



# Parshas Nitzavim

For the week ending 28 Elul 5758  
18 - 19 September 1998

## Overview

**O**n the last day of his life, Moshe gathers together all the people, both young and old, lowly and exalted, men and women, in a final initiation. The covenant includes not only those who are present, but even those generations yet unborn. Moshe admonishes the people again to be extremely vigilant against idol worship, because in spite of having witnessed the abominations of Egypt there will always be the temptation to experiment with foreign philosophies as a pretext for immorality. Moshe describes the desolation of the Land of Israel which will be a result of the failure to heed Hashem's mitzvos. Both their descendants and foreigners alike will remark on the singular desolation of the Land and its apparent inability to be sown or to produce crops. The conclusion will be apparent to all — the Jewish People have forsaken the One who protects them, in favor of idols which can do nothing. Moshe promises, however, that the people will eventually repent after both the blessings and the curses have been fulfilled. However assimilated they will have become among the nations, eventually Hashem will bring them back to Eretz Yisrael. Moshe tells the people to remember that the Torah is not a remote impossibility; rather its fulfillment is within the grasp of every Jew. The Parsha concludes with a dramatic choice between life and death. Moshe exhorts the people to choose life.

## Insights

### ENOUGH TO TURN YOUR FACE GREEN

#### “You are standing today, all of you,” (29:9)

**N**othing is more frightening than the unknown. As little children, we asked our parents to leave the door open just a little so that some light could spill in from the hall. Nothing is as foreboding as an unspecified threat. We have no way of dealing with a vague menace, for we don't really know what it is that threatens us, and our imaginations run riot.

The Midrash asks what is the connection between this week's Parsha and the 98 curses that conclude last week's Parsha. It answers: "The Jewish People heard one hundred curses minus two... Immediately their faces turned green and they said 'Who can exist in the face of these curses?' "

The terminology of this Midrash is puzzling. Why does it say "one hundred curses minus two?" Wouldn't it be easier to say 98? Does the Midrash need to probe our knowledge of basic arithmetic? Nothing turns one's face green quicker than the fear of the unknown.

The Jewish People had just heard 98 curses. 98 curses for 98 reasons. And each of those reasons naturally had its own cure. What really frightened the Jewish People was the hidden curses contained in the words

"Even any illness and any blow that is not written in this Book of the Torah, Hashem will bring upon you until you are destroyed." (28:61) These two curses turned their faces green because the reasons for them were left unspecified. One can well imagine the thoughts that ran through the minds of the people: "Maybe these two curses are worse than everything which preceded them? Maybe that's why the Torah doesn't reveal their true nature?" It's enough to turn one's face green.

Moshe immediately assuaged their anxiety and told them that these curses were not in order to annihilate them, rather to test them — "For you are all standing today." The essence of the curses is to ensure that the Jewish People will stand, not that they will fall.

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Parshas **Nitzavim** — 28 Elul 5758, 18 - 19 September 1998

## HEAD'S UP

**“You are standing today, all of you, before Hashem your G-d” (29:9)**

**S**tanding means in this context “with your head held high.” A person can hold his head high for two reasons. He can think a lot of himself and stand tall with self-important smugness. Or he can hold his head high for a different reason. Man is set between the animals and the angels. If he fills his life with vanity and the empty frenetic rush to fulfill his own desires, then he falls to the level of an animal. Really however, he is worse than an animal, because an animal is supposed to behave like an animal. A man isn't.

On the other hand, if he conquers his negative instincts, sanctifies and purifies his thoughts, his words and his actions, Man raises himself to the level of an angel. In reality, however, he has raised himself higher than an angel, for angels have no negative drives to overcome. This makes Man's ascent so much the greater. That's the other meaning of standing with your head held high: The whole year round a person is constricted by the pressures of the material world — his head and his thoughts bent downwards like an animal, dealing with all the petty nonsense that is part of survival. On Rosh Hashana, however, (it's no coincidence that rosh in Hebrew means head) his head — the head of the angel — is held high over his body — the animal. And necessarily if he is an angel, then he must be even higher than an angel, for “Today you are all standing” — with your heads held high.

## THE WILL AND THE SELF

**“For this commandment that I command you today — it is not hidden from you...” (30:11)**

**H**ow is it possible for us to have a relationship with G-d? We are finite mortal beings confined by time and space. G-d is none of these things. How can we ever bridge this chasm and have a relationship with the infinite? Let's answer one question with another: How do you know what a person is really like on the inside? How can you know a person's essence? A person is what he wants. What someone wants is who they are. The will expresses the self.

The mitzvos — the commandments — are the Will of G-d. They are, quite literally, what G-d wants. So the mitzvos show us, within the limits of our comprehension, “Who” G-d is. G-d's mitzvos however, are not like those of a flesh and blood monarch. The commandments of an earthly ruler are mere words. They don't connect us to the monarch. The mitzvos of Hashem, however, in themselves are the conduit by which we attach ourselves to G-dliness. We can see this is the terminology of the beracha “Who has commanded us in His commandments...” This power of the command “is not hidden from you,” for when a person puts his heart and soul into doing a mitzvah, he can connect to the power which G-d has locked into every mitzvah, the power to connect to the Source of the mitzvah, to connect to G-d.

We can see this idea in the teaching of our Sages: “The reward of a mitzvah — is a mitzvah.” The reward of a mitzvah is that we connect to the power of the mitzvah which is the power to connect us to its Source.

Sources:

*Enough To Turn Your Face Green - Kli Yakar*  
*Heads Up! - Rabbi Shlomo Yosef Zevin*

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## Haftorah

### Yeshayahu 61:10-63:9

In this last of the seven Haftoras of Consolation, the Prophet Yeshayahu describes how, just as the land will seem to bloom and flourish

without any prior cultivation in the time of the Mashiach, so Hashem will redeem his people and shower them with kindness without any prior action on their part, and without them deserving it, rather Hashem will bestow His kindness, through his infinite generosity.

In the last days Hashem will come "stained with blood from the battle with Esav/Edom/Rome and its spiritual heir" to liberate His people and reveal that He has been with them in every exile, frustrating the designs of those who wished to obliterate them.

WHY PEACE HAS NO CHANCE

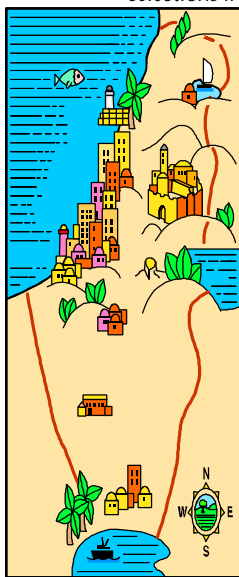
**"For Zion's sake, I will not be silent, and for Yerushalyim's sake, I will not be still"**

Why is it that the history of the world over the past two thousand years has been a constant tale of conflict and turmoil? Surely after all this time, we should have been able to advance a little bit and coexist in some kind of harmony. Why is it that the world is as dangerous a place — or more dangerous a place — than it was thousands of years ago? In the areas of science and technology, we have seen tremendous strides. We look back at the "technology" of a few hundred years ago as if it was primitive in the extreme. Why has there been no parallel development in the relations between the nations of the world? The answer is that G-d has put into the creation a restlessness, a lack of tranquillity, which is the metaphysical reflection of the exile of the Jewish People. While the Jewish People still languish in their final exile, there will be no tranquillity in the world: "For Zion's sake, I will not be silent, and for Yerushalyim's sake, I will not be still." Rather the world will know no peace until the final redemption comes.

Targum Yonason

## LOVE OF THE LAND

Selections from classical Torah sources which express the special relationship between the People of Israel and Eretz Yisrael



### INDIRECT VANDALISM

The elimination of idol worship in Eretz Yisrael was a responsibility delegated to the Jewish People upon their entry into the Land. They were commanded to destroy the idols, smash their altars and wipe out any trace of their name.

This command is followed by the warning "You shall not do thus to Hashem, your G-d" (Devarim 12:4). The simple reading of this passage is that we are warned not to do to the sacred items connected with Hashem that which we are instructed to do to those of the idol worshippers. Our Sages conclude from this that one who smashes even a stone from the Sanctuary or the altar, or one who erases even one letter of the Holy Name, has violated this prohibition. Rabbi Gamliel, however, sees another dimension in this warning: Of course Jews are not suspect of destroying their altars, says Rabbi Gamliel; rather, the Torah is warning us not to imitate the idolatrous ways of the heathens and cause our Sanctuary and altar to be destroyed as a result of our sins.

Sifri, Parshas Re'eh

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