# Stand Firm and Choose Life

Parsha Nitzavim / Vayeilech 25 Elul 5784 / 28 September 2024 Deuteronomy 30:1 – 31:6

The title of this week’s double parashah, NItzavim-Vayeilech, is two contrasting verbs – nitzavim: standing still and vayeilecth: he went. “Nitzavim” means more than just “standing still. It refers to being firmly planted, unshakeable, committed. We should think of it not just in terms of a physical stance but as a spiritual and moral one.

“Vayelech” means “and he went,” referring to Moses’ actions as he prepares to pass leadership of the people of Israel on to Joshua. In Moses’ journey to address the people one last time, we see the theme of moving forward with purpose and determination. He explains to the people the path that pleases God and the consequences for them and their offspring if they choose a different path.

Moses addresses the Israelites with these words, “This instruction… is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to observe it. (Deuteronomy 30:14)

“See, I set before you this day life and prosperity, death and adversity.” (Deuteronomy 30:15)

“Choose life –- if you and your offspring would live” (Deuteronomy 30:19)

“By loving the Lord your God, heeding God’s commands, and **holding fast to God**. (Standing firm.) For thereby you shall have life. “(Deuteronomy 30:20)

We are almost at the end of the Torah, and as the Torah places this choice of life or death before us, it brings us full circle back to the story of Adam and Eve, where we are told:

“The Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and placed there the man whom He had formed. And from the ground the Lord God caused to grow every tree that was pleasing to the sight and good for food, with the tree of life in the middle of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and bad. (Genesis 2:9)

And God commanded, “Do not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.” What did Adam and Eve do? They chose the forbidden path.

Now, you may think it is cruel to position the tree of knowledge of good and evil where it can prominently be seen and accessed by humankind who were also placed in the garden. But consider that in this story, thousands of years old, we see demonstrated, a parenting style that today, psychological studies have found to be beneficial for developing self-discipline and resilience in children:

That is: The setting of limits.

When my daughter was a toddler, we were visiting her grand aunt, and as she was joyfully exploring her new environment, I saw her reaching for a fragile ornament that was within her reach. As she was about to touch it, I immediately swooped in, grabbed it before she could get a hold of it, and gently placed it on a shelf out of her reach. When her grand aunt saw this exchange, she said to me, “NO, don’t do that! Teach her what the word **NO** means. She has to learn limits.” I confess, young mother that I was, I did not get it. I thought, “Isn’t it easier just to remove temptation.” But I understand her position now.

In the early 1970s, psychologist Walter Mischel conducted what is now known as the marshmallow test. Children were left alone in a room with a plate containing a single marshmallow. They were promised two if they did not eat it. He found that the children who were able to resist eating the candy in order to be rewarded with two in the future, later showed numerous positive life outcomes. Notably, these children displayed fewer behavioral problems and better grades than the ones who were unable to delay gratification in the test. Setting firm limits teaches our children about boundaries, responsibilities and self-control. All qualities you expect to see in leaders. And qualities that enable us to stand firm in the face of adversity.

Instead of standing still, and developing qualities such as trust and self-control, Adam and Eve choose the “marshmallow” fruit. Their Creator’s words are on their lips, but not in their hearts. And because choices reap consequences, they are denied access to the tree of life and put out of the garden. But thankfully, their story does not end there. In Genesis, when Adam and Eve sin, God is right there with clothes to keep them warm. And God follows them into their new land.

Moses encourages Israel by assuring them that God will go with them into the land. The land is special and has great significance. In the words of Elisha Guberman, “The land of Israel is not merely a geographic space; it symbolizes a deeper spiritual relationship. It represents the ideals of justice, compassion, and holiness that we aspire to embody – on a specific geographic landmark.” (Elisha Guberman)

In Nitzavim-Vayelech, we are told that Israel will sin and will lose access to their land, but when they repent, God will be right there to welcome them back into God’s arms, with the promise of life and prosperity. When we look at both Genesis and Deuteronomy, we see that God forgives sin but does not condone it. God’s forgiveness mitigates punishment but does not eliminate it. Love does not rub out the need for consequences.

This spring we saw many institutions choose the path of turning a blind eye when their students (**our future leaders**) blatantly defied their policies. We saw them make policies, and then not enforce those policies. Threaten discipline, and then renege on following through. Sadly, there was often no consequence for negative behaviour. Is it any wonder that the students felt emboldened and persistently ignored their institutional authorities?

Rabbi Sacks sees Devarim as marking “the end of the childhood of the Jewish people. From then on, Judaism becomes God’s call to human responsibility.” We may be disappointed by what we see around us, even discouraged, but “we cannot wait for the world to get better. We must take the initiative ourselves. We must do deeds that heal some of the pain of this world, and act so that others become a little better for having known us. We must live so that through us our ancient covenant with God is renewed in the only way that matters - in life.” (Rabbi Sacks)

This choice is not just about physical survival but about embracing a life filled with purpose, righteousness, and connection to God. Choosing life means making decisions that promote growth, kindness, and justice. It means rejecting paths that lead to harm or destruction. It is a daily commitment, a conscious decision to align our actions with our highest values.

Modern day Israel’s first leader, David Ben Gurion’s vision for Israel was that “The State of Israel will prove itself not by material wealth, nor by military might or technical achievement, but by its moral character and human values. (David Ben Gurion)

Although the news media portray Israel as a war hungry nation, the Israeli defense forces limit their actions by adhering to a moral code. And the Halachic principle of the preservation of life is one that many in Israeli society abide by. Many lives have been saved by countless Israeli individuals and organizations who risk their own lives to rescue and save the lives of victims of terror and disasters in Israel and around the world.

As we approach the High Holy Days, Parsha Nitzavim-Vayelech invites us to reflect on our own lives. Are we standing firm in our commitments and values? Are we choosing life in our daily actions? This parsha encourages us to renew our dedication to living a life of purpose and to make choices that reflect our deepest beliefs.

As this year comes to an end, so too may its curses.

As the new year begins, so, too may its blessings.

Proverbs tells us that “If we carry the Torah everywhere with us by having it in our hearts and on our lips, then, when we stand, (**Nitzavim**) and when we go out, (**Vayeilech**) it will lead us and guide us.” (Proverbs 6:22)

May we all find the strength to stand firm, the wisdom to choose life, and the courage to go forth, bringing blessings to ourselves and our communities.

Shabbat Shalom!

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