

Individual Choice and Responsibility

A D'var Torah on *Parashat Nitzavim* (Deut. 29:9 – 30:20)

By Michele Walot

“Atem nitzavim hayom kul’chem lifnei Adonai Eloheichem.”
“You are standing today, all of you, before Adonai, your God.”

“Perhaps there is among you some man or woman, or some clan or tribe, whose heart is even now turning away from Adonai our God to go and worship the gods of those other nations; perhaps there is among you a root sprouting poison weed and wormwood.”¹

Summary – In this week’s portion, Moses is about to die on his 120th birthday and, in his last few hours, he delivers his final oration to the entire assemblage of Israelites — mighty and humble — warning them to uphold God’s covenant or face terrible consequences. The counterpoint to these dire punishments is the great mercy God will bestow on a person who sincerely repents and returns (makes teshuvah) to the commandments. Moses assures the people that, even in his absence, the Torah is entirely accessible to the people: “very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart to observe it.”²

In fact, he says, “I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life — if you and your offspring would live — by loving Adonai your God, heeding His commands, and holding fast to Him. For thereby you shall have life and shall long endure upon the soil that the Adonai your God swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to give to them.”³ Moses leaves the people this ethical will as a culmination of the lessons he has tried to impart before they enter the Promised Land without him.

Discussion – *Parashat Nitzavim* presents an enormously powerful message about individual choice and responsibility. You don’t need to be a Moses to be accountable for your actions, nor do you need to be rich or privileged. The Torah is for all to study and understand, and each person will be held to its stringent standards of behavior. The Israelites spent forty years in the desert and witnessed God’s miracles and wrath when the people strayed. Not even Aaron’s sons Nadav and Abihu were protected from God’s retribution when they decided to improvise ritual. Moses specifically addresses those skeptics who think that they can worship other gods and fall under God’s radar, thinking, “I shall be safe, though I follow my own willful heart — to the utter ruin of moist and dry alike. Adonai will never forgive him; rather will Adonai’s anger and passion rage against that man,

¹ Deuteronomy 29:17.

² Deuteronomy 30:14.

³ Deuteronomy 30:19-20.

till every sanction recorded in this book comes down upon him, and Adonai erases his name from under heaven.”⁴

Prof. Yehuda Feliks from Bar-Ilan University offers a fascinating insight⁵ into the poison weed (*rosh*) and wormwood (*la'anah*) references with respect to the “moist and dry” two verses later. The plant *rosh* is most likely *Conium maculatum* or poison hemlock, an annual or bi-annual tall flowering grass that grows wild in Israel and contains a poison called coniine, which acts as a powerful sedative. This was purportedly the poison given to Socrates. The other plant, *la'anah*, is of the genus *Artemesia*; the most common one in Israel is a low shrub with grey jagged leaves, a sharp aroma, and extremely bitter taste. A minuscule amount of the juice can turn wine very bitter. Such wine is called absinthe. In Roman times, the victor of chariot races was given absinthe to drink as a bitter but healthful drink.

Prof. Feliks offers a naturalistic interpretation of the verses above about a stock sprouting poison weed and wormwood: The person who strays from God’s commandments “may fancy himself immune, thinking, ‘I shall be safe, though I follow my own willful heart’ to the utter ruin of moist and dry alike. The Lord will never forgive him.”⁶ *Rosh* is a common plant in Israel that grows in moist soil in areas with significant rainfall, and *la'anah* needs arid soil, like that in the Aravah region of Israel.

A person can be like a single root of a cross between the two and can then flourish in any environment — whether moist or dry — just as the juicy stalks of the *rosh* can augment the dry desert *la'anah*. The message is that hardest opportunist with bitterness in his heart towards the covenant will not survive even by conquering obvious hurdles. Though he thinks himself immune against threats to his survival, he is doomed because God will devastate the soil with sulfur and salt so that nothing can grow.

Rabbi Eliezer, in Pirkei Avot 2:10, tells his students to repent the day before they die. The obvious conundrum is that death comes without warning so that you are well advised to repent now so that you do not miss your chance.

This parashah begins with “You stand this day, all of you, before Adonai your God” and repeats “this day” (or “today”) six times in the oration, emphasizing the importance of living in the present moment, an exhortation to live proactively.

Every moment in our lives presents an opportunity to choose life.

⁴ Deuteronomy 29:18-19.

⁵ In his commentary on *Parshat Nitzavim-Vayeilech*; 31 August 2002, Revised 3 July 2004.

⁶ *Ibid.*

Here are a few quotes to live by:

- “Do all the good you can, / By all the means you can, / In all the ways you can, / In all the places you can, / At all the times you can, / To all the people you can, / As long as ever you can.”⁷
- “Be the change you wish to see in the world.”⁸
- “You cannot do a kindness too soon because you never know how soon it will be too late.”⁹
- “Talk doesn’t cook rice.”¹⁰
- “Time is a companion that goes with us on a journey. It reminds us to cherish each moment, because it will never come again. What we leave behind is not as important as how we have lived.”¹¹
- “It is not permissible to delay the study of Torah until later in life when there may be more free time. ‘More free time’ may never come.”¹²

⁷ John Wesley, English religious leader (1703-1791).

⁸ Mohandas “Mahatma” Gandhi, leader for independence of India, pioneer of nonviolent civil disobedience (1869-1948).

⁹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, American essayist, philosopher and lecturer (1803-1882).

¹⁰ Chinese proverb.

¹¹ Captain Jean-Luc Picard, played by Patrick Stewart; from the film "Star Trek: Generations."

¹² *Pirkei Avot* 2:5.