

## Facing Mortality and Choosing Life

*Nitzavim - Vayeilech, Deuteronomy 29:9–30:20, 31:1–30*

### D'VAR TORAH BY: RABBI MAX CHAIKEN

You stand this day, all of you, before the Eternal your God – you tribal heads, you elders, and you officials, all the men of Israel, you children, you women, even the stranger within your camp, from wood chopper to water drawer – to enter into the covenant of the Eternal your God, which the Eternal your God is concluding with you this day. (Deut. 29:9-11).

These are the iconic words Moses speaks to the People of Israel at the beginning of this week's double Torah portion, *Parashat Nitzavim/Vayeilech*. The Israelites are standing ready to cross the Jordan River and enter the Promised Land, but before they can proceed, they await Moses' words of farewell.

With incredible rhetorical power, these two portions restate many central themes that Moses addressed throughout Deuteronomy.

Moses reminds us of a few things: that the covenant made between the Israelites and the Divine was made for all of us, regardless of class, that we make this covenant *hayom* (today), evoking a sense of urgency, and that the covenant extends beyond “those who are standing here this day” to include “those who are not with us here this day,” making it timeless.

The text's message is that in every generation, everyone – regardless of race, sexual/gender identity, nationality, class, age, or place of birth – can affirm and fulfill our covenant with the Holy One of Blessing.

The text also teaches that our actions have consequences. As partners with the Divine, our choices can help bring about blessings and prosperity (Deut. 30:1-5) or lead us down the path of idolatry (Deut. 29:17-18). We have the power to choose:

**See, I set before you this day life and prosperity, death and adversity... I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day: I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse.**

**Choose life – if you and your offspring would live (Deut. 30:15, 19).**

But lest this responsibility frighten us, Moses offers words of support, telling us that keeping the covenant need not feel daunting:

**Surely, this instruction which I enjoin upon you this day is not too baffling for you, nor is it beyond reach. It is not in the heavens... Neither is it beyond the sea... No, the thing is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to observe it (Deut. 30:11-14).**

These portions also remind us that even great lives ultimately come to an end. Moses acknowledges that not only will he soon die, but also that he, himself, will not cross the Jordan into the Promised Land (Deut. 31:1-2). He publicly acknowledges Joshua as his successor and blesses him with courage in guiding the people on the next phase of the journey (Deut. 31:7). We even learn that Moses wrote down “this Teaching,” the Torah, and gave it to the priests to carry (Deut. 31:9), along with the first instruction that the Torah be read publicly:

**Every seventh year, the year set for remission [of debts], at the Feast of Booths, when all Israel comes to appear before the Eternal your God... you shall read this Torah aloud in the presence of all Israel. Gather the people – men, women, children, and the strangers in your communities – that they may hear and learn... (Deut. 31:10-12).**

The rhetorical momentum of this final speech amplifies its impact, and the richness of its ideas contributes to its lasting legacy.

It may not come as a surprise, then, that Reform Jews read from *Nitzavim* not only on the Shabbat before Rosh HaShanah, but also on Yom Kippur.

The themes and metaphors of Yom Kippur are rich and varied. A day of fasting and introspection, Yom Kippur reminds us to do *t'shuvah*: to return to the best of ourselves and our covenant with the Divine before it's too late. As we rehearse for our own death, our mortality beckons us to "choose life" and to acknowledge it as a blessing and a miracle. As we face the day of judgment, we are reminded that "this day," *hayom*, must be a day to change our lives, to continue the work of *t'shuvah* for ourselves and *tikkun* (repair) of our world.

The song "When I'm Gone," by folk singer Phil Ochs, frames our mortality in a similar way:

**There's no place in this world where I'll belong, when I'm gone**

**I won't know the right from the wrong, when I'm gone**

**You won't find me singing on this song, when I'm gone**

**So I guess I'll have to do it while I'm here...**

**I won't feel the flowing of the time, when I'm gone**

**The pleasures of love will not be mine, when I'm gone**

**My pen won't pour out a lyric line, when I'm gone**

**So I guess I'll have to do it while I'm here...**

**I won't be laughing at the lies, when I'm gone**

**I can't question how or when or why, when I'm gone**

**Can't live proud enough to die, when I'm gone**

**So I guess I'll have to do it while I'm here**

As we gather in community these coming weeks to welcome a new year, whether in person or online, may we continue to take part in the covenant.

May we continue to choose life.

May we focus on the blessing of life and bring an attitude of abundance to the challenges we face.

May we remind ourselves that Torah is not in the heavens nor across the sea, but close to our hearts for us to make real.

May we reaffirm the covenant made with the Divine "this day" and every day, so that when we're gone, the goodness of our actions and our lives may carry on in this world.