

Nitzavim – VaYeLech

I want to share a bit of my journey to where I am today. 52 years ago I was preparing for my Bar Mitzvah which was 51 years ago this Shabbat of Nitzavim/Veyelech. My teacher, a very humble person, was the shamas at our synagogue. I knew him as Mr. Max. He was a quiet man who sat at the back of the chapel running the daily minyan and teaching us bar mitzvah students our haftarot. He was a kind man with a mustache. Mr Max sat most of the time at the back and made us stand at the front on the bimah. One day he said to me – you're going to be like all the rest. You'll have your Bar Mitzvah and then you'll be gone. We won't see you again. I said that's not true. I am not like everyone else. Standing here today I remember that conversation of over 50 years ago as if it just happened. Apparently, I have spent a part of my life proving him wrong. I'm still here.

As a young person, life got more challenging when my father passed away a few months after my Bar Mitzvah. I was lost but the synagogue and the people there – my teachers, youth leaders, and rabbis (I found out that Mr Max was a rabbi; he just never shared that with too many people, he wanted to be a person and not a person with a title) the synagogue was a safe place and I felt taken in, adopted. From this I was drawn into the world of Jewish Education and worked in that world for 37 years in many capacities. I was a tutor, teacher, school principal, student advisor, chaplain, and more. Most of that time was with middle school students.

Today, I am a contractor. After those 37 years I had simply burned out. I ran out of patience dealing with the politics and constant contrary demands and expectations. I worked with a career counselor and changed careers. However, my connection to things Jewish and Judaism did not change. And coming here to TBZ has been a huge part of the continuation of my life in Judaism. When I left Jewish education I had no desire to be involved with a synagogue and was happy to go to services on Shabbat and holidays, have observance at home, give to Tzedakah and I was complete. But TBZ drew me in, us in, Marilyn and I and now we are members and I am on a few committees.

So, what is the connection to the Parsha? We have an interesting sequence of parshiot these last few weeks and I have felt that this sequence speaks about how our lives go, or certainly can go. Two weeks ago we read when you go out, Ki Tetze. And last week we read Ki Tavo – when you come. And today we read nitzavim vayelech – stand and go. It's like a tug of war. We go out, we come back, we go out, we come back.

And in this week's parsha we get the message – there will be times when you go out, times when you come back, times that go well, and times that are challenging. The important thing is to make a choice. And make it a good choice because we will ultimately have to answer for our choices. And what we are told is that the guide to the choices we make is in the Torah.

In chapter 30 verses 11-14 we are told that the mitzvot that we are 'commanded' are not too mysterious or remote. They are not in heaven, they are not over the sea. It is close to us, in our heart and in our mouth. At the simplest level Moses is telling the Israelites: your religion is not esoteric, difficult, beyond the comprehension of ordinary minds. It is not a religion of mysteries which need oracles, adepts or religious virtuosi to decode. "The Torah speaks in the language of human beings," said the sages. This is fundamental.

Many cultures place a premium on knowledge that is only available to a relative few, the elite. Egypt had its "decipherers of hieroglyphics." Ancient Greece had the Delphic oracle. Until the Reformation, literacy tended to be confined to priests. Latin was the language of scholars, beyond the reach of the masses. And in the prophets we learn that even the young were literate.

Here at TBZ, which is different from many congregations, we learn together and no matter the background we are all encouraged to participate and share our own individual insights. In this way we make the Torah our own, it's accessible to all, and we learn from one another. That is one of the beauties of the weekly Torah study before the service begins.

The very next verse, verse 15 tells us very clearly – I set before you today the life and the good and the death and the evil. In other words, we are instructed that the choice is ours. My wife, Marilyn, often says – it's a

choice and people should choose wisely. This makes it conscious. I once heard a saying that went something like this..

There are three kinds of people in the world – those who make things happen, those who watch things happen, and those who wonder – what happened. Each is a product of a choice – a choice to act, a choice to watch, or a choice not to do anything and be dust in the wind.

In verse 19 we read that Moshe calls heaven and earth as witnesses, much as he will do in next week's parsha, Ha-Azinu – I have placed before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. You must choose life so that you and our descendants will survive. And Rabbi Nachman taught that choice, free choice is not so complicated – we do what we want to do and don't do what we don't want to do.

It seems to me that along with the privilege of making choices comes the burden/responsibility/onus (choose your phrase) to make choices. The message of the parsha and the approaching Yamim Nora'im – days of awesomeness is to review and reset our compass. By being conscious and deliberate we can do that.

On Wednesday evening we begin the holiday of Rosh HaShannah and the beginning of the Aseret Y'mai Teshuvah – the ten days of returning. A time to take stock of our year, make good choices for the coming year, and as Reb Moshe says – we are given yet another chance to live a better life.

So, my Bar Mitzvah portion has stayed with me and I am grateful and thankful to have been able to spend a few minutes sharing some thoughts with you. Rabbi Max, I don't know if you are the sole inspiration to the choice of the path I have chosen and taken, but you are still with me sitting at the back of the chapel with your warm smile behind your mustache. Thank you for the challenge.

Ours is a way of life that encourages us each to be knowledgeable at our own level, a way of life that is meant to include all the members of our community, and tells us and warns us at the same time to make the right choices.

Shabbat Shalom.

