

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 אֲנִי־יְהוָה, which translates as "He [G-d] will cause you to return," the word אֲנִי, 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
Editor, Jewish Learning Institute

THE WORLD IS WAITING FOR YOU

Something remarkable happens in this week's Torah portion, almost without our noticing it, that changed the very terms of Jewish existence, and has life-changing implications for all of us. Moses renewed the covenant. This may not sound dramatic, but it was.

Thus far, in the history of humanity as told by the Torah, G-d had made three covenants. The first, in Genesis 9, was with Noah, and through him, with all humanity. I call this the covenant of human solidarity. According to the sages it contains seven commands, the Sheva Mitzvoth Bnei Noach, most famous of which is the sanctity of human life: "He who sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for in the image of G-d did G-d make man."

The second, in Genesis 17, was with Abraham and his descendants: "When Abraham was ninety-nine years old, the L-rd appeared to him and said, 'I am G-d Almighty. Walk before me and have integrity, and I will grant My covenant between Me and you ... I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you throughout the generations as an eternal covenant.'" That made Abraham the father of a new faith that would not be the faith of all humanity but would strive to be a blessing to all humanity: "Through you all the families of the earth will be blessed." The third was with the Israelites in the days of Moses, when the people stood at Mount Sinai, heard the Ten Commandments and accepted the terms of their destiny as "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."

Who, though, initiated these three covenants? G-d. It was not Noah, or Abraham, or Moses, or the Israelites who sought a covenant with G-d. It was G-d who sought a covenant with humanity.

There is, though, a discernible change as we trace the trajectory of these three events. From Noah G-d asked no specific response. There was nothing Noah had to do to show that he accepted the terms of covenant. He now knew that there are seven rules governing acceptable human behavior, but G-d asked for no positive covenant-ratifying gesture. Throughout the process Noah was passive.

From Abraham, G-d did ask for a response - a painful one. "This is My covenant which you shall keep between Me and you and your descendants after you: every male among you shall be circumcised. You must circumcise the flesh of your foreskin. This shall be the sign of the covenant between Me and you." The Hebrew word for circumcision is Milah, but to this day we call it Brit Milah or even, simply, Brit - which is, of course, the Hebrew word for covenant. G-d asks, at least of Jewish males, something very demanding: an initiation ceremony.

From the Israelites at Sinai G-d asked for much more. He asked them in effect to recognize Him as their sole sovereign and legislator. The Sinai covenant came not with seven commands as for Noah, or an eighth as for Abraham, but with 613 of them. The Israelites were to incorporate G-d-consciousness into every aspect of their lives.

So, as the covenants proceed, G-d asks more and more of His partners, or to put it slightly differently, He entrusts them with ever greater responsibilities.

Something else happened at Sinai that had not happened before. G-d tells Moses to announce the nature of the covenant before making it, to see whether the people agree. They do so no less than three times: "Then the people answered as one, saying, 'All that the L-rd has spoken we will do.'" "The people all responded with a single voice, 'We will do everything the L-rd has spoken.'"⁴ "The people said, 'All that the L-rd has spoken we will do and heed.'" This is the first time in history that we

encounter the phenomenon enshrined in the American Declaration of Independence, namely "the consent of the governed." G-d only spoke the Ten Commandments after the people had signaled that they had given their consent to be bound by His word. G-d does not impose His rule by force. At Sinai, covenant-making became mutual. Both sides had to agree.

So the human role in covenant-making grows greater over time. But Nitzavim takes this one stage further. Moses, seemingly of his own initiative, renewed the covenant:

"All of you are standing today before the L-rd your G-d—your leaders, your tribes, your elders and officials, all the men of Israel, your children, your wives, the strangers in your camp, from woodcutter to water-drawer - to enter into the covenant of the L-rd your G-d and its oath, which the L-rd your G-d is making with you today, to establish you today as His people, that He may be your G-d, as He promised you and swore to your

PARSHAT NITZAVIM

21 - 27 Elul 5785
14 - 20 September 2025

Torah: Duet. 29:9-30:20
Haftorah: Isaiah 61:10-63:9

PSALMS DAILY

Psalms for our brethren in the Holy Land

Psalms 117

1. Praise the Lord, all nations, laud Him, all peoples.
2. For His kindness has overwhelmed us, and the truth of the Lord is eternal. Hallelujah!

(Please say Chapter 20 daily)

SEFER HAMITZVOT

Positive Mitzvah 113

The Red Heifer

We are commanded to prepare a red heifer [as detailed in the Torah], to have it ready for the procedure of purifying those who are ritually impure as a result of contact with a corpse.

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ancestors, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.”

This was the first time that the covenant was renewed, but not the last. It happened again at the end of Joshua's life, and later in the days of Jehoiada, Hezekiah and Josiah. After the Babylonian exile, Ezra and Nehemiah convened a national gathering to renew the covenant. But it happened first in today's Parsha.

It happened because Moses knew it had to happen. The terms of Jewish history were about to shift from Divine initiative to human initiative. This is what Moses was preparing the Israelites for in the last month of his life. It is as if he had said: Until now G-d has led - in a pillar of cloud and fire - and you have followed. Now G-d is handing over the reins of history to you. From here on, you must lead. If your hearts are with Him, He will be with you. But you are now no longer children; you are adults. An adult still has parents, as a child does, but his or her relationship with them is different. An adult knows the burden of responsibility. An adult does not wait for someone else to take the first step.

That is the epic significance of Nitzavim, the Parsha that stands almost at the end of the Torah and that we read almost at the end of the year. It is about getting ready for a new beginning: in which we act for G-d instead of waiting for G-d to act for us.

Translate this into human terms and you will see how life-changing it can be. Many years ago, at the beginning of my rabbinical career, I kept waiting for a word of encouragement from a senior rabbinical figure. I was working hard, trying innovative approaches, seeking new ways of getting people engaged in Jewish life and

learning. You need support at such moments because taking risks and suffering the inevitable criticism is emotionally draining. The encouragement never came. The silence hurt. It ate, like acid, into my heart.

Then in a lightning-flash of insight, I thought: what if I turn the entire scenario around. What if, instead of waiting for Rabbi X to encourage me, I encouraged him? What if I did for him what I was hoping he would do for me? That was a life-changing moment. It gave me a strength I never had before.

I began to formulate it as an ethic. Don't wait to be praised: praise others. Don't wait to be respected: respect others. Don't stand on the sidelines, criticizing others. Do something yourself to make things better. Don't wait for the world to change: begin the process yourself, and then win others to the cause. There is a statement attributed to Gandhi (actually he never said it,¹³ but in a parallel universe he might have done): 'Be the change you seek in the world.' Take the initiative.

That was what Moses was doing in the last month of his life, in that long series of public addresses that make up the book of Devarim, culminating in the great covenant-renewal ceremony in today's parsha. Devarim marks the end of the childhood of the Jewish people. From there on, Judaism became G-d's call to human responsibility. For us, faith is not waiting for G-d. Faith is the realization that G-d is waiting for us. Hence the life-changing idea: Whenever you find yourself distressed because someone hasn't done for you what you think they should have done, turn the thought around, and then do it for them.

Don't wait for the world to get better. Take the initiative yourself. The world is waiting for you.

By Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks OBM
Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom, 5751-5773

NITZAVIM IN A NUTSHELL

The name of the Parshah, "Nitzavim," means "Standing," and it is found in Deuteronomy 29:9.

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."

IN JEWISH HISTORY

Sunday, 21 Elul 5785 - 14 September 2025

Passing of Rabbi Yonatan Eibeshitz (1764)

Rabbi Yonatan Eibeshitz was a brilliant Torah scholar, preacher, and Kabbalist. He led a Torah academy in Prague, and later served as rabbi in Metz and in the joint cities of Altona, Hamburg, and Wandsbek, Germany. Rabbi Yonatan authored many works in the fields of Jewish law, homily, and other topics. Some of his more well-known works include Kereiti U'Pleitit, Urim Ve'Tumim (both commentaries on various sections of the Code of Jewish Law), and Yaarot Devash (homiletic sermons). He passed away on 21 Elul 5524 (1764).

Monday, 22 Elul 5785 - 15 September 2025

Passing of the Maharil (1427)

Rabbi Yaakov Moelin, known as the Maharil, was recognized as the supreme Halachic authority for Ashkenazi (European) Jewry in his day. His customs, collected in Minhagei Maharil (cited often by the Rema, Rabbi 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.

Tuesday, 23 Elul 5785 - 16 September 2025

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

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

9/11 Terror Attack (2001)

On a sunny fall morning, 23 Elul 5761 (9/11 2001) Islamic terrorists hijacked four commercial passenger airplanes. Two were crashed into the Twin Towers in lower Manhattan, and 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 overcame the hijackers. In total, almost 3,000 people died in the attacks, including the 227 civilians aboard the four planes.

Wednesday, 24 Elul 5785 - 17 September 2025

Passing of Chafetz Chaim (1933)

24 Elul is the Yahrzeit of the revered Torah scholar, pietist and Jewish leader Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan (5598-5693, or 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).

Thursday, 25 Elul 5785 - 18 September 2025

Creation (3761 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, or 3761 BCE.)

Passing of Rabbi Elazar (2nd century CE)

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

Friday, 26 Elul 5785 - 19 September 2025

Creation of Skies (3761 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

Shabbat, 27 Elul 5785 - 20 September 2025

Creation of Land and Vegetation (3761 BCE)

The 27th of Elul 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