

# Torah Weekly

August 29-September 4  
21 Elul-27 Elul, 5781

Torah Reading:  
Nitzavim: Deuteronomy 29:9 –  
30:20

Haftarah: Isaiah 61:10-63:9

PARSHAT Nitzavim

## 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 Matzoh for you to be able to make the blessings every Shabbos. Please have your chaplain / Rabbi contact us to enroll (available to all prisons).

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## Nitzavim in a Nutshell

The Parshah of Nitzavim includes some of the most fundamental principles of the Jewish faith:

The unity of Israel: "You stand today, all of you, before the L-rd your G-d: your heads, your tribes, your elders, your officers, and every Israelite man; your young ones, your wives, the stranger in your gate; from your wood-hewer to your water-drawer."

The future redemption: Moses warns of the exile and desolation of the Land that will result if Israel abandons G-d's laws, but then he prophesies that in the end, "You will return to the L-rd your G-d . . . If your outcasts shall be at the ends of the heavens, from there will the L-rd your G-d gather you . . . and bring you into the Land which your fathers have possessed."

The practicality of Torah: "For the mitzvah which I command you this day, it is not beyond you, nor is it remote from you. It is not in heaven . . . It is not across the sea . . . Rather, it is very close to you, in your mouth, in your heart, that you may do it."

Freedom of choice: "I have set before you life and goodness, and death and evil: in that I command you this day to love G-d, to walk in His ways and to keep His commandments . . . Life and death I have set before you, blessing and curse. And you shall choose life."

## A Knowing Heart

"For this mitzvah which I command you today is not wondrous... nor is it distant. It is not in heaven... nor is it across the sea... Rather, the matter is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart to

do it."<sup>2</sup>

According to the simple meaning of the verse, it is understandable that the concept that "the matter is very close to you" is a new idea. For it is possible (even from a Torah perspective) to think that the Torah and its mitzvos<sup>3</sup> are wondrous and distant. [Therefore] the verse comes to teach us a new idea; that "the matter is very close to you."

The fundamental new [dimension of] the concept relates to the words "in your heart." As the Alter Rebbe writes in Tanya:<sup>4</sup> "On the surface, it... runs contrary to our natural tendency... For the matter is not close [to a person] to truly transform his heart from the desires of this world to the love of G-d. As the Talmud states:<sup>5</sup> 'Is fear a small matter?' How much more so does this apply with regard to love!"

This is the new dimension taught by the verse, that the matter is "very close" even to our hearts. As explained at length in Tanya,<sup>6</sup> it is "very close" for every person<sup>7</sup> to reach the love of G-d, for there is a natural love of G-d hidden in the heart of all Jews which is "an inher-tance from our ancestors." Accordingly, it is not necessary for a person to generate and initiate new feelings of love for G-d in his heart. All that is necessary is that he reveal the love that exists inher-ently.

This, however, is an insufficient explanation. For it is difficult to say that the primary new insight taught by the verse applies only to "your heart," since the verse also mentions "your mouth" and "to

do it." Implied is that the verse also contributes a new insight with regard to our speech and actions. Indeed, the fact that the verse mentions "your mouth" before "your heart"<sup>8</sup> indicates that there is a new dimension (not only with regard to "in your heart"), but also with regard to "in your mouth" and "to do it."

## Standing Firm

This week's Torah reading begins Atem nitzavim, "You are standing here today, all of you... from the heads of tribes... to the woodcutters and water-drawers."

The commentaries explain that nitzavim in Hebrew means "standing firm." This verse teaches us that our standing firm is conditional upon it being all of you standing together. Each of us, from the highest to the lowliest, has our part to play and our own potential to fulfill.

The Talmud's Ethics of the Fathers tells us, "Who is rich? He who is happy with his lot." Rather than worrying about why we are not standing in somebody else's shoes, our task is to fulfill our potential at the level we are at, in the situation where we are now, knowing that even if it may seem insignificant, each of us contributes on our own level and in our own way to the greater picture. In order to "stand firm" as a nation, we need the contribution of each person, on every level.

The story was told of Rabbi Aryeh Levin (known as "the tzaddik from Jerusalem") who informed the doctor that "my wife's leg is hurting us." This idea applies to all of us, as a community. When one person suffers, another feels the pain, even at a distance. When an event takes place in a distant country,

this affects us as much as if it were to happen next door.

There is no "us and them." Anything which undermines decency and the sanctity of human life, the very fabric of our community, has an effect on all of us, whether we are directly involved or not. Each person

needs to be intact, in order for us to achieve our communal potential. If one person is suffering or is otherwise affected by something, this has an impact on all of us.

*By Mordechai Wollenberg*

## Choose Life

*I call today upon heaven and earth as witnesses for you. I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. And you shall choose life, so that you and your children may live. (Deuteronomy 30:19)*

Do we really need the Torah to tell us to choose life? Which person of sound mind would choose death?

One possible answer is that one must make a conscious decision to *live* and not just vegetate. And I don't mean to live it up by living life in the fast lane. To "choose life" means to choose to live a meaningful life, a life committed to values and a higher purpose. Did it make any difference at all in that I inhabited planet Earth for so many years? Will anyone really know the difference if I'm gone? Is my life productive, worthwhile?

It is told that when the fist Chabad Rebbe, Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, wanted to bless Reb Yekutiel Liepler with wealth, he declined the offer, saying that he was afraid it would distract him from more spiritual pursuits. When the rebbe then offered to bless him with longevity, Reb Yekutiel stipulated that it should not be "peasant's years, with eyes that do not see and ears that do not hear, where one neither sees nor senses G-dliness."

Reb Yekutiel was rather fussy, it seems. The holy rebbe is offering him an amazing blessing, and he is making conditions! Yes, he chose life, and he chose to live a life that would be purposeful and productive, and that really would make a tangible difference. He wasn't interested in a long life if, essentially, it would amount to an empty life.

As we stand just before Rosh Hashanah, let us resolve to choose life. Let us live lives of Torah values and noble deeds. And may we be blessed with a good and sweet new year.

By Yossy Goldman

### **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 (see "Today in Jewish History" for Elul 17). 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).

### **Yahrzeit of the 9/11 Terror Attack Victims (2001)**

On a sunny fall morning, Islamic terrorists hijacked four commercial passenger airplanes. Two were crashed into the Twin Towers in lower Manhattan. A third was rammed into the Pentagon, the Washington, D.C. headquarters of the United States Department of Defense. The last plane was intended for Washington as well, but crashed into a field near Shanksville, Pennsylvania, after its passengers tried to overcome the hijackers. In total, almost 3,000 people died in the attacks, including the 227 civilians and 19 hijackers aboard the four planes. It also was the deadliest incident for firefighters in the history of the United States.

Known as 9/11, the events of the day deeply affected the American approach to security and diplomacy, instigating the global War on Terror.

### **Passing of R. Meir Shlomo Yanovsky (c. 1933)**

R. Meir Shlomo Yanovsky was the rabbi of Nikolayev, in the Ukraine, from 1890 until his passing. His daughter Chana married R. Levi Yitzchak Schneerson, and their son was R. Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the Lubavitcher Rebbe. The Rebbe repeated a number of anecdotes about his grandfather (see link below), and he would say Kaddish on this date in his memory.

R. Meir Shlomo composed a number of stirring tunes that are commonly sung at farbrengens and other occasions.

### **Passing of Chafetz Chaim (1933)**

Elul 24 is the yahrtzeit of the revered Torah scholar, pietist and Jewish leader Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan (1838-1933) of Radin (Poland), author of *Chafetz Chaim* (a work on the evils of gossip and slander and the guidelines of proper speech) and *Mishnah Berurah* (a codification of Torah law).

### **Preparations for Second Temple Construction Begin (353 BCE)**

Inspired by Haggai's prophecy on the first of Elul (see entry for that date), Zerubavel son of She'altiel, ruler of Judah, and Joshua son of Jehozadak, the High Priest, began the preparations for the construction of the Second Temple (Haggai 1:15). The actual construction began exactly three months later, on Kislev 24 (see entry for that date).

### **Creation (3760 BCE)**

The 1st day of creation, on which G-d created existence, time, matter, darkness and light, was the 25th of Elul. (Rosh Hashanah, on which we mark "the beginning of Your works", is actually the 6th day of creation, on which the world attained the potential for the realization of its purpose, with the creation of the first man and woman, Adam and Eve. Rosh Hashanah is therefore the day from which the Jewish calendar begins to count the years of history; the 1st day of creation thus occurred on the 25th of Elul of what is termed -1 from creation.

### **Jerusalem Walls Rebuilt (335 BCE)**

The rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem -- which had been in ruins since the destruction of the First Temple by the Babylonians 88 years earlier -- was completed by Nehemia on Elul 25 of the year 3426 from creation (335 BCE) as related in the Book of Nehemia (ch. 6).

### **Passing of R. Elazar (2nd century CE)**

Passing of the Talmudic sage Rabbi Elazar, son of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai.

### **Creation of Skies (3760 BCE)**

Today is the second day of Creation, when G-d created the skies: G-d said, "Let there be an expanse in the midst of the water, and let it be a separation between water and water." G-d made the expanse, and it separated between the water below the expanse and the water above the expanse, and it was so. G-d called the expanse Heaven, and it was evening, and it was morning, a second day. (Genesis 1:6-8)

### **Creation of Dry Land and Vegetation (3760 BCE)**

Today is the third day of Creation, when G-d exposed the dry land and created vegetation: G-d said, "Let the water that is beneath the heavens gather into one place, and let the dry land appear," and it was so.... G-d saw that it was good. G-d said, "Let the earth sprout vegetation, seed-yielding herbs and fruit trees producing fruit according to its kind in which its seed is found, on the earth," and it was so.... G-d saw that it was good. It was evening, and it was morning, a third day. (Genesis 1:9-13)

### **Frankfurt Jews Expelled (1614)**

On this date in 1614, the evil Vincent Fettmilch organized an attack on the Jewish quarter of Frankfurt, and the Jews were expelled from the city (*Yosef Ometz* §953). Thanks to the Emperor's intervention, two years later the Jews were allowed to return to the city in honor, and Vincent and his cohorts were hanged (see entry for 20 Adar 1).