we think. “For this commandment which I command you this day, is not concealed from you, nor is it far away. It is not in heaven ... Nor is it beyond the sea ... Rather, this thing is very close to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can fulfill it.” (30:11-14) We can blithely chase after the false deities of our current fancies believing that we will not suffer the consequences, we can medicate our conscience with a whole variety of deceptions, and we can search for fulfillment in other belief structures. If we are lucky, these will be momentary episodes in our lives, teaching moments along the way to maturity. Realizing that we are on a false and dangerous path, we can stop, and turn toward a better path. This is the process of *teshuvah* in which we have been engaging during the month of Elul, and upon which we will focus intently starting with Rosh HaShanah and culminating on Yom Kippur. Because our covenant includes us all, we are all capable of return: sceptics and rebels as well as the zealously pious, the long absent as well as those who have momentarily strayed, Jews of all nations, all walks of life, all shapes, sizes, and colors. We are all *klal Yisrael*, Jewish people in all our wonderful diversity, and each one of us endowed with the potential of *teshuvah* and gifted with the means to achieve it.

Shabbat shalom!