

The Choice of Judaism

Nitzavim Dvar Torah, Tim Kessler

This week's Torah portion, Nitzavim, describes Moses calling ALL the people of Israel together to enter into a covenant with God. "You are all standing this day before the Lord, your God. The leaders of your tribes, your elders and your officers, every man of Israel, your young children, your women, and your convert who is within your camp both your woodcutters and your water drawers, that you may enter the covenant of the Lord, your God, and His oath, which the Lord, your God, is making with you this day, in order to establish you this day as His people, and that He will be your God, as He spoke to you, and as He swore to your forefathers to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. But not only with you am I making this covenant and this oath, but with those standing here with us today before the Lord, our God, and [also] with those who are not here with us, this day."

Now I have to say as I read this portion, I began to panic a little bit. I thought how did little old me end up volunteering to lead services on the Shabbat going into the High Holy Days, but here we all are! Here's TIMMY!!!

Seriously though, I thought to myself whatever am I going to talk about!? This is a very important Torah portion. So, I read about nine different commentaries about it and finally had some A-Ha moments. I also read from Deuteronomy 29:9 all the way to 30:20. In many ways this portion speaks for itself. It lays out the covenant pretty clearly. It speaks of overall Jewish Unity, future redemption for us as a people, that it is possible to keep the commandments of the Torah and it gives us choice. Two of these concepts

really stood out to me. Unity and choice. Now let me tell y'all a couple of stories. I promise we will not be long.

In 2003 I was still on my journey home to Judaism. I had been attending some Talmud study and reading a lot. Rosh Hashanah was approaching and I was super excited to attend my first service for it at Temple Shalom in Fayetteville. This was prior to them having the stunning building they have now or being fully served by Rabbi Adler as they are now. They had a student Rabbi who had come in to lead the services and the joy in the room was infectious. I knew I was home even though there was so much for me to learn still. Now remember this student Rabbi, he is important in the second story.

Just a bit later, like the weekend of Yom Kippur, I was visiting Little Rock to see my then boyfriend, who would go on to be my partner of 6 years, and I wanted to show up for Kol Nidre here at B'nai Israel. My first ever. We refer to the High Holy Days as the Days of Awe and awed I was. I couldn't believe I was moving here and would hopefully get to learn and become a part of this wonderful community we have here. I won't go into all the details past this but I have essentially been around in some way since then finishing my journey home in 2006, but didn't get really heavily involved until 2015 when Temple life became a wonderful escape from a very toxic work environment. But I digress on that one. Let's save that for a future story.

Our next story is in December of 2019. I am lucky enough to have been asked to attend the URJ Biennial in Chicago by Rabbi Block. When I tell you all that I thought Biennial was everything I am not kidding. From the moment I arrived and saw all of my fellow Jews arriving and sat in that very first plenary session with around 4,000 of my

fellow Jews I was in awe. I had never experienced anything like it in my life, let alone on my Jewish journey to that point. I began to wonder to myself how many folks in that room were Jews by choice who had found their way home. I knew I wasn't the only one. Another totally cool thing about this week was that it was my birthday week. I got to celebrate in an awesome city I had not visited before, stay in a historic hotel, the Chicago Hilton, hang with all these fellow Jews and Josiah was being flown up by my sister Diedra to celebrate my birthday. I wasn't sure it could have gotten better than any of that but it did!

Remember I said the student Rabbi was important in the next story? Well, here he is. I sadly don't remember his name, as I am often terrible with names and a lot has happened since that trip. A WHOLE LOT, like a small matter of a pandemic, but on with the story. Picture it, December 2019, the lobby of the Chicago Hilton where we would catch the bus to the convention center where biennial was being held. Josiah was in town; we had spent the day walking and were headed down for me to attend the final plenary session. Since this was not the main host hotel, they had other events going and other groups. We arrive to wait for the bus and I see a fellow Jew waiting in a kippah and I am wearing my kippah as well. There were also a ton of other folks there for some sort of company Christmas party and boy did this gentleman look relieved to see us when he noticed my kippah. He said hello and commented it was nice to encounter a fellow Jew and asked where we were from. After telling him Little Rock, he said he was visiting from Indiana but used to be a student Rabbi in Arkansas for a couple years. In Northwest Arkansas.

Of course, I was taken aback and asked what Temple and when had it been? Because suddenly this gentleman looked SUPER familiar. He said it was Temple Shalom and was 2001-2003. Well after recovering from my shock, I told him I had attended my very first Rosh Hashanah with him leading services. I explained I had still been on my journey then and had since completely made my way home and well here I was representing my congregation at Biennial. He gave the biggest smile, a very hearty Mazel Tov and said welcome home. What a crazy small world we live in.

Now beyond it being a totally awesome moment, I adored the fact he simply viewed me as his fellow Jew. That is something I absolutely adore about Reform Judaism. There is a complete openness about conversion and a great appreciation of Jews by choice. In Jewish tradition those who choose to join the covenant are considered fully Jewish in all matters, their authenticity should never be questioned. This week's portion specifically mentions "your convert who is within your camp" and also "those who are not here with us, this day". Both of those lines spoke to me as a Jew who had found their way back home.

One of the commentaries I read spoke of the later line as referring to all the Jewish souls not yet born to Earth. I really felt that. The reason I feel it, is because I know I was there. I had to have been. My soul knew what it was from the first time I was struck with curiosity about Judaism in the third grade. It actually made me think of the Disney movie Soul and how all of the new souls are so excited to get their opportunity to be sent to Earth. I just think Jewish souls that have to find their way home, were just overly eager to get here. They knew who they were and would find their way once they arrived. I did, as have many others.

I personally think one of the greatest attributes of our congregation is the fact that so many of us made the choice to come home and home we are. But choice is important here, not only did we choose to come home but others who had always been here chose to stay. When I was in Judaism 101 with Rabbi Levy, he asked some congregants to come talk to our class. One of those was Lynn Greenberg. Lynn told a great story to all of us choosing to be Jews in that room. She stated that she too was a Jew by choice. She was a Jew by choice, because growing up in a society where it is very easy to assimilate and leave Judaism behind, she chose to stay. That it was lovely her parents let her go to her friend's house to help decorate the Christmas tree and participate in that experience with her, but that her own Jewish experience was strong enough to keep her home.

As we enter into this High Holy Day season, our second in a time of a plague, I hope we as a congregation and as a people continue to stand together. To show strength and unity in our journey towards Tikkun Olam. I hope that we each continue to keep the covenant that Moses made that all of our souls were present for all that time ago, and that we continue to welcome and be a beacon for those Jewish souls who are still out there wandering looking for their way back to the promised land of Judaism.

I wish each and every one of you a gut yontif and g'mar chatima tovah.
Shabbat shalom.