

September 11, 2020 – 22 Elul, 5780 – Parashat Nitzavim

Dear Temple Beth-El Family,

*“Atem nitzavim hayom kulchem ...”* (“You stand here today, all of you ...”). The second, modifying clause of this phrase, which opens this week’s Torah portion (Parashat Nitzavim), has, as is usual in our tradition, sparked some debate in the rabbinic world.

Some commentators take the position that the word *“kulchem”* (“all of you”) refers to the inclusivity of the mass gathering on the banks of the Jordan River (where Parashat Nitzavim takes place), contrasting it with the far more selective assembly a generation earlier at Sinai (where only adult males who were ritually pure could gather).

Others argue that *“kulchem”* (“all of you”) describes the way in which each of us, as an individual, is called upon to be present when appearing before God. Nitzavim commands us to worship with *kavannah* (“intentionality”), to push aside any thoughts or residual obligations that might prevent us from being fully focused on our devotions.

While in a “normal” year I feel torn between these two interpretations, this year I am unambiguously drawn – as I am guessing, are you – to the vision of an inclusive assembly in which large numbers of people are permitted to congregate in close proximity without fear of contagion or the need for half-hidden faces or social distancing.

Alas, those are not the circumstances under which we will be convening our sacred assembly this Shabbat, nor will they be the conditions that prevail this High Holiday season. Instead, we will find ourselves yet again praying “together but alone” in our respective personal “sanctuaries.”

So this year we find ourselves, all of us, caught in the interstices between Nitzavim’s twin readings. While called upon to be fully present as individuals for this most somber season of worship, we are being forced to summon the energy and focus this requires without the spiritual sustenance that our fellows’ proximity typically bestows.

Just as dauntingly, we are called upon to find within ourselves the tools that will help us endure the oppressive silences between the audible prayers, the moments when – absent the convenient distractions that our fellow congregants typically provide – we stand naked before the thoughts and feelings summoned by the season and its liturgies.

“Stand fully present, not only with your God and your fellows, but with yourself,” Nitzavim exhorts us. Do we have it within ourselves to rise to this test?

Wishing everyone an energizing Shabbat and hoping to see many of you for our Selichot service on Saturday evening at 9 p.m. (details and liturgy available on the TBE website).

Rabbi Rachel Safman