



Parshat Netzavim / Vayelech

For the week ending 23 Elul 5759
3 & 4 September 1999

Overview

NITZAVIM

On the last day of his life, Moshe gathers all the people, young and old, lowly and exalted, men and women, in a final initiation. The covenant includes not only those who are present, but even those generations yet unborn. Moshe admonishes the people again to be extremely vigilant against idol worship, because in spite of having witnessed the abominations of Egypt, there will always be the temptation to experiment with foreign philosophies as a pretext for immorality. Moshe describes the desolation of the Land of Israel which will result from failure to heed Hashem's *mitzvot*. Both their descendants and foreigners alike will remark on the singular desolation of the Land and its apparent inability to be sown or to produce crops. The conclusion will be apparent to all — the Jewish People have forsaken the One who protects them, in favor of powerless idols. Moshe promises, however, that the people will eventually repent after both the blessings and the curses have been fulfilled. However assimilated they will have become among the nations, eventually Hashem will bring them back to *Eretz Yisrael*. Moshe tells the people to remember that the Torah is not a remote impossibility; rather its fulfillment is within the grasp of every Jew. The Parsha concludes with a dramatic choice between life and death. Moshe exhorts the people to choose life.

VAYELECH

On this, the last day of his life, Moshe goes from tent to tent throughout the camp, bidding farewell to his beloved people, encouraging them to "keep the faith." Moshe tells them that whether he is among them or not, Hashem is with them, and will vanquish their enemies. Then he summons Yehoshua, and in front of all the people, exhorts him to be strong and courageous as the leader of the Jewish People. In this manner, he strengthens Yehoshua's status as the new leader. Moshe teaches them the *mitzvah* of *hakhel*: That every seven years on the first day of the intermediate days of Succot, the entire nation, including small children, is to gather together at the Temple to hear the king read from the Book of *Devarim*. The sections that he reads deal with faithfulness to Hashem, the covenant, and reward and punishment. Hashem tells Moshe that his end is near, and he should therefore summon Yehoshua to stand with him in the *Mishkan*, where Hashem will teach Yehoshua. Hashem then tells Moshe and Yehoshua that after entering the Land, the people will be unfaithful to Him, and begin to worship other gods. Hashem will then completely "hide His face" so that it will seem that the Jewish People are at the mercy of fate, and that they will be hunted by all. Hashem instructs Moshe and Yehoshua to write down a song — *Ha'azinu* — which will serve as a "witness" against the Jewish People when they sin. Moshe records the song in writing and teaches it to *Bnei Yisrael*. Moshe completes his transcription of the Torah, and instructs the *levi'im* to place it to the side of the *aron* (Holy Ark), so that no one will ever write a new Torah Scroll that is different from the original — for there will always be a reference copy.

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Parshat **Netzavim / Vayelech** —

Production Design: Eli Ballon

23 Elul 5759, 3 & 4 September 1999

Insights

THE SAME BOAT

"You are standing, today, all of you..." (29:9)

Quietly, he entered his cabin and closed the door behind him. Down here in the bowels of the ship, you could hear the massive turbines droning and the ocean slipping under the keel inches beneath the steel floor.

Opening a small closet, he removed an anonymous-looking briefcase, laid it on the bed and moved the combination to its correct position. The latches of the case sprung open. He lifted the lid. There it was. The smallest and most powerful laser blowtorch that you could buy anywhere in the Far East. He removed it from its velveteen bed and held it lovingly in his arms. Then he pushed aside the bed and took up the rug to reveal the dull steel of the hull. He flicked the switch and the laser sprang to life. As the beam met the metal floor, the ship gave out a banshee wail.

Within a minute, there were loud knocks on the door. "What are you doing?" "Open the door!" "Open this door!" "What's going on in there?"

"I'm cutting a hole in the floor. Go away."

"Are you crazy, you'll kill us all!"

"Mind your own business. What's it to do with you? I'm only cutting a hole in my own cabin!"

In the first part of this week's double Torah portion, *Nitzavim*, Moshe assembles every member of the Jewish People on this, the last day of his life. From the youngest to the oldest, from the least to the most exalted, Moshe initiates them into a new covenant. Why did they need a new covenant?

Hadn't they already entered a covenant with G-d at Sinai?

What was different about this covenant was that it created a mutual responsibility between all Jews. Not just responsible in the sense that we have to look after each other, feed and clothe the sick and the poor, but in the sense that "I am responsible for everything you do" — like a big brother. This idea is hinted to by the very first words of the parsha "*You are standing, today, all of you...*" meaning, "You are all standing over each other."

"Religious coercion! Big Brother is watching you!" All too often, we hear these words screaming from newspaper headlines. And what a tragic, mistaken idea it represents. When a Jew cries out "Shabbos!" to someone driving past his home on Shabbos, he's crying in pain. He feels that responsibility that we all accepted for each other.

The Jewish People are but sparks of one soul. A mystical connection exists between us all. What each of us does affects all the rest of us. A Jew cannot say: "Look, if you guys want to keep Shabbat, that's fine, but why should I be coerced into doing things that I don't believe in? It's my life. I'm my own person."

With respect — it's not your life. You were given it. And you're not just your own person. Every action we do ripples across the physical and the spiritual world. There is no action without reaction. No man is an island entirely to himself, and no man has a cabin in which he can cut a hole in the floor. We are all in the same boat.

Sources:

Rabbi Mordechai Perlman

Haftorah: Yishayahu 61:10-63:9

In this last of the seven Haftorahs of Consolation, the prophet Isaiah describes how just as the land will seem to bloom and flourish in the time of the *Mashiach* without any prior cultivation, so too Hashem will redeem his people and shower them with kindness without any prior action on their part, and without them deserving it. Rather, Hashem will bestow His kindness through His infinite generosity.

The Targum Yonason translates "For Zion's sake, I will not be silent" to mean that there will never be peace in the world while the Jewish People are scattered in exile.

In the final days, Hashem will come "stained with blood from the battle with Esau/Edom/Rome and its spiritual heir" to liberate His people and reveal that He has been with them in every exile, frustrating the designs of those who wished to obliterate them.

ONLY HAPPINESS IS A TWO-WAY STREET

"I will rejoice intensely with Hashem, my soul shall exult with my G-d." (61:10)

Our Sages teach us that "a person is obligated to make a blessing on adversity just as he makes a blessing on good." (*Berachos* 54) However, this is only when the misfortune happens *to oneself*, but if one's neighbor is beset by tragic events, it is forbidden to rejoice. In fact, a person is obligated to empathize with the pain of his neighbor.

This is the intention of this verse: "*I will rejoice intensely with Hashem...*" When I perceive Hashem through the aspect of His Mercy, when He blesses me with an abundance of revealed good, then I can both rejoice and give others cause to rejoice with me.

However, when I perceive G-d through the aspect of His Judgment, "*my soul shall exult with my G-d.*" When affliction befalls me *only I am allowed to exult*, for "*a person is obligated to make a blessing on adversity just as he makes a blessing on good.*" But when misfortune befalls others, then not only am I forbidden to exult, I must seek out every way to empathize with them in their loss.