

Parsha: Nitzavim-Vayelech

This week's Torah reading consists of two portions, bearing the contrasting names of Nitzavim ("standing upright") and Vayelech ("and he went"). Both consist—as does the whole of the book of Deuteronomy—of Moses' parting words to the children of Israel on the eve of their entry into the Promised Land:

You stand upright this day, all of you, before the L-rd your G-d: your heads, your tribes, your elders, your officers and all the men of Israel; your little ones, your wives, and your stranger that is in your camp, from the hewer of your wood to the drawer of your water—

to have you enter into the covenant of the L-rd your G-d, and into His oath, which the L-rd your G-d makes with you this day. In order that He may establish you today for a people to Himself, and that He may be a G-d to you, as He has spoken to you, and as He has sworn to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob.

Not with you alone do I make this covenant and this oath; but with those who stand here with us this day before the L-rd our G-d, and also with those who are not here with us this day.

Moses also warns of the consequences of Israel's failure to remain faithful to their covenant with G-d: the devastation of the land and the people's banishment from it into galut (exile).

The Future Redemption

But together with the dire warning comes the promise:

It shall come to pass, when all these things have come upon you, the blessing and the curse which I have set before you, that you will take them to heart, among all the nations into which G-d your G-d has driven you.

You will return to the L-rd your G-d and obey His voice, according to all that I command you this day—you and your children—with all your heart and with all your soul.

Then the L-rd your G-d will return your captivity, and have compassion upon you, and will return and gather you from all the nations amongst whom the L-rd your G-d has scattered you.

If your outcasts are at the utmost parts of heaven, from there will the L-rd your G-d gather you, and from there will He fetch you.

The L-rd your G-d will bring you into the land which your fathers possessed, and you shall possess it; and He will do you good, and multiply you more than your fathers.

The L-rd your G-d will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, to love the L-rd your G-d with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live . . .

Practicality and Choice

Two more fundamental principles of Judaism are stated in the Parshah of Nitzavim: The practicality and accessibility of Torah—

For this mitzvah which I command you this day, it is not hidden from you, neither is it far off.

It is not in heaven, that you should say, “Who shall go up for us to heaven and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?”

Nor is it beyond the sea, that you should say, “Who shall cross the sea for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?”

Rather, the thing is very near to you, in your mouth, and in your heart, that you may do it.

and the principle of free choice—

See, I have set before you this day life and good, and death and evil . . .

I call heaven and earth to witness this day: Life and death I have set before you, blessing and curse. You shall choose life, so that you may live, you and your seed.

To love the L-rd your G-d, to obey His voice and to cleave to Him, for He is your life . . .

Moses Went

The section of Vayelech (and the next two Parshiot of Haazinu and V’Zot HaBerachah) describes the events and words spoken on the last day of Moses’ life:

Moses went and spoke these words to all Israel. He said to them: “I am a hundred and twenty years old this day; I can no longer go out and come in, and G-d has said to me: You shall not cross this Jordan . . .”

Moses entrusts the leadership of Israel to Joshua. He puts the Torah into writing, and commands them the mitzvah of Hakhel (“gathering”): every seven years, on the Sukkot festival following the Shemittah year, “Gather the people together, men, women and babies, and your stranger that is within your gates”; the king shall then read from the Torah to them, “that they may hear and that they may learn, and fear the L-rd your G-d, and observe to do all the words of this Torah.”

Moses again warns of the hiding of the divine face which shall occur when the people abandon the Torah; indeed, G-d Himself predicts that this will be the case. "This song" must therefore serve as an everlasting testimony to ensure Israel's eventual return and rapprochement with their G-d.