Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
Parashat Nitzavim
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Nitzavim in a Nutshell

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/3078/jewish/Nitzavim-in-a-Nutshell.htm

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."

Haftarah in a Nutshell: Isaiah 61:10 – 63:9

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/562389/jewish/Haftorah-in-a-Nutshell.htm

This week's haftorah is the seventh and final installment of a series seven "Haftarot of Consolation." These seven haftarot commence on the Shabbat following Tisha b'Av and continue until Rosh Hashanah.
The prophet begins on a high note, describing the great joy that we will experience with the Final Redemption, comparing it to the joy of a newly married couple.
Isaiah than declares his refusal to passively await the Redemption: "For Zion's sake I will not remain silent, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not be still, until her righteousness emerges like shining light..." He implores the stones of Jerusalem not to be silent, day or night, until G-d restores Jerusalem and establishes it in glory.
The haftorah then recounts G-d's oath to eventually redeem Zion, when the Jews will praise G-d in Jerusalem. The haftorah also contains a description of the punishment G-d will mete out to Edom and the enemies of Israel.
Isaiah concludes with the famous statement:
"In all [Israel's] afflictions, He, too, is afflicted, and the angel of His presence redeemed them..."
Like a loving father who shares the pain of his child, G-d, too, shares the pain of His people, and awaits the redemption along with them. (all nutshells borrowed from chabad.org)

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Defeating Death (Nitzavim 5781
https://rabbisacks.org/nitzavim-5781/

Only now, reaching Nitzavim, can we begin to get a sense of the vast, world-changing project at the heart of the Divine-human encounter that took place in the lifetime of Moses and the birth of Jews/ Israel as a nation.

To understand it, recall the famous remark of Sherlock Holmes. "I draw your attention," he said to Dr Watson, "to the curious incident of the dog at night." "But the dog did nothing at night," said Watson. "That," said Holmes, "is the curious incident."[1] Sometimes to know what a book is about you need to focus on what it does not say, not just on what it does.

What is missing from the Torah, almost inexplicably so given the background against which it is set, is a fixation with death. The ancient Egyptians were obsessed with death. Their monumental buildings were an attempt to defy death. The pyramids were giant mausoleums. More precisely, they were portals through which the soul of a deceased pharaoh could ascend to heaven and join the immortals. The most famous Egyptian text that has come down to us is The Book of the Dead. Only the afterlife is real: life is a preparation for death.

There is nothing of this in the Torah, at least not explicitly. Jews believed in Olam HaBa, the World to Come, life after death. They believed in techiyat hametim, the resurrection of the dead.[2] There are six references to it in the second paragraph of the Amidah alone. But not only are these ideas almost completely absent from Tanach. They are absent at the very points where we would expect them.

The book of Kohelet (Ecclesiastes) is an extended lament at human mortality. Havel havalim… hakol havel: Everything is worthless because life is a mere fleeting breath (Ecc 1:2). Why did the author of Ecclesiastes not mention the World to Come and life-after-death? Another example: the book of Job is a sustained protest against the apparent injustice of the world. Why did no one answer Job to say, "You and other innocent people who suffer will be rewarded in the afterlife"? We believe in the afterlife. Why then is it not mentioned – merely hinted at – in the Torah? That is the curious incident.

The simple answer is that obsession with death ultimately devalues life. Why fight against the evils and injustices of the world if this life is only a preparation for the world to come? Ernest Becker in his classic The Denial of Death argues that fear of our own mortality has been one of the driving forces of civilisation.[3] It is what led the ancient world to enslave the masses, turning them into giant labour forces to build monumental buildings that would stand as long as time itself. It led to the ancient cult of the hero, the man who becomes immortal by doing daring deeds on the field of battle. We fear death; we have a love-hate relationship with it. Freud called this thanatos, the death instinct, and said it was one of the two driving forces of life, the other being eros.

Judaism is a sustained protest against this world-view. That is why "No one knows where Moses is buried" (Deut. 34:6) so that his tomb should never become a place of pilgrimage and worship. That is why in place of a pyramid or a temple such as Ramses II built at Abu Simbel, all the Israelites had for almost five centuries until the days of Solomon was the Mishkan, a portable Sanctuary, more like a tent than a temple. That is why, in Judaism, death defiles and why the rite of the Red Heifer was necessary to purify people from contact with it. That is why the holier you are – if you are a Kohen, more so if you are the High Priest – the less you can be in contact or under the same roof as a dead person. God is not in death but in life.

Only against this Egyptian background can we fully sense the drama behind words that have become so familiar to us that we are no longer surprised by them, the great words in which Moses frames the choice for all time:

> See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil … I call heaven and earth as witnesses today against you, that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse; therefore choose life, that you and your children may live. (Deut. 30:15, 19)

Life is good, death is bad. Life is a blessing, death is a curse. These are truisms for us. Why even mention them? Because they were not common ideas in the ancient world. They were revolutionary. They still are.

How then do you defeat death? Yes there is an afterlife. Yes there is techiyat hametim, resurrection. But Moses does not focus on these obvious ideas. He tells us something different altogether. You achieve immortality by being part of a covenant – a covenant with eternity itself, that is to say, a covenant with God.

When you live your life within a covenant something extraordinary happens. Your parents and grandparents live on in you. You live on in your children and grandchildren. They are part of your life. You are part of theirs. That is what Moses meant when he said, near the beginning of this week's parsha:

> It is not with you alone that I am making this covenant and oath, but with whoever stands with us here today before the Lord our God as well as those not with us here today. (Deut. 29:13-14)

In Moses' day that last phrase meant "your children not yet born." He did not need to include "your parents, no longer alive" because their parents had themselves made a covenant with God forty years before at Mount Sinai. But what Moses meant in a larger sense is that when we renew the covenant, when we dedicate our lives to the faith and way of life of our ancestors, they become immortal in us, as we become immortal in our children.

It is precisely because Judaism focuses on this world, not the next, that it is the most child-centred of all the great religions. They are our immortality. That is what Rachel meant when she said, "Give me children, or else I am like one dead" (Gen. 30:1). It is what Abraham meant when he said, "Lord, God, what will you give me if I remain childless?" (Gen. 15:2). We are not all destined to have

children. The Rabbis said that the good we do constitutes our toldot, our posterity. But by honouring the memory of our parents and bringing up children to continue the Jewish story we achieve the one form of immortality that lies this side of the grave, in this world that God pronounced good.

Now consider the two last commands in the Torah, set out in parshat Vayelech, the ones Moses gave at the very end of his life. One is hakhel, the command that the King summon the nation to an assembly every seven years:

> At the end of every seven years … Assemble the people – men, women and children, and the stranger living in your towns – so that they can listen and learn to fear the Lord your God and follow carefully all the words of this law. (Deut. 31:12)

The meaning of this command is simple. Moses is saying: It is not enough that your parents made a covenant with God at Mount Sinai or that you yourselves renewed it with me here on the plains of Moab. The covenant must be perpetually renewed, every seven years, so that it never becomes history. It always remains memory. It never becomes old because every seven years it becomes new again.

And the last command? "Now write down this song and teach it to the Israelites and make them sing it, so that it may be a witness for me against them" (Deut. 31:19). This, according to tradition, is the command to write [at least part of] a Sefer Torah. As Maimonides puts it: "Even if your ancestors have left you a Sefer Torah, nonetheless you are commanded to write one for yourself."[4]

What is Moses saying in this, his last charge to the people he had led for forty years, was: It is not sufficient to say, our ancestors received the Torah from Moses, or from God. You have to take it and make it new in every generation. You must make the Torah not just your parents' or grandparents' faith but your own. If you write it, it will write you. The eternal word of the eternal God is your share in eternity.

We now sense the full force of the drama of these last days of Moses' life. Moses knew he was about to die, knew he would not cross the Jordan and enter the land he had spent his entire life leading the people toward. Moses, confronting his own mortality, asks us in every generation to confront ours.

Our faith – Moses is telling us – is not like that of the Egyptians, the Greeks, the Romans, or virtually every other civilisation known to history. We do not find God in a realm beyond life – in heaven, or after death, in mystic disengagement from the world or in philosophical contemplation. We find God in life. We find God in (the key words of Devarim) love and joy. To find God, he says in this week's parsha, you don't have to climb to heaven or cross the sea (Deut. 30:12-13). God is here. God is now. God is life.

And that life, though it will end one day, in truth does not end. For if you keep the covenant, then your ancestors will live in you, and you will live on in your children (or your disciples or the recipients of your kindness). Every seven years the covenant will become new again. Every generation will write its own Sefer

Torah. The gate to eternity is not death: it is life lived in a covenant endlessly renewed, in words engraved on our hearts and the hearts of our children.
And so Moses, the greatest leader we ever had, became immortal. Not by living forever. Not by building a tomb and temple to his glory. We don't even know where he is buried. The only physical structure he left us was portable because life itself is a journey. He didn't even become immortal the way Aaron did, by seeing his children become his successors. He became immortal by making us his disciples. And in one of their first recorded utterances, the Rabbis said likewise: Raise up many disciples.
To be a leader, you don't need a crown or robes of office. All you need to do is to write your chapter in the story, do deeds that heal some of the pain of this world, and act so that others become a little better for having known you. Live so that through you our ancient covenant with God is renewed in the only way that matters: in life. Moses' last testament to us at the very end of his days, when his mind might so easily have turned to death, was: Choose life.

[1] Arthur Conan Doyle, "The Adventure of Silver Blaze." [2] The Mishnah in Sanhedrin 10:1 says that believing that the resurrection of the dead is stated in the Torah is a fundamental part of Jewish faith. However, according to any interpretation, the statement is implicit, not explicit. [3] New York: Free Press, 1973. [4] Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Tefillin, Mezuza, VeSefer Torah 7:1.

Choose Life: The Central Message of the Covenant -Nitzavim 5781 by Rabbi Yitz Greenberg

https://mechonhadar.s3.amazonaws.com/mh_torah_source_sheets/GreenbergParshatNitzavim5781.pdf?utm_medium=email&_hsmi=154503639&_hsenc=p2ANqtz-_vBOZz0DfG6pQGA4hdv2f34td3Xkj32KedhNGrkLWaR27qw1xy_125OEdDIbVT6ewdXR0NMWTCe8fHKEe1njICyrUQVQ&utm_content=154503639&utm_source=hs_email

As one of his last major acts of leadership, Moses gathers the Israelites poised to enter the land of Canaan on the plains of Moab. He brings this new generation, the children of those who stood at Sinai, into the brit, the covenant of Israel. In Parashat VaYelekh next week, I will discuss why this new ceremony is needed. Here in Nitzavim, it says "I command you to love the Lord your God, to walk in His ways, to keep God's commandments, statutes, and judgments" (Deuteronomy 30:16). What does this add up to? Here is Moses' elevator pitch of the meaning of the Torah: "Behold, I place before you today life and good and death and evil... I call on Heaven and Earth to witness to you that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse—choose life!" (30:15, 19).
Maimonides points out that, in verse 15, the words "life and good" are in apposition, while "death and evil" are twinned. Says Maimonides: this is because in every act of good, there is an element of choosing life; in every act of evil, there is an element of choice of death.[1] Overall, the purpose of the covenant is to repair the world so that life flourishes in this world and all its dignities are honored. But the committed member of the covenant cannot act

in every matter at the level of perfection because the world is not fully redeemed. At this moment, every act in every life situation, involves a mixture of life and good, and of death and evil. Therefore, to live up to the covenant, every individual needs to live consciously. People must size up every situation before acting, ascertain the mix of good and evil and shape the act to maximize elements of life and minimize elements of death. The innovation in living covenantally is to literally become aware of every human behavior and not do it routinely. Rather, one should shape actions or modify them to, in some measure, increase the life quotient—and minimize the death quotient—in the act.

Take eating. If one does not eat, one will die. To live, a person must eat. But what and how we eat contains a mix of life and death elements. To live up to the covenant goal, one must maximize the life element. If I eat healthy food, then the eating is on the side of life. If I eat excessively processed foods which have lost vital nutrients, or food with a lot of salt, with a lot of sugar, that leads to obesity or diabetes, or meat that infuses excessive cholesterol into the bloodstream, one has increased the elements of death in the eating process. Kashrut should be understood not just as a ritual commandment but as a covenantal guide to maximizing life in the process of eating.[2] Kashrut starts with the model of vegetarianism. Ideally, no other higher forms of life—organisms such as animals, birds, or fish—should die so I should live. In the Garden of Eden, the Torah projects its ideal that all living creatures be vegetarian.[3] The prophet Isaiah predicts that, in the Messianic age, when the process of tikkun olam is complete, even predatory animals will become vegetarian.[4]

Since the world is not yet fully repaired (and meat eating provides a needed source of protein) eating animals is permitted, but heavily restricted. A very limited number of species of fish are permitted; only a limited number of (non-predatory) birds and animals are permitted, and they require shehitah (swift, painless slaughter). Furthermore, meat, the outcome of death, is prohibited to be cooked or eaten with milk, the source of life.

In the same spirit, the side effects of eating animals may undermine life. Raising meat animals in industrial quantities causes suffering and sickness among those creatures and increases methane (from cows) in the atmosphere, thereby warming the earth. Eating overfished species threatens their survival. All the above increase the quotient of death. Treatment of workers in the food provision industries may include elements of exploitation, pesticide exposure, and unsanitary conditions, just as abuse of agricultural workers may taint plant foods with evil or death. Drinking fair trade coffee or eating fair trade chocolate, buying local produce, and so on, are examples of choosing life. Covenantal eating requires that each aspect of food preparation be reviewed, and the quotient of life be maximized as against evil or death.

In the pandemic, we learned that praying—or any religious gathering—can be turned into superspreader occasions. This represents choosing death for people

and turning worship of God from enhancing life to advancing death.
Every worldly life behavior should be reviewed to "choose," i.e. maximize, life. Driving a car creates pollution. Reducing one's carbon footprint by using mass transportation or by driving an electric car is an act of choosing life, as is using seatbelts religiously and driving safely and responsibly.
In doing business, I can build homes and rent apartments that improve people's lives, or be a slumlord who exploits tenants and degrades the quality of their life. I can create a product of high quality that enhances life, or turns the manufacturing process into pollution, excessive waste, and non-recyclable products that poison the earth. I can pay a fair, living wage and set up a safe production system to which workers can contribute. Or I can create sweatshop conditions that harm the workers and impoverish society.
Or take the act of speaking. The words I speak to a fellow human being can be respectful, treating them as an image of God and therefore of equal value, increasing or enhancing their life. The words could also be words of denigration and hatred which makes others feel unequal or unwanted, reducing their life—and mine. My words have the ultimate power to make others feel loved and encouraged, to embrace life and do good. When I talk trivially or speak platitudes, I have chosen death for the listeners whose lifetime is used up with no gain or worthwhile outcome for either of us.[5]
The Torah's ethical laws are not simply commandments to obey. They are meant to be guidelines to treating others with dignity and respect and not exploiting. They need to be reviewed, upgraded, and applied to new circumstances in every emerging society or changing economy. The ritual laws also are meant to guide us to choose life and dignity as well as minimize death and devaluation of others. If they are applied to demean others or reduce the dignity of women, or racial and sexual minorities, then they are harming the covenantal goals and undermining the vision of choosing life. They need to be corrected or reoriented toward the divine goal of filling the world with life and generating a culture, society, and environment that sustains life.
Moses mentions that the Torah lines up blessing and curse, life and death, alongside each other and asks us to choose life. This is a reminder that every human behavior can advance life and be a blessing, but that same action (done or applied improperly) can be a curse that increases evil in the world. This is why living covenantally requires constant monitoring, preparation, and review. The coming High Holiday season reminds us that if we fail or do evil—inevitably we all do some—we can repent. We can admit our sin, make reparation to people we hurt, and change our behavior going forward. This turn to life is the central message of the Torah and the central purpose of the life of covenant.
Shabbat Shalom.

[1]See Maimonides, Guide of the Perplexed, part 1, chapter 42. 2 See also my essay on this topic for Parashat Shemini, "Kashrut: Eating as an Act of Choosing Life," available here: https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/kashrut-eating-act-choosing-life. 3 "The Lord said: I have

given you every herb bearing seed… every tree on which there is fruit, to you it shall be for food. And to every beast… every bird… every thing that creeps… I have given every green herb for life" (Genesis 1:29-30).. 4 "The wolf will live down with the lamb… the lion, as the ox, shall eat straw" (Isaiah 11:6-7). 5 In The Triumph of Life (forthcoming), I expound the theme of choosing life as Judaism's central message.

Choosing to Choose: Nitzavim by Jan Uhrback
https://www.jtsa.edu/choosing-to-choose

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said: All the animals of the creation—were created in their full-grown stature, they were created with their consent, and according to their form (Rosh Hashanah 11a).

The rabbis taught that Rosh Hashanah commemorates the creation of the world, or by some accounts, the sixth day of creation, the day that humanity was created. Liturgically, the day is seen as more than just an anniversary. We pray "*Hayom Harat Olam,*" today the world is born, suggesting that the world, humanity, and each of us individually, are created "today," every Rosh Hashanah.

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi's teaching about the process of creation suggests something startling: each creature has a measure of choice in its own formation; its "consent" is required. Indeed, according to the great Hasidic master the Sefat Emet, at Creation, *l'da-atan nivr'u* means that all creatures chose for themselves—each one its own particular form.

This idea will be familiar to anyone who has engaged in creative work of any kind. At some point in the creative process, the object being created begins to direct its own form. The same is true of human beings. Of course we do not have complete free reign to "self-create." We are all born with particular physical, intellectual, and emotional characteristics, and into particular social and familial structures. But the phrase "today the world is born," suggesting as it does a passive process, is misleading. Within the realm of things within our control, we actively create ourselves on Rosh Hashanah, and indeed every day. And we do so through our choices.

See, I set before you today life and good, death and evil . . . Life and death I place before you, blessing and curse. Choose life (Deut. 30:15, 19).

Why does our Torah reading this week need to command us to choose life, and what does that really mean? Reading the command in light of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi's teaching, we may understand the Torah to be reminding us that *all choices are creative acts*. Each and every one of us creates ourselves constantly through the choices we make. In the end, we are the sum total of our choices; we are beings freely created according to the form we choose, not only at creation, but at every moment.

To choose life we have to actively, consciously, and continually choose who we will become. We have to choose to create ourselves and our lives, rather than

passively allow ourselves to be shaped. At the most basic level, we have to choose to choose.

The command to choose life expresses a reality that life energy comes from the exercise and expression of the will, from making choices. We are most fully alive when we are actively, consciously engaged in the process of choosing who to be. The moment that we allow ourselves to be a certain way simply because we have always been that way, or because society or a particular person pressures us to be that way, or any other reason other than a conscious, thoughtful decision to be a certain way—we have died a little. We have chosen death, not life.

And this choice itself—to embrace our power to choose; to actively, consciously create ourselves—is neither intuitively obvious, nor easy. The opportunity on Rosh Hashanah to create ourselves anew is a tremendous privilege and also a tremendous responsibility.

The Talmud teaches of the three books open on Rosh Hashanah:

Rabbi Kruspedai said in the name of Rabbi Yochanan: Three books are opened on Rosh Hashanah, one for the thoroughly wicked, one for the thoroughly righteous, and one for the beinonim, intermediate. The thoroughly righteous are immediately inscribed and sealed in the book of life; the thoroughly wicked are immediately inscribed in the book of death; the beinonim—they are suspended and stand from Rosh Hashanah until Yom Kippur. If they merit, they are inscribed in the book of life; if they do not merit, they are inscribed in the book of death (Rosh Hashanah 16b).

A powerful Hasidic interpretation (Toldot Yaakov Yosef, quoted in Netivot Shalom) understands this as follows:

This means that they open three new books, in which each person must inscribe themselves for the coming year.

As uncomfortable as some of us are with the idea of God sitting in judgment and decreeing life or death, this reading may be even more challenging, because it puts the responsibility squarely on us. We have to choose.

Perhaps this is one reason why we need to be *commanded* to choose life. All too often, we readily relinquish our power to choose because we don't want to bear responsibility for our choices, or we simply don't know what to choose. Other times, we *do* know what to choose, but the right choice feels too demanding; it involves too much work, loss, change, or risk.

And we have many strategies to avoid choosing. Sometimes we're passive, allowing life to simply happen to us. Other times we're reactive and reflexive, acting on impulse without self-reflection, thought, and discipline. And often, we avoid having to make choices today by simply sticking with the choice we made yesterday, for no other reason than that we made it. This particular strategy can border on the idolatrous; we pledge our primary allegiance to our own prior choices and commitments.

Ultimately, we are free to choose, but we are not free from the burden of having to choose. To fail to choose is itself a choice, and it is not the choice of life and

blessing.
Granted, it is not easy to know what to choose. But the fact that we don't know how to choose doesn't let us off the hook. We have to choose to become people who *will* know how to choose. Each choice that we make changes us a little and changes the way we perceive and decide the next choice. With each life decision we make, we become someone else, and it is that new person who will make the next choice. So our question is not only, who will I be if I make this choice, but, will making this choice turn me into someone who is better able to make the next choice? What will this choice teach me? Will it increase my courage, my strength? Will it deepen my capacity to love, sensitize me, educate me? Will it help me to tolerate greater depth, rise to the next challenge? Will it shore up my moral footing, or will it make me more susceptible to ever greater ethical compromise? How will this choice not only reflect, but shape, my character?
Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi taught that all the animals were created in their full-grown stature. This is perhaps a difference between the original creation and the ongoing process of creation, and between the animals and humans. We are not created full-grown, in our final form. We grow into who we are meant to be. And we have to grow also into our capacity to choose, we have to grow into ***ba'alei bechira,*** truly free, "masters" of choice. ***(Jan Uhrbach is acting Dean of the Rabbinical and Cantorial Schools at JTS)***

From Washington Heights to Jerusalem - Nitzavim by Cantor Evan Kent

https://reformjudaism.org/learning/torah-study/torah-commentary/washington-heights-jerusalem

This week's Torah portion, Nitzavim, which is read on the Shabbat preceding Rosh HaShanah, is filled with images of awe, covenant, and an awareness of our place in the chain of generational continuity. The words of this portion so illuminate and magnify the High Holiday liturgy that they are heard again in Reform synagogues on Yom Kippur morning.

> You stand this day, all of you — your tribal heads, your elders and your officials, all the men of Israel, your children, your wives, even the stranger within your camp, from woodchopper to water drawer— before God to enter into the covenant, which God is concluding with you this day, with its sanctions" (Deuteronomy 29:9-11).

Using "nitzavim," rather than the usual verb meaning "to stand" - "omeid" – signals the intent of a deliberate action. Rabbi Cookie Olshein has pointed out that this usage appears as well in Genesis, when the angels come to Abraham's tent, they are "nitzavim" before him, their visit has a purpose.
Moses' speech in this parashah serves as a reminder that no one is exempt from hearing these words and commands and bearing responsibility for them across time. "I make this covenant, with its sanctions, not with you alone, but both with those who are standing here with us this day before God and with those who are not with us here this day" (Deuteronomy 29:13-14).

Later in the portion, the theme of the High Holidays is further articulated:

> "See, I set before you this day life and prosperity, death, and adversity. For I command you this day, to love your God, to walk in God's ways, and to keep God's commandments, laws, and rules, that you may thrive and increase, and that God may bless you in the land that you are about to enter and possess… I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day: I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life—if you and your offspring would live—by loving your God, heeding God's commands, and holding fast to God. For thereby you shall have life and shall long endure upon the soil that God swore to your ancestors, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to give to them" (Deuteronomy 15-16, 19-20).

Reading these words, I cannot help but think about my great grandmother Eva. She lived in Washington Heights, literally in the shadow of the George Washington Bridge. Her apartment was dark and rambling. In the front hallway stood a telephone table with a small blue and white charity box. Whenever we came to visit, she encouraged us to put coins in the box "for the country of Israel."

On the wall above the telephone table hung a ceramic plate with scenes of Jerusalem: the Dome of the Rock, the Western Wall, the Montefiore Windmill and inscribed the words: "Next year in Jerusalem." As a young child, I always wondered if "next year" literally meant next year or some future time, perhaps when I reached the age of my great grandmother.

As she got older, she would spend a few months at a time at our house on Long Island and accompany us to High Holiday services. Sitting on her lap in the synagogue as a young child, I sensed her great faith, devotion, and sense of awe. I do not know how learned she was in the liturgy of the Yamim Noraim, Days of Awe, but she manifested an understanding of the High Holiday experience that transcended the literal meaning of the Hebrew prayers and songs.

For me and my family, the words "choose life" have real resonance. My ancestors made the fateful decision at the beginning of the 20th century to leave Eastern Europe and emigrate to the United States to improve their economic condition. If they had not stood up - nitzavim – and chose to leave their places of birth, I probably would not be here to share their story.

As I sat on Rosh HaShanah snuggled next to my great grandmother, who prayed with tears in her eyes and a heart filled with memories, neither of us could have imagined that I would be living in Jerusalem today and telling the story of the ceramic plate in her apartment inscribed with the words "Next Year in Jerusalem." And to my five-year-old self wondering when that day would come, the answer is right now. *(Cantor Evan Kent is an oleh chadash (new immigrant) living in Jerusalem, where he is on the faculty of Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion. For 25 years, he served Temple Isaiah in Los Angeles, CA.)*

Writing Women Into the Torah - Nitzavim by Rabbi Dianne Cohler-Esses
https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/writing-women-into-the-torah/

For the last four or five decades, feminist scholars have asserted that the Bible is an androcentric work reflecting a time when men controlled property, politics, and religious life, not to mention women themselves. Those insights delegitimized the Torah as a source of meaning and authority for many women. How could a sacred text reflect the injustices of patriarchy? It did not seem possible.

However, the extent to which patriarchy de-legitimizes the Bible as a sacred book for women has become more nuanced in recent scholarship. While the Bible's male-centeredness generally goes undisputed, at least in academic circles, various scholars (such as Phyllis Trible, Tikva Frymer-Kensky, and Meyers) have highlighted a number of potentially mitigating or even redemptive elements .. concerning women. First are the powerful and highly delineated female characters in the Bible, most notably Sarah, Rebecca, Tamar, Miriam, Rahab, Deborah, and Ruth, all of whom are leaders who transform the private or public realms in which they act. Second are the Bible's commandments that express a clear concern for the care of the marginal and/or impoverished in society: the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow. Third are the deep covenantal principles articulated in the Torah that can be used for feminist purposes. Parashat Nitzavim exemplifies this, with its rich, powerful–even revolutionary–concepts that can be used to further the creation of a feminist Judaism. The portion begins: "You stand this day, all of you, before your God — you tribal heads, you elders, and you officials, all the men of Israel, you children, you women, even the stranger within your camp, from woodchopper to water drawer — to enter into the covenant of your God" (Deut. 29:9-10). Let's take a close look at the language surrounding women.

First of all, from the nature of the list, one can pretty safely assume that the women were not tribal leaders, elders, woodchoppers or water drawers. The crucial fact, however, is that they are included. They are standing before God as full members of the covenantal community. In many other instances in the Torah, only the men are addressed or female inclusion is ambiguous — eclipsed by the nature of the Hebrew language itself, which retains a grammatically masculine form whether addressing or referring to an all-male group or a mixed male and female group.

Secondly, the "women" listed belong to the "you" being addressed. (The word is often translated as "your wives)" as if the women are not part of the "all of you" in v. 9.) But here "women" are not the only ones subject to belonging. Every individual belongs to a household, a clan, a tribe. In the Hebrew Bible, belonging is what constitutes a people. In this particular passage, leadership and power do not set one apart as an autonomous individual. No one, not even the most powerful male tribal leader, stands alone. For better or for worse, everyone is held in an inescapable web of interconnectedness and belonging.

With all of that, one might still dismiss the applicability of the text to us as contemporary women. Yet I believe we should not overlook the value of this text for women "this day" (29:9). Perhaps the historical context can account for some of the dispiriting force of androcentrism. The biblical authors could not imagine women in roles other than daughters who then became wives (or widows, a state also defined by marriage). Women simply were not necessarily visible if they did not fulfill wifely or maternal duties. Here we can summon the traditional concept of "the Torah spoke in the language of human beings" (dibrah torah kilshon b'nei adam). An alternative translation of this saying would be: "The Torah spoke in the language of men." It is for us, as students of Torah and members of the covenantal people, to help construct our very lives in a way that takes text out of its historical context, out of its male dress or costume, and applies it to our own time. In this way, we redress Torah — and address it to ourselves and our own community, much as the rabbis who authored the Midrash and Talmud did. It is time to do no less than to dress the Torah in the language of women.

The Torah itself is explicit about the fact that this covenant is not a thing of the past. As Deut. 29:13-14 makes clear, this covenant was intended for each one of us in our own time.

The covenant is made not only with those who stood in Moab listening to Moses' words, but also with future generations. Every Israelite since that day, and every Jew to come into this world in the future, is directly and personally included in this covenant. Thus are we — those reading the Torah now — empowered to forge our own relationship to the contents of the ongoing revelation. The tradition is not fixed; quite the contrary. it is our very active and receptive listening that gives this text its meaning and its very sanctity. The text gains its kedushah ("holiness") from those in every generation who read it and

add their voices to the endless. sacred conversation about what this all means. If women exclude themselves from that process, the full power, relevancy, and truth of the Torah are diminished.

To underline that point, the Torah itself adds words of encouragement further on in the portion concerning our ability to apprehend this text: "Surely, this Instruction which I enjoin upon you this day is not too baffling for you, nor is it beyond reach … No, the thing is very close ro you, in your mouth and in your heart, to observe it" (Deut. 30:10, 14). The Torah belongs to everyone of us, not just to experts or to certain segments of the community; it does not belong to men alone. As this portion reminds us, the Torah is far more democratic, fluid, and subjective. We await revelation–and yet revelation is right here, precisely where we stand. "It is not in the heavens…No, the thing is very close to you" (Deut. 30:12, 14)–exceedingly close. *(Dianne Cohler-Esses is the first Syrian Jewish woman to be ordained as a rabbi. She was ordained in 1995 at the Jewish Theological Seminary. She is currently a freelance educator and writer, teaching and writing about a wide range of Jewish subjects. She lives in New York City with her journalist husband and their three children.)*

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Upcoming Yahrtzeits

Rabbi Lisa Vernon remembers her mother Lillian R. Vernon on Saturday September 9^{4h} (Elul 27)

Rebecca and Peter Greene remember their son Ethan Greene on Monday September 6th (Elul 29)

Rebecca Greene also remembers her mother Anita Schwartz on Tuesday September 7th (Tishri 1).

Willie Bruckner remembers her father Seymour Cohen (Schmuel ben Batya) on Thursday September 9th (Tishri 3)
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