

Parashat Nitzavim – Rosh Hashanah 5778, 2018:

The Holiness of Unity

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yecheiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, Shayna Yehudit bat Avraham Manes and Rivka, and Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, the *refuah shlaimah* of Yakir Ephraim ben Rachel Devorah, Eliezer ben Sarah, Anshul Pinchas ben Chaya and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

Shabbat Parashat Nitzavim is the concluding *parasha* of the Jewish calendar year, and a time for introspection. On this final Shabbat before Rosh Hashanah, many of us reflect upon our past errors in order to work toward a more Torah-infused future. Quite apropos for this time of the year, the first two *pasukim* (verses) of our *parasha* declare that we are standing before the Almighty:

You are all standing this day before the L-rd (*Atem nitzavim hayom*), your G-d, the leaders of your tribes, your elders and your officers, every man of Israel, your young children, your women, and your convert who is within your camp both your woodcutters and your water drawers. (*Sefer Devarim* 29:9-10, this and all Bible translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

Why were our forebears standing “before the L-rd?” The Torah continues its narrative:

that you may enter the covenant (*brit*) of the L-rd, your G-d, and His oath, which the L-rd, your G-d, is making with you this day, in order to establish you this day as His people, and that He will be your G-d, as He spoke to you, and as He swore to your forefathers to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. (29:11-12)

In sum, the new generation of the Jewish nation, who had not directly received the Torah at Mount Sinai, was assembled in order to “enter the *brit* of the L-rd” (i.e. accept the totality of the Torah) and become the next link in the chain of the Almighty’s chosen people.

As we have seen, the initial words of our passage read “*atem nitzavim hayom*,” which may be translated as “you, the entirety of the Jewish people, are standing here today.” A careful reading of this phrase leads us to believe that it conceals far more than it reveals. As such, we are very fortunate that *Midrash Tanchuma*, Parashat Nitzavim IV, helps shed light upon its authentic meaning:

Atem nitzavim hayom: Just as a day can on occasion be dark and dreary and at other times bright and filled with light, so, too, are the Jewish people. Even though the Holy One blessed be He brings the darkness [of exile] upon you [today,] in the future, He will [one day] bring upon you bright and permanent light [i.e. the light of redemption]. As the text states: “...but the L-rd shall be to you for an everlasting light, and your G-d for your glory.” (*Sefer Yeshayahu* 60:19, *Midrash* translation and brackets my own)

The *Midrash* continues its presentation and asks, and answers, a crucial question, “When [will we merit the light of redemption?] When all of you will be united” (“*k’she’tihyu kulchem aggudah achat*”) ...for the Jewish people will not be redeemed until they will become a single united entity.” In other words, redemption will continually remain elusive until we finally live together in *achdut* (unity and harmony).

Unfortunately, the sole time in Jewish history when we were truly united was the Revelation at Mount Sinai: “They journeyed from Rephidim, and they arrived in the desert of Sinai, and they encamped [*va’ya’chanu* – plural] in the desert, and Israel encamped [*va’yichan* – singular] there opposite the mountain.” (*Sefer Shemot* 19:2, brackets my own)

The halachic *Midrash* to *Sefer Shemot*, known as the “*Mechilta*,” reveals a fascinating insight regarding this verse:

In every [other] instance wherein the Torah states: “*va’yi’su va’ya’chanu*” (“they journeyed and encamped”), they travelled amidst dissension and encamped in manifest disagreement. But here [where the unusual expression “*va’yichan*” is utilized regarding this particular encampment], all of the Jewish people joined as one entity with one heart, as it were. Therefore, the Torah states: “... and Israel encamped [*va’yichan* – singular] there opposite the mountain.” (*Masechta d’b’Chodesh, Yitro*, end of section I, translation and brackets my own)

Our ancestors stood poised as one to receive Hashem's holy Torah at the base of Mount Sinai. It seems their impending meeting with the Master of the Universe encouraged them to rise above their usual conflictual behaviors, and embrace *achdut*. In his *Commentary on the Torah*, Rabbi Yehuda Aryeh Leib Alter (1847-1905, the "Sefat Emet") notes that *achdut* was the necessary constitutive element for the Revelation to unfold, for without it, we would have lacked the proper level of holiness to encounter the Creator:

... as a result of unity amongst the Jewish people, we come to merit holiness. This is the meaning of [the verse in *Sefer Devarim* 23:15] "For the L-rd, your G-d, goes along in the midst of your camp..." [When will this be the case?] If your camp is a singular entity, complete, and united, [then Hashem will go along "in the midst of your camp."] (*Parashat Kedoshim* 1:1, translation and brackets my own)

Like our ancestors of old, we are standing before the Master of the Universe. In a few days we will recite the *Machzor*'s well-known words, "*Va'ya'asu kulam aggudah achat la'a'sot ratzonecha b'la'yav shalame*" ("And you [the Jewish people] will fashion yourselves into a single unified entity in order to perform the Almighty's will with a complete heart and mind"). With Hashem's help and our fervent desire, may this Rosh Hashanah be the time when we become an *aggudah achat* and rise to the level of holiness wherein our Creator will once again be "in the midst of our camp." Then, with His mercy and love, may He enable the light of the ultimate redemption to shine upon us, bring the righteous *Mashiach*, and rebuild the *Beit Hamikdash*, soon and in our days. *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom and *Kativah v'Chatimah Tovah*

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>
They may also be found on <http://www.yutorah.org/> using the search criteria of Etengoff and the parasha's name.

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

*** My audio *shiurim* for Women on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at:
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*** I have posted 164 of [Rabbi Soloveitchik's](#) English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.