

## You Stand This Day ... All of You

Parashat Nitzavim 5783

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We Jews are an argumentative bunch. You know: two Jews, three opinions. It may be one of our contributions to the larger society. We are living now in a very polarizing time. We all have opinions about a broad range of issues, and we are aware that some people disagree with us. And we are quite sure that those folks are ... wrong ... hopelessly so. Their ideas are useless at best, and dangerous at worst. Our challenge, though, is not just to be right. Our challenge is to learn to understand, appreciate, value the views from the other side as well.

In a *d'var Torah* at our Thursday morning *minyan*, Rabbi Stone referenced teachings of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, the first Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of the Yishuv, the Jewish Settlement in Eretz Israel before the establishment of the state. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century, most of the Haredi Orthodox world opposed Zionism. Religiously, they believed only the Messiah could establish Jewish sovereignty in the land of Israel. And politically, they opposed a Zionist movement led by secularists who rejected “old world” expressions of religious Judaism.

The camps were divided, but Rav Kook tried to bring them together. He preached what he called “*achdut ha-hafakhim*, a uniting of opposites.” (It sounds similar to Hegel’s thesis, antithesis, and synthesis, but Kook never mentioned Hegel; he drew on kabbalistic principles instead.) While the prevailing ethos was to belittle the ideas and aims of the other, Kook argued that the religious and secular needed each other. The Zionists’ goal of establishing a Jewish state would benefit religious Jews, too.

To those who were suspicious of their secularism, Kook argued that they weren’t really so secular. “Jewish secular nationalism,” he wrote, “is a form of self-delusion. The spirit of Israel is so closely linked to the spirit of God that a Jewish nationalist, no matter how secular his intentions may be, must, despite himself, affirm the divine.” In other words, the act of building a Jewish state – even if performed by a staunch secularist – is by definition a religious act. That was Kook’s way of valuing the other side: (#1) their work is our work because religious Jews will benefit; and (#2) their program of strengthening the Jewish collective is actually a religious mission.

Beyond the “usefulness” argument, Kook preached a philosophy of deep love for all. His essay on love begins: “האהבה צריכה להיות מלאה בלב לכל” Let love fill your heart and flow out to all. The love for all creations, ... love for all humanity, ... love for the Jewish people” leads to love of the divine, which is fully realized love. In our time of polarizing divisions in Israel and in this country. We might stand to learn from Kook’s message of the inherent value of all people.

Regrettably, Kook wasn’t considered part of the classical Jewish canon when I studied at the Jewish Theological Seminary, so I haven’t studied much of him. Just as Kook’s teachings were more valued by future generations than they were in his own day, I pray that I may yet merit to study more of

his work. I haven't read Kook's commentary on Parashat Nitzavim, but I can imagine what he would have said, based on the little learning I have done. We read this morning, "*Atem nitzavim hayyom kulkhem*, you are standing today, **all of you**, before Adonai your God – your tribal heads, your elders, and your officials, all the men of Israel, your children, your wives, even the stranger within your camp, from woodchopper to water drawer – to enter into Adonai's covenant."

I love how expansive and inclusive those opening lines are, particularly in light of the divisions we experience today. We are suspicious of those with whom we disagree. We very easily point out how they are wrong, sometimes dangerously so. But can we learn to understand – and even appreciate – them and their values as well? Can we aspire to live out Kook's uniting of the opposites?

The story of American Judaism is a story of expanding the boundaries of community. First it was women – inviting women to sit together with the men in family pews; then to read Torah, lead services, and seek ordination as rabbis and cantors. More than twenty years ago, the discussion expanded to include the participation of LGBT+ individuals in Jewish life – to recognize gay marriages and welcome gay and lesbian students into our rabbinical schools. More recently, we are learning to adjust our language and certain aspects of ritual to fully include transgender and nonbinary individuals in Jewish life. This is an ongoing process, as conventions change and there is always more to learn, but the principal is based on that opening verse from today's Torah reading. All of you – all of them, all of us – were included in the covenant at Sinai. Every individual who is Jewish or wants to cast their lot with the Jewish people deserves a place, and not just to join. Every individual has the potential to contribute, to add their voice to the community conversation, because every individual is inherently valued as a child of God.

That principal of expansion applies to Jews of Color. It informs the way we think about disparities in observance practices and levels of education among our members. It applies to non-Jews as well as to Jews. Ritual creates certain boundaries, but most of community life extends beyond the reach of ritual. In our portion, Moses continues: "ולא אתכם לכדכם, It is not with you alone that I make this covenant, but both with those who are standing here before the Lord our God, *ואת אשר איננו פה עמנו היום*, and also with those who are not here with us today." Moses's words compel us to ask in every generation: Who is not standing with us today? Who might help to make this community stronger, if only they might be invited in? How might our walls continue to expand?

September is National Recovery Month, and its message is the same: "Every person. Every Family. Every Community." Addiction does not restrict its reach to certain communities. It happens in the Jewish community as it happens in other communities. It happens in wealthy families as it happens in poor ones. It happens to the well-educated, and those who are less educated as well. Addiction is a disease. We don't know why it infects some people more than others, but we don't have to know. We don't blame other diseases on the people who are stricken. We try to support them and ensure they have access to the best treatments.

"Every Person. Every Family. Every Community" has a role to play in recovery as well. It is not uncommon for 12-step programs to meet in church basements. There is nothing wrong with that, except if it sends an implicit message that addiction only afflicts Christians, or only the Christian community is

committed to recovery. I want to give a shout out today to Our Jewish Recovery, which is an online community founded by my colleague Rabbi Ilan Glazer. Our Jewish Recovery uses the wisdom of our Jewish tradition – Torah study, meetings, community – to support individuals who suffer from addiction. Our B’nai Israel clergy is eager to support people as well. Our doors are open, and we pledge to **listen** – not to judge – and to support anyone who wants to be helped. “Every Person. Every Family. Every Community” stands before God in covenant.

The 20<sup>th</sup>-century Rabbi Asher Anshel Yehudah Miller, asks in his commentary *Lechem Asher* about our opening verse: “You are standing today, *all of you* ..., all the men of Israel.” If the verse says “all of you,” why must it add “all the men of Israel”? The answer, says Lechem Asher, is that as individuals, each of us is deficient and undeserving of standing in God’s presence. Ecclesiastes teaches that there is no fully righteous person who never succumbs to temptation, “כי אין צדיק בארץ אשר יעשה טוב ולא יחטא.” But when we stand together as a community, our blemishes disappear. One person’s deficiencies are masked by another person’s strength. We stand together because everybody counts, everybody contributes, everybody is valued.

Whenever a person is left to feel alone – because their views don’t always align with ours, because they are too religious or too secular, because they suffer from an affliction that others might not recognize – when a person feels pushed to the side, Parashat Nitzavim calls out and invites them to come closer. It calls on communities, families, congregations to open their arms wide. It calls upon us to love. Because everybody matters. Everybody belongs. Everybody has the ability to move us further along the path of God’s sacred covenant. Shabbat shalom.