

KOL NIDRE 2021

Congregation Beth Shalom of Napa Valley
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Last week, on Erev Rosh Hashanah, I discussed
some of the challenges of our age,
pressing current events that, by definition,
relate to our specific time & our specific place
in history.//

Tonight, on Kol Nidre, I want to focus instead
on something that is *timeless*,
something that is *always* relevant & important,
irrespective of when you live or where you live.//

There is a Torah portion, *Nitzavim*, which occurs
toward the end of the book of Deuteronomy,

that has been viewed as so important spiritually
it is read in Reform synagogues on Yom Kippur
rather than the traditional *parsha*./

Josh Slater will chant it for us tomorrow morning
from this very podium.//

In *Nitzavim*, the Israelites stand at the threshold
of the Promised Land./

Their 40 years of wandering in the Sinai desert
have finally come to an end,
and their future is uncertain.//

Moses will soon die, & the words of this *parsha*
are part of the prophet's farewell to his people.//

Atem nitzavim, Moses says, “You stand this day,
all of you, before the Lord 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 the covenant of the Lord your God.”//

The powerful bond between the Israelites & God
is a democratic one, egalitarian in nature
and expansive in scope.//

Regardless of gender, age or one’s station in life,
the moral & spiritual responsibilities of the Torah
are applicable to everyone.//

But these obligations are not only democratic—
they are also *timeless* //

Moses continues, speaking for God:

“I make this covenant, with its sanctions,
not with you alone,
but both with those who are standing here
with us this day before the Lord our God
and with those who are not with us here this day.” //

The laws of God, & the relationship between God
and God’s people, are *eternal*—
they transcend time & place. //

They are binding on all,

both present as well as future generations of Jews.//

The fact that the Torah is incumbent on everyone,

even those not yet *born*,

might seem a little confusing & daunting.//

But Moses tries to reassure his people:

“Surely this Instruction

which I enjoin upon you this day

is not too baffling for you, nor is it beyond reach.”//

He tells them that the teachings of their religion

are not “in the heavens” nor “beyond the sea,”

metaphors for a spiritual path

so remote & inaccessible

that they seem almost impossible to follow.//

Instead, Moses says,

“No, the thing is very close to you, in your mouth
and in your heart, to observe it.”//

This is a poetic & poignant image.//

The words of Torah, teachings of the Jewish faith,
are within all of us.//

God has implanted them inside our souls,
and it is our mission—

and our lifelong challenge—

to tap into them, to nurture them

and to *actualize* them through our deeds.//

Nitzavim makes it clear that it is up to *us*

as to whether or not we follow this spiritual path.//

We are free to accept or reject

the demands of the covenant—

but there will be consequences to our decisions.//

“See,” the address continues,

“I set before you this day life and prosperity,

death and adversity.”//

And to reinforce the message, Moses says:

“I call heaven and earth to witness against you

this day: I have put before you

life and death, blessing and curse.”//

Our options appear to be stark & *binary* //

If we embrace & observe the rules of the covenant,

we will be rewarded;

if we disregard or reject them, we will be punished. //

For many of us, this theology is too black-&-white

when compared to our lived experiences. //

The teachings of Judaism *do* at times seem remote

and obscure. //

Bad things do sometimes happen to good people;

wicked people sometimes *do* get away

with unethical behavior. //

Our world today is marked by nuance & ambiguity,

not certainty & automatic outcomes. //

Will God actually reward us if we keep kosher?//

Will we be punished if we work on Shabbat?//

Very few of us believe in these pre-modern ideas,
and we need to come up with new ways
of understanding & interacting with the practices
of our tradition
if they are to remain relevant & vital in our lives.//

As Jews who live in a modern culture & context,
the covenant—
regardless of how our relationship with God
actually plays out in the “real world”—
can feel like a *burden*.//

Is the serious practice of Judaism truly that easy
in our day—

is it really, truly “in our mouths & in our hearts,”
as the Torah tells us it is?//

Most of us in the non-Orthodox community
would say no—

it is very challenging indeed to be observant,
to be “religious” in contemporary America—
for the reasons I’ve noted tonight, as well as
a number of others.//

But our covenant, our *brit*, our spiritual legacy,
is also a *blessing*,

even if it is demanding &, at times, baffling.//

The rites, rituals, ceremonies & values

of the Jewish tradition

can give our lives meaning & purpose.//

They can inspire us to be better people

and to build stronger communities.//

They can comfort, enliven, & elevate our souls.//

Judaism is literally our lifeline—

particularly during difficult times such as these.//

At the end of tomorrow morning's Torah portion,

Moses exhorts the Israelites to “choose life.”//

Whether it is the Tree of Life

(*Eitz Chayim* in the Torah service),

the Book of Life

(*Sefer Chayim* during the Days of Awe),

or the preservation of life (*pikuach nefesh*),

Judaism always advocates that we embrace *life*

and the traditions & structures that ennoble it—

even when they are sometimes unclear,

even when we don't fully understand their function

or ultimate goal.//

On this Kol Nidre, at this most sacred time of year,

and on every day that follows,

the choice is ours to make; may we choose wisely.//