

Nitzavim (Deuteronomy 29:9-30:20; Isaiah 61:10-63:9)  
Temple Adath Israel  
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*Shabbat shalom!* We're nearing the end of the Jewish liturgical year. This week's *parsha*, *Nitzavim* ("the ones standing"), is the last *parsha* before Rosh Hashanah. In Moses' third sermon to the Israelites depicted as standing on the plains of Moab (east side of the Dead Sea), he recapitulates and reaffirms the terms of the entire covenant between God and the people of Israel, following their circuitous, forty-year-long journey, before they, but not Moses, will cross into the land promised to them by God. The passage serves as a reminder of the need for reckoning and repentance before the upcoming New Year and Day of Atonement.

[[This week's *haftarah*, just as a note, is an exultant passage from Isaiah celebrating God's espousal (in both senses) of Zion and the city of Jerusalem. It's replete with bridal imagery we incorporate at the beginning of the Sabbath liturgy, as well as an overview, in just a handful of verses, of God's head-spinning emotional range—from blood-spilling wrath to magnanimous and salvific kindness. I'll focus on the *parsha* tonight.]]

I feel a personal connection with the last section of this *parsha* because I've been privileged for several years to chant that text on Yom Kippur morning. In addition, in preparing for tonight, I found the entire passage uncannily thought-provoking in the challenging times in which we currently find ourselves. If you haven't read it recently, I encourage you to do so, but let me spoon-feed you **six key take-aways**:

- 1) **Everyone in Moses' audience is bound to the covenant:** Persons of high and low status, all tribal heads, elders and officials; men, children, and wives (listed in that order); even the strangers living among them [*gerecha*]*—*and he names a couple of occupations associated with the special status of those foreign-born: woodchoppers and water-drawers. You are *all* God's people, Moses says, thanks to a commitment made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Everyone in that community is bound to God's covenant, with its sanctions.
- 2) Not only is the covenant viewed as a promise pledged in the past, but it's given and binding to both those present ("standing," *Nitzavim*), and also **future generations**.

- 3) They've encountered an array of **bizarre belief systems and devotional practices to foreign gods** on their sojourn out of Egypt and around the Sinai peninsula, to which some sub-groups and individuals within the community were evidently drawn, because Moses cautions against these things, saying, "Perhaps there is a man or a woman [specifically *ish oh-isha*] among you, or a clan or a tribe, whose heart is even now turning from the Lord our God to go and worship the gods of other nations . . . and [that person] may think 'I shall be safe, though I follow my own willful heart.'" But Moses maintains that God will single out such a man, woman, clan, or tribe and never forgive them, and blot out their name from collective memory.
- 4) The consequences for such waywardness aren't just **individual annihilation and erasure of memory**; rather, **they are broad and long-lasting: plagues and diseases** will befall them, and **their soil will be devastated**, to the extent that other nations will be prompted to ask, "Why did God do this to this land?" and will be told, "because they forsook the covenant of the Lord."
- 5) What lies **hidden in people's hearts is significant** and will be divinely monitored. The Lord is omniscient, even if the rest of community isn't, but it's the job of the latter, the community, to hold accountable everyone who commits **overt actions** against the covenant.
- 6) Finally, what's required of people isn't **hard-to-find, esoteric knowledge** (in the heavens, or beyond the sea), rather, it's **devotion and adherence to the terms of God's covenant**. Blessing will befall those who adhere; doom awaits those who do not. And Moses concludes with the straightforward charge: "Choose life (*u'vaharta bachaim*) . . . by loving the Lord your God (*I'ahavah Adonai eloheichem*)" and steadfastly heeding God's commands. Weighted though that set of options may seem (life/blessings/prosperity vs. death/curses/adversity), it's still presented as a choice: THEIR CHOICE.

Now, we all interpret the world around us through lenses inevitably shaded by our own experiences, and so we bring our life and times to any text we read, however carefully we respect it on its own terms. I'll confess, however, that, given the news headlines

bombarding us daily—of a global pandemic now affecting old AND young, and all between; of devastating wildfires, and floods, and crop- and livestock-decimating droughts, as well as melting Arctic glaciers and toxic algae blobs; of bizarre beliefs, conspiracy theories, and medical *disinformation*, themselves "gone viral," spreading like "digital wildfire" under the guise of esoteric knowledge via YouTube, Facebook pages, and reddit threads (and consumed and purveyed by those who proclaim with breathtaking naiveté, "I did my own research"); as well as raging political debates at national, state, and local levels regarding trade-offs between personal freedom and public safety, and the appropriate recognition of those born outside our borders, and which elements of our collective history should be included in our national narratives, and which are undeserving of honor—in light of all these things, I'll confess, this week's *parsha* got my renewed attention.

I'd be the last to advocate for a way of life based on a conflation of millennia-old customs and social structures, but this text, as it stands, reflects an astute sensitivity to some elements of human psychology and social binding that we may find familiar.

Social contract theorists recognize that any community needs a theoretical commitment by its membership, if not to a higher power, at least to the community's current and future members—all of them—for it to endure and remain intact; and, regardless of the particular form of government that results, that those members are better off *with* such commitment than without it.

And, while the members of Moses' audience are depicted as by no means of equal status, the community-wide obligation of *all* members to the covenant, and the protection afforded by that covenant to them ALL, both the powerful and the vulnerable—high-standing and low; men, women, and children; even outsiders in their midst—is worthy of the admiration of moral and social justice philosophers.

The commitment to future generations charged here is recognizable as a form of what's now termed "intergenerational justice" that grounds much social welfare and economic policy, and, especially, environmental protection.

And while we rightly value freedom of thought and freedom to disagree, we're currently experiencing the destructive rending of our social fabric and, indeed, our very physical

health—and life—wrought by lethal *misinformation* and *disinformation*—mere falsehoods and intentional lies—about our government, about scientific research, about medical therapeutics, about our very history—that have turned members of our society—including neighbors and family members—against one another with fervent misplaced devotion.

Most immediately, we're being forced to spend another set of High Holidays away from one another because of a pandemic that's been prolonged by the mendacious, the manipulative, and the gullible, who continue to attack medical research and frontline caregivers and life-promoting vaccines and basic public health practices. Who needs such gods?

We face competing visions of how to be and act in the world, and on what basis. We can choose life-affirming, health-affirming policies and practices, rather than mocking, and even legislating against, them. We can choose to base our actions on evidence that can stand public scrutiny, rather than fabricated pseudo-facts. We can choose to hold the powerful and well-connected, no less than ordinary citizens, accountable for their actions. We can resist those whose own willful hearts would limit, suppress, or exclude the participation of our fellow citizens in representative self-government. We can require that the laws and judicial rulings that govern us ease our interactions rather than repress us, and be transparently justified and reasoned, rather than issued anonymously in the dark of night. We can choose to preserve and replenish a natural world in which our children and their children can survive and prosper—or we can deplete it beyond repair.

In all these arenas, it's our choice. As the New Year of 5782 begins, let's choose a way that allows all of us to flourish. *L'chaim. Shabbat shalom. And Shanah tova.*