



Parashat Nitzavim: Freedom to Love

Dear Friends,

It is difficult to write drashot for the book of D'varim. Every parasha seems like the entire Torah standing on one foot, and especially this week's parasha, Nitzavim. In it, Am Yisrael enters into a renewed covenant with the Creator, fresh and current (“**You stand today**”). This is an event similar to that at Mount Sinai, no less.

The covenant is not just with the men, as was the custom, and it is not only with those who were alive at that time, but with all of Am Yisrael - and, in my opinion, with all of humanity - present and future. The Sages tell us that we, too, are part of this covenant: “**...your tribal heads, your elders and your officials, all the men of Israel, your children, your wives, even the stranger within your camp...those who are standing here with us this day before the LORD our God and with those who are not (yet?) with us here this day.**” (D'varim 29: 9-14)

The word “covenant” is a little confusing, because a covenant is usually made between two willing parties, and yet our choice in this case is very limited. Its content is dictated to us from on high, its terms are not negotiable. Our part is simply to comply.

That is, it is possible not to, but then, like in the story of Jonah - the prophet who tries to escape from the mission forced upon him, the covenant will follow us to the depths, or until we agree to commit to it.

Like Jonah, we too try every single day with our “...own willful heart...” (D'varim 29:18) to escape from this covenant which was forced upon us. But just as the laws of nature and gravity cannot be escaped, so, too, we discover over and over again that this covenant cannot be avoided.

The covenant is very very simple, again, just like the laws of nature and gravity. We are talking about something simple, basic, and very close: “**Surely, this Instruction which I enjoin upon you this day is not too baffling for you, nor is it beyond reach. It is not in the heavens, that you should say, ‘Who among us can go up to the heavens and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may observe it?’ Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, ‘Who among us can cross to the other side of the sea and get it for us**

and impart it to us, that we may observe it?’ No, the thing is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to observe it.” (D’varim 30: 11-14)

This verse is one which I recited with my classmates in front of hundreds of people at our joint bar mitzvah on the kibbutz where I was born and raised. I did not understand a word of it then. But 42 years later these words guide my path; they light my way in the world every day.

“See, I set before you this day life and blessing, death and adversity... I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day: I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life—if you and your offspring would live” (D’varim 30: 15-19)

So we do have some freedom of choice after all: we can choose between life and blessing, or death and adversity.

All of the 613 mitzvot we know of today (which Moshe himself was not familiar with, at least not consciously!) are an attempt by our Sages throughout the generations - from the time of the Mishna to the present - to help us make the Torah’s vision of “life and blessing” into a life-sustaining list of do’s and don’ts, assisting us in making our life’s journey one of blessing.

And the most important and helpful mitzvah of them all, even though it is also the most difficult, is the mitzvah to love - to love the Creator and to love creation.

“... Choose life... by loving the LORD your God... For thereby you shall have life and shall long endure upon the soil...” (D’varim 30: 19-20)

One can rail against life (and there are many good reasons to do so); one can cry “it’s not fair” (and there are excellent reasons to do so); one can rail against the cruel laws of nature and the wearing pull of gravity (and there are wonderful reasons to do so).

And one can choose - even though it is the harder choice - to love the Creator and to love Creation (although it sometimes seems there are absolutely no good reasons to do so).

This option, though more difficult, is also the only one I know to turn the reality forced upon us into a life of blessing.

Yes, this is the harder option and I have no miracle recipes to offer; just the conscious decision: to love.

By the way, it is possible to love and to be angry at the same time. It is possible to be frustrated and helpless and still love. There is no real contradiction here.

Life is indeed upsetting: **“the ones who were born are to die ...Blessed be He, before Whom there is no iniquity, nor forgetting, nor respect of persons, nor taking of bribes, for all is His. And know that all is according to the reckoning. And let not your impulse assure thee that the grave will be a place of refuge! Against your will were you born, against your will you live, against your will you will die...”** (Masechet Avot 4:32)

But within this overwhelming, unwillingly-bestowed situation, called “life”, Parashat Nitzavim reminds us that we do have one very formative choice: to love life, to love reality, to love its Creator.

But hey, you don't have to! After all, this is the one freedom of choice you still have. Don't waste it.

Shabbat Shalom, and if we are not in contact before Rosh Hashana, then Shana Tova. To a year of of loving life!

Elisha