

Nitzavim Vayelech 2017

Shabbat Shalom.... It is wonderful to be given the opportunity to celebrate with you today.

It seems to me that today's parsha, Nitzavim Vayelech, actually began several verses earlier at the end of last week's portion, Ki Tavo. Today we began reading from chapter 29 verse 9 but we saw from verse 1 (in last week's reading) that the nation had already been summoned together. And similar to what was stated in Exodus chapter 19 verse 4 - Moses reiterates that the nation witnessed what God did for them in Egypt, how God helped fight back against Sichon, king of Cheshbon and Og king of Bashan. Last week's portion then ends with a big IF - reminding us If we safeguard the words of this Covenant and keep them we will be successful in all we do.

This last part of D'varim, which this parsha introduces, primarily places the future before the people. They have a choice to make. And the Israelites are warned of the dire consequences of not obeying God's law. And even with that warning, they are presented with a good ending, despite going into exile. God (and perhaps Moshe) are confident that Israel will return. We see this in the 4th Aliyah that I read - chapter 30 verse 3 - YHVH will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you, and bring you together from all the nations to which YHVH your Elohim had scattered you...

I couldn't help but wonder what kind of a choice is it if there is such a dire consequence for not choosing correctly. YHVH, through Moses, is letting the people know that they will be responsible for their own lives. And in this lesson, no one is left out.

Today's parsha Nitzavim states from the very first words - " You are standing and present, ALL OF YOU!" Everyone is present - your head, your tribes, your elders, your officials, and all the men of Israel. Included too are the little ones, your wives, your sojourners - everyone from the woodchoppers to the water haulers (who were seen as the lowest in society).

This in itself appears as something of a contradiction. The verse begins by speaking to Israel as a unity—“You are standing... all of you”—without making any distinctions. But immediately afterwards, it

proceeds to detail the different classes of Jew separately. Upon careful reading we see that we are faced with a question. If Moses said that everyone was present in his words "you, all of you", why did he list so many 'classes' of people? What is the Torah trying to teach us?

One explanation could be that he did so in order to make a fundamental point: that on the one hand, **there must be unity; and, at the same time, each and every one of us has a unique contribution to make, our own individual mission.** If we are united then indeed we are greater than the sum of our parts and yet, in our culture, we certainly don't want to lose our individuality. We live with a tension between the community and ourselves as individuals.

I have another question to ponder. Why include the children? - The Rambam pointed out that as minors they couldn't accept the covenant BUT by being present they shared in this powerful event. We are taught in the Talmud that even before building a synagogue, the community must provide for the education of its children. Education is, I believe, one of the strongest tenets of Judaism. Here, at TBZ, a remarkable institution that we all can and should be proud of is Beit Rabban. We have an education program for our young people that continues to grow and thrive. We should count ourselves among the more fortunate in that we have an educational program for our young people that is flourishing!

The covenant is given not just to those present but also to those not here, the unborn. Essentially the adults and the children are responsible for the future generations to which they will give birth. We learned this message a few weeks ago when we read Parshat Shoftim. Similar to the event at Sinai, the Torah is telling us that all our souls were present at Moshe's address (not Reb Moshe). An important message to me is about legacy. What is the legacy that each of us will leave. And is there potential for the legacy to continue beyond us to the next generation? How will the choices we make affect what and who comes after us? What will future generations say about us as human beings? Will they know what we cared about? Will they know something of what we did or said to help make the world a better place? Whether we have children or

not, we need to concern ourselves with the legacy each of us leaves.

How can we educate, initiate, inspire the next generation of the Jewish People, our children and further descendants to assume their place as a link in the chain of Jewish history and to keep Judaism alive and relevant for itself and for future generations? This challenge is the challenge that Moshe faces during the entire Book of Devarim (Deuteronomy).

By example, I was reminded as I prepared this d'var Torah of the words of some of my teachers from my Religious School and Hebrew High School days. I did not attend Jewish Day School. My foundation came from a few day a week religious school from teachers who really cared about what they were imparting to us in spite of our antics as youth.

When Mr. Shapiro taught me to read Torah and learn lessons from what I was reading he would conclude with "and that's the whole shebang!". To me it sounds like the story of the person who came to Rabbis Shamai and Hillel to ask them to teach the whole Torah while standing on one foot. Rabbi Hillel taught "what is hateful to you, don't do to your neighbor and the rest is all commentary."

When Rabbi Max, whom I mentioned when I had commemorated an earlier B/M anniversary three years ago said to me "you'll be like all the rest; we won't see you after your Bar Mitzvah", he too left an important impression on me because I'm still here and still learning. There was my teacher, when I was 9 years old, Mr. Teitelbaum, who was a lawyer by day and a religious school teacher by afternoon and Sunday. A man with bushy eyebrows and a twinkle in his eye who could never be cross with us for more than a moment. He stayed with me after classes to help me master Hebrew reading. I am grateful for his dedication to teaching.

And when a mentor, Mrs. Levitats, warned not to go into Jewish Education as a professional, I didn't heed her words. Both she and her husband had given their lives to Jewish Education. Nonetheless, she tried to dissuade me from choosing it as a profession. I took her words as a challenge and served in Jewish Education for 37 years. I have the satisfaction of knowing that I did make a positive

impression on students and I am still involved today as a bar mitzvah tutor.

We need to choose our words wisely because we can have an impact or influence on others. As an example, my former teachers had an impact on my beliefs and choices. I am sure that my teachers from my religious school have no idea that what they said still resides with me to this day. We, too, will and are having lasting impacts on our children, our friends, and the people we see and interact with every day. This is a great responsibility and requires that we always try to be aware and cautious of how we conduct ourselves. As we enter the Yamim Nora'im and prepare for the holiness of introspection let's commit ourselves to be mindful of the example we set for our children and to others by what we do and what we say. Let's commit to the impact on our future as a people and a community.

The Torah belongs to all of us and it is accessible to each and every one of us individually and as a community. We just have to take hold of it and draw the lessons that touch us. And we shouldn't be shy about sharing what we are learning. When we ask ourselves, "did it really happen this way?" we are asking the wrong question. What we need to ask is, "What is this teaching us? What can I gain or learn from this?" And how can I best pass this on? In this way we make it our own and help towards continuity.

And finally, I want to thank this wonderful community for welcoming us (Marilyn and me) into it. Last week was the quote welcoming Shabbat - and we have felt and continue to feel that every week is welcoming Shabbat. I am personally grateful to belong to a Jewish Institution that lives its message of caring, learning, and community. You have hooked me in, in the most beautiful and meaningful way - beyond words.

Thank you for the opportunity to share these thoughts with you. May we all be inscribed and sealed for a year of goodness, a year of personal growth, a year of learning from mistakes, and many years of peace. I hope that's not asking for too much. Shabbat shalom!