

Parashat Nitzavim 5781, 2021

U'vacharta ba'Chayim!

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Peretz ben Chaim, Chaya Sarah bat Reb Yechezkel Shraga, Shmuel Yosef ben Reuven, Shayndel bat Mordechai Yehudah, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof, Pittsburgh, and Jersey City, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, Moshe ben Itta Golda, Yocheved Dafneh bat Dinah Zehavah, Reuven Shmuel ben Leah, Chana bat Sarah, and the health and safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

Parashat Nitzavim contains a celebrated *pasuk* that is quite timely for these final days before Rosh Hashanah: “This day, I call upon the heaven and the earth as witnesses [that I have warned] you: I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. You shall choose life (*u'vacharta ba'chayim*), so that you and your offspring will live.” (*Sefer Devarim* 30:19, this, and all Bible and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Tanach Complete Tanach*) As we look back upon the many challenges we have faced this past year, our thoughts naturally lead us to focus upon the meaning of the phrase: “*u'vacharta ba'chayim.*”

Rashi (1040-1105) suggests the following interpretation of this expression in his *Commentary on the Torah* on our verse:

I instruct you to choose the portion of life. It is like a man who says to his son, “Choose for yourself a fine portion of my estate,” and then directs him to the best portion, saying to him, “This [is the portion which] you should choose for yourself!”

Implicit in Rashi's explanation is a crucial lesson regarding the relationship that obtains between Hashem's instructions and the nature of our *bechirah chafshite* (free will); namely, even though the Almighty may urge us to follow a certain path, this does not

prevent us from exercising our absolute freedom of choice. As such, in this short gloss, Rashi emphasizes the word, “choose,” no less than three times.

A century later, in his *Commentary on the Torah*, the Radak (Rabbi David Kimchi, 1160-1235) makes the transformative nature of *bechirah chafshite* explicit. In his analysis of Hashem’s statement to Cain following the rejection of his insufficient *korban* (*Sefer Bereishit* 4:7), he highlights how the same assertion, albeit in a different formulation, is once again given powerful voice in our *pasuk*:

And you can rule over it [the evil inclination]: He will rule over you and cause you to stumble if you do not remove [his power] from upon you. And if you so desire, you will rule over it and bring it low before you. And in so doing, the Almighty showed him the possibilities found within *bechirah*, just as *Moshe Rabbeinu*, may his memory be blessed, said to us: “Behold, I have set before you today life and good, and death and evil... *u’vacharta ba’chayim.*” (*Sefer Devarim* 30:15 and 19, Radak translation and brackets my own)

Both Rashi and the Radak emphasize the essential role that *bechirah chafshite* plays within Judaism. Its greatest advocate among all Medieval Jewish thinkers, however, was the Rambam (Maimonides, 1135-1204), who devoted chapters five and six of *Hilchot Teshuvah* to its explication. Here is an example of the singular import *bechirah chafshite* held for him:

This principle is a fundamental concept and a pillar [on which rests the totality] of the Torah and mitzvot as [*Sefer Devarim* 30:15] states: “Behold, I have set before you today life [and good, death and evil].” Similarly, [*Sefer Devarim* 11:26] states, “Behold, I have set before you today [the blessing and the curse],” suggesting that the choice is in your hands. Any one of the deeds of men that a person desires to do, he may do, whether good or evil. Therefore, [*Sefer Devarim* 5:26] states: “If only their hearts would always remain this way.” From this, we can infer that the Creator does not compel or decree that people should do either good or bad. Rather, everything is left to their [own choice]. (5:3, translation, Rabbi Eliyahu Touger with my emendations)

As the Rambam makes quite clear, we are not compelled to behave in a particular manner. The choice to pursue that which is good and righteous or, G-d forbid, the

opposite course, is totally within our control: "...the Creator does not compel or decree that people should do either good or bad." We will surely make mistakes, yet, if we dedicate ourselves to studying and living according to the Torah, we will be well on our way to fulfilling the thrilling words, "*u'vacharta ba'chayim!*" *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom and may Hashem in His infinite mercy remove the pandemic from *klal Yisrael* and all the nations of the world. *Kativah v'Chatimah Tovah* to one and all.

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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* on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

*** 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: [The Rav zatzal](#)