

Nitzavim Vayelexh 5767
The Shabbat Before Rosh Hashanah

Shabbat Shalom.

I am not a Luddite who is afraid of new technology, nor am I a techno-junkie who knows how to use every new program. I have to admit that I still struggle with Hebrew on my computer, and Rabbi Jacobs has promised to teach me how to make those cool English-Hebrew study sheets that she makes. One day.

I enjoy learning about new technology – this summer I got to play tennis on a Wii – Nintendo video game machine – it was great fun!

And on the professional side, I learned how to use Google Calendar. It allowed a number of us in the shul to schedule meetings and view our joint calendar. It was efficient, simple to use and, in some sense, also fun. Scheduling on Google Calendar or on my own Palm calendar is something I enjoy – knowing my schedule brings me a sense of control that makes me more relaxed.

Scheduling and planning in a thoughtful way helps me try to live a balanced life (OK, I have more work to do on this!). Given that, one has to wonder about the scheduling of the Jewish calendar. Rosh Hashanah and then Shabbat – three days of yontif (of no work and holiday), a week later Yom Kippur, followed four days later by another three-day yontif of Sukkot and Shabbat, followed by the four intermediate days of Sukkot, and then a third three-day yontif of Shmini Atzeret, Simhat Torah and Shabbat. As my wonderful secretary Evelyn said this week, “Couldn’t they have spaced it out a bit more?!?”

While there are moments where our Jewish calendar is challenging, there are also moments where one can see how brilliantly it is woven together. This is one of those moments. This Shabbat, the one before Rosh Hashanah, when we read the portions of Nitzavim and Vayelexh, captures what we are feeling today.

We stand at a threshold – about to enter the High Holy days. The tradition has been building toward this week for almost two months. It began back in July when we commemorated the saddest day on the Jewish calendar, Tishah B’Av, which recalls the destruction of both Temples in Jerusalem. After that low point of fasting and mourning, we start climbing a metaphoric ladder. As Rabbi Jacobs mentioned, we read each week a haftarah of hope that lifts us up from remembering a sad moment until we reach Rosh Hashanah. These seven weeks represent a complete cycle – seven being the number of wholeness and completion.

So now we are coming out of the mourning. In some ways, this is akin to shivah – the seven weeks, like the seven days of shiva. When shivah ends for a mourner, there is a custom to lift the person out of the shivah. The mourner sits after the morning service in her home, and then the minyan – those gathered for the service – recite the traditional words of condolence and “lift her” out of shivah. Then the mourner stands and goes for a walk around the block to mark the end of this period of intense, sequestered mourning.

In today’s *parshiyot*, we find the Israelites gathered east of the Jordan River, listening to Moses’ final speeches. It is a liminal moment, a threshold moment, as they are about to be “lifted out” of their wandering years in the desert and enter the Promised Land. The anticipation and excitement is palpable.

But, of course, there is also fear. “*Atem Nitzvaim hayom kulkhem lifnei Adonai Eloheikhem*” – the parashah opens with: “You stand today, all of you, before Adonai Your God.” This verse pulls the Israelites – and us with them – back to the moment when Moses and the people reaffirm their covenant with God, standing at Sinai. As the Torah states in Exodus (19:17): “*Vayityatzvu – and they stood*” at Sinai.

Standing, they declared their allegiance to God, their covenantal bond to the Almighty. The word *nitzavim* in our reading has the same root – the people are standing in a powerful manner – they are presenting themselves before God. So, too, we are preparing ourselves to stand before God on the High Holy days – which then inspires us to do the introspective work of self-transformation that these Days of Awe require.

This Torah reading points to the future – as it states: *Hayom* – this day – a day thousands of years ago, and also today, this very day. We are about to stand before God on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur – think of our community standing together during Kol Nidrei. It is an annual reenactment of that first standing before God.

But our reading today continues with great insights into this moment on the Jewish calendar. We are taught: *Hanistarot IAdonai* – the hidden acts are known to God. The verse is incorporated into our High Holy Day liturgy, urging us to work not only on the overt acts we do, but also on the secret ones; those are also vital. For the process of teshuvah, repentance, to work we need to examine all parts of ourselves. Teshuvah is embedded in our parashah: chapter 30 contains the Hebrew root *shuv* seven times. The parashah echoes this moment as we are called to repent and return to God and our deepest selves seven times.

Standing on the precipice of a new land or a new year, we are faced with opportunity and challenge. The shofar blasts have been sounded each weekday

morning for the past month to call us to attention and to prepare us for this moment.

Our Torah states this explicitly – *Ha'idoti lakhem hayom et-hashamayim v'et ha-aretz hahayim v'hamavet u'vaharta bahayyim* – I call heaven and earth to witness before you this day: I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse – Choose life!”

The ability to make that choice is one of the greatest of life's blessings. It is the greatest of miracles. While the commandments God has given us as Jews may seem to limit our options, they paradoxically give us choices. If there were no commandments, there would be no choice. As Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, the greatest Orthodox thinker of the 20th Century, who incidentally lived in Boston, points out, if there were no mitzvot, we would be driven solely by nature, by hedonistic instinct. The reason that human beings are regarded as the epitome of creation is that we are blessed with the ability to choose.

So, how do we make informed decisions? The answer is also found in our reading where the Torah is described as “*Lo Bashamayim hee* – Torah is not in Heaven;” it's right here, it's for us – The Torah is for us! It is our guide and it's right here – accessible and open to all, not just to an elite. All of us may study it and challenge it together, determining how best to live.

The Torah is also not removed or far away from us; it is: *karov eleikha ... bilvavekha* – in your heart. The Sefat Emet, a great Hasidic Master, teaches that the Torah is inscribed on our hearts – that it is part of our souls, our essence. The Torah is not only external, but it is internal, part of who we are.

Now, standing on the threshold of the new year, engaging in teshuvah and the efforts it requires, can be daunting. It is like assuming a new leadership role. As Michal mentioned, this occurs in our parashah when Joshua is appointed the next leader. Like us, perhaps Joshua felt a bit overwhelmed. Moses encourages him and all the people with the words *Hazak Ve'ematz* – be strong and resolute.

Similarly, we add a psalm to each morning and evening service during this time of year: Psalm 27 – a beautiful religious poem about yearning to feel God's presence. In it, we find: *ki avi v'immi azavuni*: though my father and mother leave, *VAdonai ye'asfeini* – God will gather me up. And to help support this notion that we are not alone, the poem concludes: *kaveh el Adonai Hazak V'ya'amez leebekha V'Kaveh el Adonai* – hope in Adonai; be strong and resolute and hope in Adonai – echoing the same words of encouragement from our reading.

We have the power to stand at this moment. And to really step into a new space, a new land, a new year, one must look inward – become more aware of ourselves and work hard to make better choices. This is the work of this season, and this is the opportunity for which God and the Torah have prepared us.

May we all appreciate this covenantal moment just before Rosh Hashanah – as it existed for our ancestors thousands of years ago and, more importantly, as it exists for us today, as we embark on a new year.

Shabbat Shalom.