

**Sermon | Parshat Nitzavim**  
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The Torah moves from a narrative about one individual family, to the story about a nation, a group of people bound together by their shared past and their shared destiny. These collective experiences make it such that we often depict the people of Israel has a homogenous group: descendants of Jacob who became a great nation in Egypt, were liberated by God through Moses, and were brought through the wilderness to inherit the Promised Land, if only they uphold the covenant as outlined by the Torah. But every once in a while, the Torah turns away from this sense of homogeneity, and recognizes instead there is diversity within the people that have traveled with Moses to this point. There are people of different ages, different genders, people who occupy different places in ancient Israelite society, and even people of different backgrounds and origins. This is the reminder that Parshat Nitzavim sets before us:

אַתֶּם נֹצְבִים הַיּוֹם כְּלָכֶם לְפָנַי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם

"You stand this day, all of you, before Adonai your God—"

רְאִשֵׁיכֶם שְׂבֻטֵיכֶם זְקֵנֵיכֶם וְשֹׁטְרֵיכֶם כָּל אִישׁ יִשְׂרָאֵל:

your tribal heads, your elders and your officials, all the men of Israel,

טַפְּכֶם נְשִׁיכֶם וְגֵרְךָ אֲשֶׁר בְּקִרְבְּךָ מִחֲנֶיךָ

your children, your wives, even the stranger within your camp,

מִחֹטֵב עֵצִיךָ עַד שֹׁאֵב מִיְמֵיךָ:

from woodchopper to waterdrawer."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Deuteronomy 29:9-10.

The list is much more exhaustive than a typical address of the Torah. There is much more specificity than we might be able to find in other places. As you may have anticipated, the classical commentaries on the Torah have much to say about these verses.

Rashi cites one teaching from Midrash Tanchuma which suggests that the woodcutters and waterdrawers are people who tried to join the Israelites, but who lacked the best intentions. They were not seeking to become a part of the people or to follow our ways, but rather were interested in being protected by the power of the nation. The *midrash* derives that idea from a narrative in the Book of Joshua where that same phrase, “woodcutters and waterdrawers,” refers to a group of Gibeonites who tried to deceive the Israelites.

Seforno takes a markedly different approach. The individual categories of people are named because each one plays an important role, each one has something to teach the rest of the people. In this moment of communal gathering to affirm their collective commitment to the *brit*, the covenant between the Israelites and God, each group within the congregation has something to offer and something to teach. That is a powerful demonstration of the importance of all people in a community, regardless of their age, occupation, or station.

If we go back and look at Midrash Tanchuma, there are alternative interpretations of the verse compared to the one offered by Rashi. The first alternative is that despite each individual having a different role and function, all people stand equally before God, כְּלָכֶם שְׂוִין לְפָנַי. Whether you are a magistrate, an officer, or a waterdrawer does not *really* matter in the eyes of God. Each person has inherent human dignity because we are created in the image of God, *b'tzelem Elohim*. God does not look upon one profession as any more honorable than another. When we stand before God in judgment, as we will in just a few days, we stand

together as equals. When we stand equally before God, we recognize the value of inherent human dignity. God does not privilege the Harvard graduate over the high school graduate, the doctor over the sanitation worker. Each person contributes to the functioning of society in their own way, from the tribal head to the waterdrawer.

The second alternative interpretation from this *midrash*, is that all members of the House of Israel, all of the Jewish people, are responsible for one another: כְּלֶכֶם עֲרָבִים זֶה בְּזֵה. This phrase appears elsewhere in rabbinic texts as well, and typically is employed to teach that we are, in fact, responsible for another's actions. This idea is awfully countercultural in America today, where the rights and freedoms of each individual are typically privileged over what is idea for the collective. Judaism compels us to think and act differently. It is our task as a community to watch out for one another, to protect one another, and to do what we must to take accountability for each other's actions. We share in each other's successes, but also in our failures.

When we set these two alternative interpretations side by side, recognizing the inherent human dignity of each person, as well as accepting upon ourselves this notion of collective responsibility, we are compelled to take the message of this Labor Day Weekend beyond the retail sales and unofficial end-of-summer hype. The message of these opening lines of Parshat Nitzavim is that we stand here today, collectively responsible for upholding the human dignity of our neighbors, regardless of their station in life. It is a reminder that all who serve in the labor force, all who dedicate their daily working hours to the functioning of a healthy society, are deserving of dignity and respect.

A brief history about Labor Day: Labor Day has its origins in the labor movement of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and its growing discontent with the exploitation of workers who were required to work twelve hours per day, often six days a week. It took years of strikes, parades, and other actions within the labor movement to realize the dream of making Labor Day a federal holiday, a gesture to honor the nation's workers, and an opportunity to raise awareness about issues facing America's laborers. Oregon was the first state to declare a holiday called Labor Day in 1887, and several states soon followed. Seven years later, in 1894, Labor Day is declared a federal holiday. Although we have come a long way since 1894, there is still much work to be done in the pursuit of fair labor practices in our nation. That is why we mark today as Labor on the Bima, a Shabbat initiative of Jews United for Justice since 1998 to put "labor" back into Labor Day by engaging local Jewish communities in a collective conversation about texts, historical experiences, and the challenges facing workers today. In so doing, we recognize how Judaism calls upon us to uphold human dignity, to practice collective responsibility, and to thereby honor and give attention to all workers, regardless of their job title or level of income.

Parshat Nitzavim reminds us that all stand equal before God, and that all of us are responsible for one another. I am dutybound to honor and uphold your dignity, just as you must do the same for me. And that is not where the story ends. Our *parsha* continues after these verses to emphasize the importance of the *brit*, the covenant made between God and the Jewish people. That covenant calls upon each one of us to follow the Torah's divine instructions, to uphold the commandments and execute our responsibilities, both those that are *bein adam l'makom*, between a person and God, and those that are *bein adam l'havero*, between one person and another. We can only participate in that covenant if we first accept

upon ourselves the importance of honoring one another's dignity, and taking accountability for our actions as a community. When the U.S. House Committee on Labor commented on the legislation that made Labor Day a federal holiday, they said in the report (and I am quoting here so please forgive the gendered language), "So long as the laboring man can feel that he holds an honorable as well as a useful place in the body politic, so long will he be a loyal and faithful citizen."<sup>2</sup> So long as we in the Jewish community do our part to honor human dignity and to work collaboratively to fulfill our community's aspirations, so long will we remain faithful to the covenant established between Moses and all the people of Israel.

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<sup>2</sup> See <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/article/history-labor-day>.