

Torah Weekly

בס"ד

September 6-12, 2020
17-23 Elul, 5780

Torah: Nitzavim Vayelech:
Deuteronomy 29:9 - 31:30
Haftorah: Isaiah 61:10-63:9

PARSHAT NITZAVIM-
VAYELECH

Calendars

We have Jewish Calendars. If you would like one, please send us a letter and we will send you one, or ask the Rabbi/Chaplain to contact us.

Family Programs

Do you have family on the outside struggling? Please contact or have them contact our office to learn more about our family programs. You and they are not alone, we are here to help.

Grape Juice & Matzah

We offer free Grape Juice and Matzah for you to be able to make the blessings every Shabbos. Please have your chaplain / Rabbi contact us to enroll (available to all prisons).

Hyman & Martha Rogal Center
5804 Beacon Street
Pittsburgh, PA 15217
412-421-0111
Fax: 412-521-5948
www.alephne.org
info@alephne.org



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While We're in Exile, Where's G-d?

In our Parshah, Moses prophesies regarding our nation's exile as well as our ultimate redemption, regarding which he says, "G-d will return your exiles and He will have mercy upon you. He will once again gather you from all the nations where the L-rd your G-d had dispersed you" (Deuteronomy 30:3).

Though *galut* (exile), by definition, is a time when G-d's presence in our lives isn't manifest and palpable as it was—and will soon again be—during the Holy Temple glory days, it by no means signals a hiatus in our relationship with Him. This idea was expressed by Jacob the first time that our nation was dispatched into exile, when he informed his children that they would spend many years exiled in Egypt, but "G-d will be with you" (Genesis 48:21). G-d is omnipresent, He's with everyone at all times, so Jacob's special assurance that G-d would be with the Jews was referring to G-d's *overt* presence and protection. Indeed, though our exiles have been times of great national difficulty, persecution and worse, it is these very travails that testify to the fact that G-d is still "with us." For is there any other explanation for the fact that a small, displaced and defenseless nation outlives all the superpowers that endeavor mightily to annihilate her? But lest we think that G-d is a master conductor who keeps a watchful eye over us while He Himself remains serenely unaffected by our suffering, the verse (Psalms 91:15) quotes G-d as saying, "I am with him [Israel] in distress." This was the message that G-d conveyed by choosing to appear to Moses in a thornbush when the Jews were being oppressed by the Egyptians. When we suffer, it's as if He is being pricked by thorns. After all, is there a father that is not distressed when his child is in pain? The verse cited

above, from this week's Parshah, takes this idea a step further. The Hebrew wording employed in this verse is rather unusual. Rather than the standard הָשִׁיב, which translates as "He [G-d] will cause you to return," the word וְשָׁב, which translates literally as "He will return," is used. On this our sages comment: "From here we learn that the Divine Presence resides among Israel, as it were, in all the misery of their exile. And when they are redeemed, G-d writes [here in the Scriptures] redemption for Himself—for He, too, will return with them!" This is not simply a father who is commiserating with his son. This is a father who accompanies his son into exile. A king who voluntarily joins his son in captivity. And when the time of the redemption arrives, He will return together with each and every one of us, as Isaiah prophesies (27:12), "You will be gathered up, one by one, O children of Israel." By Rabbi Naftali Silberberg

Genuine Growth On the first day of school, hoping to impress the class with his experience, my brother's teacher listed the many schools where he had taught over the previous decade. One boy, duly impressed, but not quite in the way the teacher had hoped, wondered, "Why were you fired so many times?" It is always difficult to determine just how many previous employments should be listed on a resume or in a job interview. Listing too many places conveys sophistication and experience, but also, a lack of permanence and loyalty. Listing too few places conveys a sense of steady dependability, but also, a lack of versatility and flexibility. Indeed, this is the very question we ponder when we consider changing our location or place of employment. Moving around prevents us from laying down roots and building upon previous successes. Staying in one place can result in missed

opportunities. How do we balance these two important, but contradictory considerations? **Two Parshahs** The name of a Torah reading often reflects the general theme of the portion. The Hebrew names of the two parshahs that are read this week are *Nitzavim* and *Vayelech*. *Nitzavim* means to stand firmly. *Vayelech* means to move forward. The general theme of the first Torah portion is stationary permanence; to remain firmly committed to one vocation or calling. The general theme of the second Torah portion is forward momentum; to constantly move forward and explore new possibilities. At first glance the two seem contradictory, yet as we probe the inner meaning of these concepts we discover that they are, in truth, complimentary. In analyzing the two names we notice the order in which they are arrayed. First, *Nitzavim*; we commit ourselves to our original position. Only then, firmly rooted in our original state, do we permit ourselves to *Vayelech*—move forward and seek out new possibilities. We must always ask ourselves why we seek new opportunities. Is it because we are generally malcontent, unable to remain in one place for long? Or have we maximized our full potential in this area and are seeking further room for growth? The latter is an acceptable reason to relocate, the former is not. Only when we have maximized our potential in our current location is it appropriate to move forward. At that point, remaining stationary can cause stagnancy and complacency.

Community When we move into a new community and lay down roots with intention to remain, we naturally reach out to form new friendships and associations. When our stay is intended as temporary we tend not to form deep bonds. "Why form bonds," we ask ourselves, "if they are unlikely to last?" Indeed, when Moses declared that the

nation stood firmly before G-d, he pointed out that they stood together. Leaders and princes stood alongside children, proselytes, wood-hewers and water-carriers. A good way to measure the extent of our commitment to a community is to gauge our friendships within that community. If you entered the community with a migratory mindset then you would not have developed genuine relationships with those around you. If you have developed genuine friendships, chances are that you have fully engaged your community. If you need to move forward at this point, it is not for a lack of trying to make it work.

Stationary Mobility What can you do if you realize that you never did lay down firm roots in your community or place of employment and never really tried to make it work? Must you force yourself to stay even when your heart wants to leave? We do, of course, have freedom of choice and may choose to leave; however, there are other options to consider. We might consider remaining in place and satisfying our desire for mobility by introducing new and innovative ideas to our existing framework. This too is implied by the juxtaposition of the two Torah portions. It is possible to achieve the enthusiasm and momentum of mobility ("*Vayelech*") even when we remain stationary ("*Nitzavim*"). New horizons are not always found in new locations or places of employment. It is often possible to remain in our current position and find a novel approach that would stimulate us anew.

New Resolutions As we approach the High Holidays we would do well to incorporate these ideas into our preparation for the new year. We resolved at the end of last year to improve in certain *mitzvot*. But as we look back we realize that we did not live up to those expectations and we wonder how to approach the coming year. Should we dispense with last year's resolutions and try different resolutions this year? or should we recommit ourselves to last year's resolutions and pursue them till we succeed? The proper approach is a combination of both. We must strengthen our resolve from last year and work to improve in those areas. At the same time, in an effort to generate new enthusiasm, we must also try our hand on new resolutions. May we succeed in our resolutions and may we be granted a healthy and good new year.

By Rabbi Lazer Gurkow

Sunday, September 6, 2020 --- 17 Elul, 5780

Noah Dispatches Dove (2105 BCE)

Following the failed attempt to dispatch a raven from the ark, Noah sent a dove from the window of the ark to see if the great Flood that covered the earth had abated. "But the dove found no resting place for the sole of its foot" and returned to the ark; Noah waited seven days before making another attempt.

R. Schneur Zalman's parents marry (1743)

Wedding day of Rabbi Baruch and Rebbetzin Rivkah, the parents of Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi (1745-1812), in 1743.

Monday, September 7, 2020 --- 18 Elul, 5780

Passing of Maharal (1609)

Elul 18 is the yahrtzeit of Rabbi Yehudah Loewe, the "Maharal" of Prague (1525-1609), outstanding Torah scholar, philosopher, Kabbalist and Jewish leader. Popularly known for creating a "golem" (clay man) to protect the Jewish community of Prague from the frequent threat of blood libels.

Baal Shem Tov Born (1698)

Elul 18 is the birthday of Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Chassidism. Rabbi Israel was born in a small town in Ukraine in 1698. His father, Rabbi Eliezer, who was a member of the secret society of "hidden *tzaddikim*," passed away when young Israel was only five years old; his last words to his son were, "Fear nothing but G-d alone. Love every Jew with all your heart and all your soul."

The young orphan would spend much of his time wandering and meditating in the forests that surrounded his hometown; there, he one day met with one of his father's compatriots, and eventually joined their society. For many years, he lived disguised as a simple innkeeper and clay-digger, his greatness known only to a very small circle of fellow mystics and disciples. But on his 36th birthday, he was instructed by his master to "reveal" himself and publicly disseminate his teachings.

Drawing from the mystical "soul of Torah," the Baal Shem Tov ("Master of the Good Name," as he came to be known) taught about the spark of G-dliness that is to be found in every creation, and about the great love that G-d has for each and every one of His children, scholars and simple folk alike. He emphasized the importance of joy and simple faith in serving G-d, rather than asceticism. Initially, his teachings encountered fierce opposition from the scholarly elite and established leadership of the Jewish community; but many of those very scholars and communal leaders ended up becoming his devoted disciples. When Rabbi Israel passed at age 62 on Shavuot of 1760, the movement he founded was well on the way of becoming the most vital force in Jewish life.

1st Chabad Rebbe Born (1745)

Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi (1745-1812), founder of the "Chabad" branch of Chassidism, was born on Elul 18 of the year 5505 from creation -- the 47th birthday of his "spiritual grandfather", Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov (Rabbi Schneur Zalman was the disciple of the Baal Shem Tov's disciple and successor, Rabbi DovBer of Mezeritch).

Tuesday, September 8, 2020 --- 19 Elul, 5780

Passing of R. Chaim Benveniste (1673)

R. Chaim Benveniste was a renowned scholar who served as rabbi in Tire, a town near Izmir, Turkey, and then in Izmir itself. His most famous work is *Kenesses Hagedolah*, a collection of halachic material arranged according to the order of the Code of Jewish Law.

Friday, September 11, 2020 --- 22 Elul, 5780

Passing of R. Yaakov Moelin (the Maharil) (1427)

R. Yaakov Moelin, known as the Maharil, was recognized as the supreme halachic authority for Ashkenazi Jewry in his day. His customs, collected in *Minhagei Maharil* (and cited often by R. Moshe Isserles in his comments to the Code of Jewish Law), are the basis for the conduct of Ashkenazi Jewry in many areas of Jewish life, especially in matters relating to prayer and synagogue procedure.

Shabbat, September 12, 2020 --- 23 Elul, 5780

Dove brings Olive Leaf (2105 BCE)

On the 301st day of the great Flood, Noah sent a dove for the 2nd time from the ark. This time, the dove stayed away all day; "the dove came in to him in the evening, and, lo, in her mouth was an olive leaf plucked off; and Noah knew that the waters were abated from off the earth" (Genesis 8:11).