

Nitzavim Drash 2024

As is the custom now in colleges across the country I will now disclose “Disclaimers and Trigger Warnings”:

I will make reference to:

- The Reform movement
- The Conservative Movement
- Zionism and Peter Beinart
- Someone you don't know named Jacob and someone you do...
Robert Alter
- A really cool ending

For the 30 years of my working life as a Reform rabbi, portions of this week's torah portion was also the Yom Kippur morning Torah reading. Some say this reading focuses on the freedom human beings have to make moral choices. But there a bigger idea here. More on that in a minute.

As part of its theology, the Reform movement rejected the idea that the Temple will be rebuilt and sacrifices reinstated. Thus, Reform Judaism alters certain holiday readings that specifically deal with sacrifices.

As for Netivot Shalom and the Conservative movement the sacrifices are recalled as an ancient method of *korban*, getting closer to God, to be remembered but not to be reinstated. Our traditional Yom Kippur morning Torah portion is about sacrifices.

Back to the 1990's. I loved reading from Nitzavim on Yom Kippur. The children's service was full. Why? One reason may be it was a free service in the Main Sanctuary. Over the years many people would come with borrowed children. I was able to read from the Torah: "You stand here this day... " and have everyone stand up as a roll call: children, heads of households, workers and employed people, elders and all women and men. And in that multitude in the 1990's was a little boy, a friend of my Tali, Jacob.

21 years later, in 2011, I attended, along with 500 other Reform rabbis, a convention in New Orleans of the CCAR. My last.

That same Jacob was then working in community service in New Orleans and so I invited him to join me for dinner and then the evening program of the convention, a panel discussion on Israel.

The panel consisted representatives from Zionist groups across a spectrum, and Peter Beinart, the American liberal columnist, journalist, and political commentator. He was working on a new book, **The Crisis of Zionism**.

As the evening went on much of these conversations consisted of a defense of Israel's position on the Palestinians the impossibility or probability of two State Solution and a pile-on Beinart.

Beinart was worried about Benjamin Netanyahu who had become prime minister again in 2009 by forming a coalition with other right-wing parties. What passed as other right-wing parties then are moderates now. He proposed of a three-state solution: A weak Fatah in the West Bank, a manageable Hamas in Gaza and an all-powerful Israel to keep the two in check.

Beinart's concluding statement:

"The more that the State of Israel resembles another despotic, autocratic and militaristic Middle Eastern country, the less young American Jews will be able to recognize it."

At that moment Jacob turned to me said, "That's the only thing that made sense to me tonight."

That was 2011.

In 2011, today's college students were B'nai Mitzvah age.

I became a Bar Mitzvah in 1967. I grew up with Golda, Moshe and Abba Eban. There is a Zionist Generation Gap. When I am asked if I am a Zionist I respond, "Worse. A labor Zionist. A movement that passed away this year without a eulogy."

Preparing to stand before you today, and not on Yom Kippur, the Itsy-Bitsy spider being so last year, I found, in the fourth Aliyah 4: Devarim 30:11-14, something new.

“For this command which I charge you today is not too wonderful for you nor is it distant. It is not in the heavens, to say, ‘Who will go up for us to the heavens and take it for us and let us hear it that we may do it?’ and it is not beyond the sea to say ‘who will cross over for us beyond the sea and take it for us and let us hear it that we may do it?’ but the word is very close to you in your mouth and in your heart to do it.”

Here's what got me: Robert Alter's insight:

“The Deuteronomist, having given God's teaching a local place and habitation in a text available to all, proceeds to reject the older mythological notion of the secrets or wisdom of the gods. It is the daring hero of the pagan epic who, unlike ordinary men, makes bold to climb the sky or cross the great sea to bring back the hidden treasures of the divine realm – as Gilgamesh crosses the sea in an effort to bring back the secret of immortality. This mythological and heroic era, the Deuteronomist now proclaims, is at an end, for God's word, inscribed in a book, has become the intimate property of every person.”

This is not a turning point in world history, or even Jewish history. It's a turning point to anyone standing here this day, any age, gender, or occupation who not just hears but listens deeply.

This is the adult reading: From this point forward not to look outwards for heroes. False or true, prophetic or delusional, give that up.

To find the hero within we have to face bitter truths. Most of us keep trying to create a better past. How brilliant that our tradition put this reading before Selichot.

So, Jacob, here's my vidui: I may not be guilty for the Zionist extremes of the past or present, but I am responsible.

And yet,

I believe that Zionism is redeemable.

I believe that Israel is redeemable.

I believe that I am redeemable.

How?

Because of a poem hidden in each of the Haftarothe of consolation that we have been reading, ending today, for the past seven weeks.

David ben Yosef **Abu-dar-ham** (mid-14th century) was a Spanish rabbi and commentator on Jewish liturgy. He explains, in the name of the Midrash, that the sequence of the seven Haftarothe has a message. The opening verse of each Haftorah records part of a conversation, in the voice of the Poet, the People Israel and God.

Haftarothe of consolation are:

1. Va-Etchanan: *Nachamu Nachamu Ami* Comfort, comfort, My people says Your God
2. Ekev: *Vatomer Tzion Azavani HaShem* But Zion says God has forsaken me
3. Re'eh: *Aniya Seora Lo Nuchama*
Afflicted one, stormed, tossed and disconsolate
4. Shoftim: *Anochi Anochi Menachmechem* I am He who comforts you
5. Ki Tetze: *Roni Akara Lo Yolada* Sing barren one, you who has not given birth
6. Ki Tavo: *Koomi Oori Ki Vo Orach* Arise shine, for your light has come
7. Nitzavim: *Sos Asis*
I will greatly rejoice in my God

Here it is: A poem of Hope

Comfort, comfort, My people says Your God
But Zion says, "God has forsaken me!"
Afflicted one
Stormed, tossed and disconsolate
I am The One who comforts you
Sing barren one, you who has not given birth
Arise shine, for your light has come
I will greatly rejoice in my God

God is my inner hero: pleading for me to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly. Shabbat Shalom.