

*“Atem nitzavim hayom kulachem lifnei adonai eloheichem – you are all standing this day before the Lord your God ...”* *Nitzavim*, from the root נצב, means standing actively, positioning oneself. Indeed, the opening words of our parashah extend far into the future, and they are addressed to 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. We all count, and we are all unequivocally obligated by the terms of our eternal covenant. Reiterating the phrase, “Perhaps there is among you ...” (29:17), Moses issues a dire warning for those who think they can live in two worlds. The first iteration 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 is allegorical, “... a root that produces hemlock and wormwood.” These bitter plants symbolize the bitter fruits of evil behavior. Whereas all parts of the hemlock plant are highly toxic, wormwood has medicinal properties along with its toxicity – a perfect illustration of Rashi’s belief that the repetition refers to two levels of disobeying HaShem: Serving other deities knowingly and willingly, versus momentarily straying off the path. However, both the intentional and the impulsive sinner will 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 “adding the saturated to the parched.” The root ספה means: to add, but implies sweeping away / bringing to ruin, i.e., making a bad situation worse by refusing to acknowledge wrongdoing. The Ramban (Nachmanides) focuses on “blessing himself in his heart” – those who believe that because the rules don’t apply to them, there will be no consequences. The deities of Moses’ time have vanished along with their worshipers, but others have taken their place: Wealth, power, fame, social acceptance, success, comfort, and countless other unhealthy, immoral and unethical “achievements” people strive for. Every generation has its own lures, its own deceptions, its own punishments, and its own passionate devotees who believe they have found foolproof ways to express the “freedom” they think they have invented and the recognition they think they have won. Nothing new under the sun! I came of age in the 1960s, when universities were rife with drugs and student protests, and fertile ground for 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 fall prey 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 so-called 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: *shema* – listening with understanding and reacting accordingly. After every generation’s detours with their often tragic consequences, most of us end up returning to the promises and obligations of our covenant. If this were not so, we would have disappeared long ago. *Baruch haShem*, we are still here, because we have understood the eternal truth that Moses tells the people in Chapter 30: 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 soothe our conscience with every imaginable deception. We can search for fulfillment in other forms of spirituality. And we can even withdraw into addiction. If we are lucky, these will be momentary episodes in our lives, teaching moments along the way to greater understanding. Once we realize that we are on a false and dangerous path, we can stop, rethink, and turn toward a better path. Yes, *teshuvah* – the product of the soul searching that we have been doing during the month of Elul as we prepare for Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur. Because our covenant includes us all, we all have the capacity to 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. We just have to tune out the noisy world and silence our own distracting thoughts so we can hear the *kol d’mamah dakah*, the thin voice of stillness within each of us that is our very own, personal connection to HaShem. שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל Listen up, God-wrestlers – and stand tall.

Shabbat shalom!