**Nitzavim, Sept 2017**

“Atem Nitzavim Ha’yom Koolchem: You stand today, all of you”

I have repeated and chanted this line several times in my daily practice for today’s Torah reading. The parallel that comes to my mind is how, in the 150th year of our celebration of Canada’s confederation, we have stood, many of us, at various events as we have experienced joy, and excitement, and pride at being part of this incredibly big, diverse and beautiful country. We stood for our anthem, we stood to feel even more engaged in the clapping and rejoicing, we stood to see better, we stood because that is how we internalize full attention, just as we stand for the amida, or for Kaddish or for neila.

Because the notion of nationhood is important in this parsha, I want to dwell a little on our civic nation. One ironic twist of history is the name of our nation: Canada. It is a word borrowed from the Natives of our country; it means “village”: it is one native thing our early governments felt worthy of keeping.

For my overview, I borrow observations from Reverend Allan Bennett, from Wall Street United church in Brockville who wrote this in June, just on the eve of July 1st.

We have stood to rejoice about having reached this season, about how good we feel to mark 150 years of unity, about the sense of nationhood that activities through the country have invited us to experience. This has been especially intense in Ottawa.

In contrast to our neighbour to the South, Canada has come of age through a vastly different process. We have evolved over the past 150 years: from British colony, we came into existence in 1867 through negotiation, not out of revolution, not out of fighting or bloodshed. This may have left us with a legacy: could it be that we like negotiating? A slow, painful process, that does work, and that binds.

In the years following the second world war, Canada went through some maturing; from a time where we wondered if and how we were different from the United States, it seems fair to say now that we have resolved our inferiority complex of the 70’s; we have gambled that diversity is our strength and supported immigration in varying numbers.

Another legacy of a peaceful installation as a country is trust in our governments; we like that we can trust the process that keeps it in place. We also trust our police and we feel safe. This is in contrast to our neighbours to the South who do not trust their police, and carry guns just about everywhere.

Our proud history as a country has one big ugly stain. The First Nations people were perceived as primitive; their language, culture and spirituality were of no value. Our government wanted them to meld in the mainstream, to fade away. To assist in this process, residential schools were set up. They were funded by the Canadian government, but operated by the churches. I think we can agree that the intent was bad, the process beyond awful, and the consequences huge. Many in the First Nations did not stand in pride on Canada Day.

The past lives on and affects us. Who better than Jews understand this? Does the Torah not enjoin us to “not forget”?

Not only cannot we not forget, but we have a responsibility in the present, and into the future to do things better.

Back to Nitzavim: this is about all of us standing together before G-d. We are standing and we are invited by Moses to enter into a covenant with G-d: we who are here, (the tribal heads, the elders, the officials, the men, the women, the children, the strangers who live in the camps, from wood chopper to water-gatherer),and also those who are not here.

At verse 29:15, Moses reminds us briefly of our past, then he moves quickly to express strict prohibitions and fearsome consequences regarding the temptation to imitate the worshipping ways of the peoples whose lands we crossed.

Moses then brings his speech into the future: should we live in exile, should we live amidst people whose ways G-d abhors, we continue to have the option to stay on the straight and narrow. We are asked to “take to heart” the blessing and the curse.

- 30:2, if you heed His command with your “heart and soul”

-30:6, the Lord will open up your heart and the heart of your children, to love G-d with your heart and soul, in order that you may live

-30:10, once you return to your G-d with your heart and soul

-30:16, I command you this day to love your G-d

-30:17, but if your heart turns away

-30:17-19 choose life, by loving the Lord your G-d

This repeated statement begs the question: what does it mean to “love G-d with all your heart”? Is “to love” the same as “to obey”? Can we not love G-d, and forget about some of the mitzvot?

Two weeks ago, Carol Steinberg commented insightfully on some of the 74 mitzvot outlined in parsha Ki Teze. In all honesty, there were plenty among those that left me indifferent. Can I be indifferent about those mitzvot and still love G-d with all my heart?

While I do not see in the words of today’s parsha specific answers and definitions, I cannot avoid the strongly worded part: (30:11-14) at the end of today’s reading: “Surely this instruction which I enjoin you today is not too baffling for you, nor is it beyond your reach. No, the thing is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to observe”.

Could it be, at the end of the day, that we know, from within, what to do, what to say, what not to say? That is certainly what the text says: do not make a mountain out of it, do not go in wild searches in the heavens or beyond the sea: look within, because, when you do look, you know in your heart how to proceed. *It is in the heart that we find a disposition toward gratitude, toward forgiveness, toward generosity: these values are at the centre of the coming days.*

*Rabbi Liz Bolton shared with me this summer this particular insight: she said to me that in our time, our avoda, our sacrifice that pleases G-d, is the intent, the kavanah that we instill in what we do: in our home, in our community, in our shul, in our Canada- if you will, the small one and the big one.*

*I came across an explanation in Reform Judaism.com for the phrase “choose life that you may live” that offered some relevance to my questions. Rabbi Josh Zweiback, in 2008, wrote the following dvar:*

*Some years ago, 1878 to 1942, Rabbi Eliezer Davidovits lived in Slovakia; in his writings, Rabbi Davidovits asked the obvious question: Is there a person who would choose death? What kind of choice is really being offered here? Wouldn’t most prefer life to death, blessing to curse?*

*Rabbi Zweiback wrote there are two ways to choose life. The first is the “I” way. If we want, we can choose to think of ourselves first. We can worry about our needs, our desires, our wishes, and only later, -much later sometimes- will we consider the needs, desires and wishes of others.*

*There is another way to choose life, another way to live our life. This is the “you” way. Before we act, before we decide, before we speak, before we remain silent, we can choose to think about how our behaviour will affect future generations, including our own children and grandchildren.*

*A real choice is being offered. Do we live in a way that supports life in the broadest sense, or do we live in a way that serves only ourselves, only our own narrow interests? This narrow way, the second choice, ultimately leads not to life, but to death.*

*In 2008, Rabbi Zweibach echoed Rabbi Davidovits before him:*

*“Choose life” is at the heart of Yom Kippour.*

*My last resource today is an excellent little book by Bruce Feiler, published in 2017: The First Love Story: Adam, Eve, and Us.*

*In the last chapter, (p 248), Feiler draws the reader to consider the views of Pope Francis: “A faith that does not know how to root itself in the life of people remains arid, and , rather than oases, creates other deserts. The moments of greatest suffering are precisely the occasions for G-d to show mercy.”*

*Fieler elaborates: Religion, since its earliest days, has struggled with the tension between walls and bridges. You can build enclosures of law, tradition, belief, or any other standard, and insist the world either come in or stay out. Or you can build bridges of compassion, charity and forgiveness, and invite the world either to come in or stay out as they wish. In the first instance you get purity but may suffer contraction; in the second you get flexibility but may suffer indifference. …*

*It won’t surprise you that Adam and Eve, in order to have survived as long as they have, embody this tension. They may even have initiated it. The Garden of Eden is the original walled enclave. When Adam and Eve don’t comply with its regulations, G-d evicts them. Yet once Adam and Eve are outside those walls, G-d continually builds bridges of compassion with them. G-d wraps them in clothes, helps them conceive children, comforts them after loss.*

*As has been the case for centuries, you can read Adam and Eve as blunt messengers of the consequences of disobedience. Or you can read them as ambassadors of equality, transgression, forgiveness, and reconciliation.*

*To this I would add ambassadors of free will.*

*First Eve chooses to eat of the fruit that was forbidden: she chooses knowledge. Then she invites Adam to taste as well. Adam exercises also his free will. He could cast his lot with G-d and lose Eve, or cast his lot with Eve and lose G-d. He opts for the latter: he chooses love over obedience.*

*Who among us cannot relate to that? (p98-99)*

*The good news is that Adam and Eve live for a long time, that G-d displays concern for them, and that they acknowledge G-d in their life, even after one of their children murders the other.*

*Free will is about choosing. Nitzavim is about choosing, and about love and about committing with our whole heart and soul to G-d, and to life, in a manner where G-d and life are compatible.*

*As Moses advised Israel, may you choose life.*

*Shabbat Shalom.*

*Shana Tova.*