

Today we are reading Nitzavim, the last of 3 Torah portions where Moses delivers a set of detailed instructions to the community of Israelites before they enter the Promised Land under the new leadership of Joshua. He specifies that we must strictly observe the 613 mitzvot, and not stray physically or by belief away from the holy community. He details the continuous disciplined effort that is required individually and collectively, and exhorts us by our faith to choose life.

Because this is the third of a three part section, let's recap what we've heard so far this year: 2 weeks ago, in Parsha **Ki Teitzei Vicki** Kelman discussed the parapet and the importance of constructing a home that is safe, that provides safety. Last week, for **Ki Tavo**, Rebecca Bardach explained how the Israelites were transformed into a people that is holy to God and chosen by God, a status which must be continually earned, . . . and today, I am going to discuss standing together while sometimes apart, a skill we've had to develop when the Pandemic started and one we appear to need to strengthen again this year.

As you might already know, Parsha Nitzavim connects specifically to the Day of Judgment and is the last Torah reading before the Chagim. It emphasizes the 611 commandments which were given to us by God through Moses and the two commandments that we received directly from God, which are the first 2 of the 10 commandments: <sup>1</sup> Out of the 613 total, -248 positive commandments (do's) and -365 negative commandments (don'ts).

Some commandments are quite straightforward: Honor thy father and thy mother. Thou shalt not steal. Thou shalt not kill. Others have two parts or link positive and negative or active and passive components: Remember the Sabbath **AND** keep it holy; don't cook meat in milk **AND** don't eat meat cooked in milk;

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<sup>1</sup> Dr Maurice M. Mizrahi Congregation Adat Reyim Tikkun Lel Shavuot 2015 and

☞ I am the L-rd your G-d, Who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.

☞ You shall have no other gods before Me.

Keep the fire on the altar burning continuously **AND** don't extinguish the fire that is burning on the altar.

Do not ignore a lost object AND (where possible) also try to find the owner.

Apparently, welcoming the stranger is the most popular commandment in the Torah since it is mentioned a champion # of 36 times, and finally, **fulfilling the mitzvot with all your heart and all your soul**

is the way to achieve eternal life, a point which was "driven home" (pardon the pun) on Yom Kippur

October 6, 1965, a Wednesday, when Brooklyn-born National League Los Angeles Dodgers left handed pitcher Sandy Koufax (originally known as Sanford Braun) took the day off and did not pitch for Game 1 of the 1965 World Series against the American League's Minnesota Twins thereby fulfilling two of the

Torah's most important mitzvot: that not only must we rest on Shabbat, - we are also forbidden to work and of course Yom Kippur is the Great Shabbat, Shabbat HaGadol. In this particular example, Sandy not

only kept the commandments but also transformed the Jewish experience of how the world perceived Jews from that point forward, although whether this was his actual intention, however is not certain.

Now I'm not sure about you, but this year when I began reading Nitzavim, I stopped at the very first line, in fact the first 12 words:

**You stand this day, all of you,** before the Lord your God<sup>2</sup>. . . to enter into the covenant . . .

And I said to myself: imagine this! What a super spreader event: so close to each other and no masks or vaccination cards! While that might sound amusing, what I realized is how deeply imprinted into our DNA is the experience we've had of hearing these lines for maybe the past 3000 years (or maybe we've read them together since the printing press was invented in the 15<sup>th</sup> century<sup>3</sup>).

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<sup>2</sup> – your tribal heads – your elders and your officials – all the men of Israel, your children, your wives, even the stranger within your camp from woodchopper to water drawer -

<sup>3</sup> <https://jewishaction.com/jewish-world/history/the-story-of-the-synagogue-chumash/>

Together we have thought about the year that has just passed and the year that is to come **in community for centuries!** Now I don't know if you feel the same, but even if it only takes 100 repetitions to establish a new habit, some 3000 years of being together as we renew our commitment to our faith is a hard habit to break . . .

Then I thought about my own life, my childhood with my family where the entire community got together to attend two synagogues in our neighborhood, walking to shul, the children in our new outfits with our new shoes, sitting in shul with our families, and then in the afternoons, walking from house to house to visit friends and neighbors to wish each other a Good Year, and subsequently, how much I have enjoyed the holidays as part of this and other congregations. These three elements: synagogue, community and neighborhood have carried me over a lifetime, and of course although we are very grateful for the "pivot" of new digital and hybrid celebrations, services, classes, rituals and practices that have been created over the past 18 months, we also feel an utterly profound loss when we are not physically together particularly as we face a whipsaw of constant and often destabilizing change.

I myself must also confess to you that I dread the onset of winter with dark days and maybe more restrictions, times when the unknowns we face require that we find within ourselves, both individually and collectively, the inner resources that are required to "choose life" and not perish from a sense of disconnectedness that this winter might again entail. And I know I am not alone in wondering how I can re-up this year – both for myself individually and as a member of a large and close knit group – almost a family that we are.

Two weeks ago I attended a talk called "Caring for Ourselves: The Science of Emotional Resilience" with Dr. Amy Eva, Associate Education Director at UC Berkeley's Greater Good Science Center.<sup>4</sup> First, she discussed the many ways in which many of us are feeling separated experiencing zoom fatigue, insomnia,

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<sup>4</sup> <https://olli.berkeley.edu/blog/amy-eva-caring-ourselves-science-emotional-resilience>

missing friends and family, not knowing how long the pandemic will last, a sense of loss of purpose, meaning, focus and even our social skills, feelings of not belonging, grief from losing family and friends to Covid, cancer, dementia and not knowing who our friends still are. . . the list goes on.

So here are some tips she provided and some I've thought of that might help:

1. If you recall, in Ki-Tavo, Moses advises the Jewish people to write down the Instructions as soon as they have crossed the Jordan River, and Amy Eva said: write down what is bothering you. Name it. Label it. Name where you are because if you can name your emotions, you are better able to regulate them, and also see that you are not the only one experiencing these feelings.
2. Practice self-compassion. Speak to yourself in ways that show you care about yourself and show kindness to yourself. (Kristin Neff<sup>5</sup>/Rick Hanson<sup>6</sup>- see links below)
3. Give yourself healthful practices – put a schedule together, plan your meals and activities, drink lots of water. Go outside every day you can and get some daylight. (vitamin d3) Figure out how to do difficult things and don't do things – particularly alone - that upset you. Take a break; shut the news OFF, and plan ahead: if you have a gap, a need, do you have time to identify the support you might need? (Hello Lynne Yellenberg!) If you think you're sick or anxious, do you have someone to call? Can you lower the volume on anxiety by using your mind to learn something new?
4. Think oxytocin – in other words have some fun. Prepare at least one fun thing or something you love to do every day– if you like to pray, pray. Meditate. If you like words, do crosswords, look up the joke a day line, garden, exercise, volunteer, spend time with a pet, whatever it takes to spend a few minutes feeling good.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://self-compassion.org/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.rickhanson.net/teaching/wednesday-meditations-with-dr-rick-hanson/>

5. If something happens in an emergency, have someone to call – last year podiatrists reported 3-4X more broken toes for people of all ages walking around shoeless at home. I am part of that statistic. When I walked into a box of files and broke my toe, I realized I wasn't completing the needed second icing, and through Lynne and Norma Kaufman and Lotsa Helping Hands,<sup>7</sup> someone called each night at 9 p.m. for 2 weeks. My callers might have just spent 5 – 10 minutes on the phone with me when it was their turn, but often they actually stayed on the phone with me helping me feel connected while I iced.
6. Remember, as in our commandments, sometimes what we need to do has 2 parts as in not just reach out but ALSO include a second step. Thank people who call you. Ask about them, and try to tell them at least one good thing . . . In fact, I want to give a huge shout out to Pat and Howard Goldman. If you're in touch with them, they thank you for reaching out and ask you how YOU are doing. It is positively inspirational. I've also gotten some phone calls recruiting me for projects other people are working on and through CJ Kingsley, I now volunteer to translate for Alameda County civil court child custody and divorce cases. In other words, if you have a project you're working on, reach out and see if others might be interested in getting involved to help you. If you're doing something interesting, put it up on the Netivot Facebook page. (Here Claire Sherman gets the award for daily Facebook postings with photos and lots of good recipes.)
7. Have a spiritual practice – however small. I actually have a Netivot Shabbos candle lighting partner . . . we've been lighting candles in person or together by phone for about 10 years, complete with the blessing for wine and the motzi. And I decided to do a few things on my own: to give a drash (thank you Cynthia Whitehead) and to leyn for RH. It is a way I select to pull myself through. And I also can be someone's partner which I have actually done at least once

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<sup>7</sup> <https://my.lotsahelpinghands.com/account/login>

with someone that I didn't know well at all. They were sick and I knew they didn't want phone calls with someone asking unnecessary intrusive questions. So once a week just before Shabbat I sent an email to say "I care." It took just a couple of minutes each and every week for about a year. We laugh about it now, how I became that person's LC, their loyal correspondent. It was EASY, and they thanked me with a donation to the synagogue in my name which was also quite amazing.

8. Finally, remember the most important point of all: just as each year we recommit to our faith, the pandemic has put a very different spin on "choosing life" and obviously will continue to do so. So here again, it is incumbent upon us – individually and collectively – to **renew our commitment to this discipline**. The Torah says: "it is not beyond your reach. It is within your grasp." If you can do something big, do it. If not, do something small. Pick up the phone, send an email or a greeting card. Deliver a meal. Knit a baby hat. God is often only a phone call or an email away and often the sustaining sense that God cares and **we care** can come directly to another person through you.

I thank everyone in our community whose help, support, and earthly, digital and divine intervention have meant so much to all of us this year. . . (R. Chai's yearlong effort)

May we all enjoy good health in a peaceful world for all in the year to come.

SS and G'mar tov.