

*Parashat Nitzavim*  
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Good Shabbos, everyone.

When Rabbi Perkins first contacted me in May about preparing a drash this summer, I confess that my first thought was, “How can I gracefully get out of this?” Although I am deeply interested in learning Torah and other Jewish studies, I felt myself thoroughly unqualified to expound on any such subject myself. But I also felt that the Rabbi's offer was a serious one and deserved serious consideration, so I looked into the available dates.

I saw that I would be in CA for three of the four proposed dates. As I don't have the fortitude shown by Lynn and Steve Baum, who regularly attend these services via zoom despite being in Seattle, I mentally rejected those dates. But when I saw that the one other opportunity was this one, to talk about Nitzavim, I agreed promptly and eagerly. Frankly, I surprised myself. Why was I so eager?

After I began studying the text, I slowly realized why. The recollection of a friend of mine from my teenage years kept intruding in my thoughts. Nitzavim had been his Bar Mitzvah portion. Somehow this had been significant to me even back then. A few years later, at what must have been another Bar Mitzvah (the only occasion aside from the High Holidays when my parents and I would have been in synagogue together), I turned to my mother and said, “this was my friend's Bar Mitzvah portion.” She seemed genuinely interested to be reminded of it.

Attending his B/M was my first encounter with Nitzavim, just as my B/M a few months earlier was my first encounter with Shelach Lecha. I vaguely knew then that bad things happened in my parasha because I had to repeat the first few verses of it in English, but I don't think I realized how critical a moment it was for the Israelites. After all, the entire Jewish people was nearly sentenced to immediate execution; only Moses' intervention succeeded in having that punishment commuted to a life sentence of wandering in the desert, never to see the Promised Land. Nor did I know that the mitzvah of tzitzit was given at the end.



I have been to many other B/Ms, but my friend's was the only one where I remember which parsha was read. So what was so remarkable about Nitzavim that I should remember it several years later and even today? I think it must have been because of the economy and power of the opening words of the text. It begins with just two Hebrew words, *Atem nitzavim*, you are standing, that in my mind evoke the image of every Jew, not sitting in their tents, but gathered together, as one people, to hear Moses' teachings. That's quite a lot to get from just two words.

The scene we see in our mind is an echo of the revelation at Mt. Sinai, where the Jewish People were first gathered to receive a great teaching. It was a pivotal moment; both the gathering together and the receiving of the law. Repeating that scene just before entering the Promised Land seems in itself to teach us that gathering together to hear Gd's words is something we need to revisit periodically. We need these reminders, and we need to be reminded as a community. We are, after all, responsible for each other. Many of the commandments remind us of this.

What does Moses teach the Jewish people as they are gathered there? Moses frames Gd's commandments as entering into a covenant, a contract, with obligations and benefits on both sides. We accept Adonai as our Gd, and promise to obey Gd's laws; Gd in turn accepts us as his beloved people, and will protect and prosper us. The covenant applies to all of the people, from the lofty tribal leaders to the most humble, even with those who are not Jews by birth but live among them. Remarkably, Moses made explicit that the covenant was made not just with those present at that time, but also with future generations. Moses was, after all, a clever jurist, as we have seen in rulings of his that the Torah has recorded.

But what are the detailed terms of the Covenant that we must perform? These have been given in earlier chapters of Deuteronomy not to mention earlier books of the Torah. We have the Ten Commandments repeated with some subtle but significant changes. There is the Shema, in which the unity of Gd is declared once again, and we are instructed to recall Gd's laws and make everything we do an opportunity to teach them to our children. We also have the dietary laws, the holiday calendar, the role of the priesthood, kindness to animals, and many other laws that tell us to deal fairly with each other. Interestingly, we are reminded in earlier chapters of Deuteronomy that we were chosen to enter into this covenant not because we were a numerous and powerful nation; we were not. On the contrary, we were chosen because of the righteousness of our ancestors and Gd's covenant with them. More on this later.

More than anything else, it seems to me that what worries and concerns Moses is the Covenant's prohibition against idolatry and worshipping other gods, in other words, the first two Commandments. We are instructed to destroy all symbols of other gods, destroy those who worship them, and destroy those who would persuade us to worship them.

After Moses' long association with the Israelites, Moses expects that they will in fact turn to other gods. Perhaps we should not be surprised by this. Monotheism and the worship of an unseen and unseeable Gd was an innovation in religious practice. Moreover, it is a difficult and highly abstract concept; even today, only three faiths in the world are monotheistic. I know it's true because I checked it on Google. Besides, in my view, one of those three faiths arguably incorporates idolatry and is not monotheistic to the same degree as the other two. I'm sure its adherents would argue vehemently that I am wrong about this and denounce me as a libelous scoundrel. So be it. But in Nitzavim we are warned that there will be a severe penalty for worshipping other gods and for worshipping idols. Not only will the people be scattered across the world and despised among the foreign countries where they will live, but the land promised to them because of the righteousness of their ancestors will be poisoned so that nothing will grow on it. But Moses assures us that redemption is possible. The Israelites need only return in true repentance to the worship of Adonai to lift the curse and return to the Promised Land.

But how must we worship Gd? How do we repent? Repentance may be difficult to achieve, since it requires discipline and effort, but Moses reminds us that at least what is expected of us is not hard to find or understand. It's not some difficult to decipher puzzle or secret code, nor some vague enlightenment achieved after years of contemplation. No, the laws are not far away, not in heaven, not across the sea, but near to us and in our mouth and in our heart. Following Gd's laws is the way we must worship and how we show our love for Gd, as the Shema commands. In case we have forgotten and we need a quick synopsis of some of Gd's laws, we will get a reminder in less than two weeks of all the ones we may have broken during the past year when we recite the Yom Kippur confessionals. I have several times reminded friends that engaging in idle gossip is among them. My popularity has not increased.

And how will Gd fulfill the divine part of the covenant and protect the Jewish people? During the conquest of the Promised Land, Gd was at the head of the Israelites, assuring their victory. My own feeling is that later on, it is fulfilling the Mitzvot that protects the Jewish people. It's far from perfect protection, but can't be discounted. I think there should be little reason to attack a nation of priests whose

principal desire is the pursuit of righteousness. It seems to me that their righteousness is the reason our Patriarchs and Matriarchs prospered while living among foreign peoples far from their birthplace.

But why was I so eager to give this drash? I can only believe it was because of my friend, whose B/M portion was Nitzavim. He was in my Hebrew school class, of course, and in the class following mine at my high school in Philadelphia, the same h/s attended by Rabbi Perkins, some seven years after me. My friend got very respectable grades. He was athletic and handsome as all get out. We even went on a few double dates together. But my closest contact with him was through Scouting (11-16). He rose to be Senior Patrol Leader; in my troop, this was the highest and most responsible junior leadership position. His father was also active in Scouting; not on a daily basis, but for the big stuff. He was our adult leader when we went on our ten day hiking and camping adventure in the Rocky Mountains of New Mexico. My friend's father carried his own backpack like the rest of the boys. Fortunately, we didn't suffer any of the dreadful discrimination that Rabbi Perkins experienced when he went there. My friend's father also was our adult leader when another group of us Scouts took a 20 mile canoe trip down the Delaware river, and he went with his son and me on the 20 mile bike ride that was part of earning our 50 Miler award.

My friend died very young. I learned of his death while I was in college. Apparently it was from a drug overdose. I was surprised, since my friend didn't seem the type, and had given no hint of prior drug use nor any hint of interest even in smoking cigarettes; but experimentation was becoming common then and user expertise was limited, so it seemed plausible, or at least possible.

Now I had a passing acquaintance with my friend's older sister, but I recently learned that my own older sister was much better acquainted with his sister than I was. Through them I learned only a few years ago that his death was not from drug use after all. That was just a cover story, a way of blaming the victim. Rather, his death was from their family situation, one that his sister was able to survive, with much difficulty, but which my friend could not. This news came as a real shock.

The High Holidays are near at hand, as they always are when we read Nitzavim on Shabbos. I hope we can renew our covenant to worship no god but our Gd by obeying his commandments. Along with being kind to the fatherless, the widow, the orphan, and the stranger, and being generous to the poor among us, let's not forget to be good to those most dear to us, those whom we may at times either neglect or hurt. If we return to Gd, Gd will surely return to us and show us love

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