

## Delivered on Shabbat Nitzavim, September 20, 2025

Nitzavim, the Torah portion that offers us the choices of **life and prosperity** versus **death and adversity**, emphasizes the straight and very narrow path demanded of us if we are to have a direct relationship with G-d. Considering that six weeks ago G-d made clear to Moses that he will never enter the Land of Israel<sup>1</sup>, Nitzavim is in itself remarkable as Moses overlooks his own bitter situation to create a teaching moment of detailed ritual and moral standards delivered in this, his final lecture.

Once again, this lecture emphasizes all of our 613 Torah mitzvot: 365 negative (think of the # of days in the year and observing one mitzvah per day) and 248 positive (some say this is based on the way the Mishnah counted the bones in the body). It might also help us to know the words "mitzvah" - singular and the plural "mitzvot", which are variously translated as commandments, ritual observances, instructions, or responsibilities,<sup>2</sup> derive from the verb "he commanded" implying action, a covenant, connectedness, as it is first mentioned in Genesis Ch 2: verse 16. *This is the verb: tzavah (צוה)*

**Genesis 2:16:** "The LORD God commanded the human, saying, 'From every fruit of the garden you may surely eat . . . BUT' not, it adds in the next verse, from the tree of knowledge . . . for then you are doomed to die"

("tree" is usual; "fruit" is Robert Alter)

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<sup>1</sup> Rabbi Niles Elliot Goldstein (Congregation Beth Shalom of Napa Valley in the J of August 8, 2025,) G-d's words in Parsha V'aetchanan put a definite end to any hope Moses might have had of entering the Land of Israel.

<sup>2</sup> Derived from the Hebrew word "*tzavah* (צוה) the most prominent example of this is the first time the word in **Genesis 2:16: "The LORD God commanded the human, saying, 'From every fruit of the garden you may surely eat . . . BUT' not, it adds in the next verse, from the tree of knowledge . . . for then you are doomed to die"** (Robert Alter) Also <https://biblehub.com/hebrew/6680.htm#> **Wikipedia on the word mitzvah (מצוה)** . . . . The first use is in **Genesis 26:5** where God says that Abraham has "obeyed my voice, and kept my charge, my commandments (מצוות *mitzvotai*), my statutes, and my laws".

Although some 200 Torah mitzvot can no longer be practiced for a variety of reasons,<sup>3</sup> between 200 BCE and 600 CE rabbis developed additional mitzvot,<sup>4</sup> and should you want to read a condensed version of all the mitzvot, some consider Psalm 15 an overview of the many principles governing interactions between humans (you and me) and also between humans and **G-d**.

Now many of us – myself included - have typically begun the Chagim hoping to turn the page and start the new year afresh practicing some additional mitzvot, some area I feel I've left out where I want to improve. But this year is different. Since 2018 and The Tree of Life Synagogue, and then Covid and now some 714 days since October 7, through these years, I have come to shul and seen empty chairs with pictures of people missing or dead right here in our synagogue and I painfully understand that many things known as life, liberty, the pursuit of happiness, human safety, tikkun olom and shalom are utterly evanescent. I can hardly bear what has hit the world during this last year, nor fathom what is coming next. This is my mindset on the final Shabbat before this Chagim.

So I have set as my first task during Nitzavim, a great need to harness myself, to be able to come into the sanctuary now with the right attitude. I must be able to center myself while I am here and I must also identify something I can do after the Chagim that will be at least a guiding principle. For this initial task – as I come into our sacred space - I'm using a little book published in 1996 called **Instructions to the Cook**. It was written by Bernie Glassman, a Jewish/Zen master, who created a bakery in Yonkers. What Bernie Glassman says is that everyone no matter the circumstance has the opportunity to create the supreme meal in every moment with the ingredients we have at hand. First we need to clean and clear a space, then we need to see which ingredients are available, and then we begin the cooking.

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<sup>3</sup>The destruction of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Temple in 70 CE, plus we no longer would break the neck of a heifer to resolve an unsolved murder or stone someone to death.

<sup>4</sup>Rabbi Wayne Dosick z'l <sup>4</sup> teaches us in his book **Living Judaism** that "Both the mitzvot of the Torah and those developed by the rabbis form the basis for Jewish ethical and ritual conduct and behavior. These are the laws by which Jews are to live."<sup>4</sup>,

For me as I come through the gate with my tallis bag wearing my Shabbos clothes or holiday outfit, I enter the patio and pick up my book. I touch the stones in the vestibule placed in memory of my parents and separate this moment, taking a breath. Then, I enter the sanctuary. I see the chairs that are empty, chairs with pictures of those who are missing, suffering or dead. I feel the pain and uncertainty of our world, and I also recognize - maybe even more importantly, that I must clear the space.

I must see - that here in this space where we recognize so much grief and sorrow, there are chairs filled with the living, with like-minded people just like me, people who are on the same journey I've been on this year and who are going on the same journey I'm about to embark upon during this Chagim.

I see the beautiful Cathy Bolding handwoven tent, the service leaders, the open Ark, our cabinet of ingredients containing the Torah scrolls that tell our story, the prayers that we chant - El na rafana la<sup>5</sup> –as we pray for **ALL** who need healing. This is all that I need in this moment to make the supreme meal, nourishment to both comfort me right now and hopefully allow me to re-enter the world with enough strength for whatever happens next.

I also understand that individually and as a community while we are here, we are performing certain mitzvot in a particular way that provides comfort and direction. Can you see that we are performing the mitzva of welcoming the stranger – an obligation mentioned 36 times in the Torah - each time we sing “haveinu shalom aleichem”? That we are performing the mitzva of inclusivity each time we say - from our beloved Leslie Gordon - “please rise in body or spirit,” or that we are executing several of the additional Rabbinic mitzvot when we – among other mitzvot<sup>6</sup> - light Shabbos candles, say kiddish over the wine and wash our hands saying the b'rachot containing the words “asher kidishanu bemitzvosov vitzivanu” (who has sanctified us with G-d's commandments and commanded **us**).

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<sup>5</sup> as Moses prayed to heal Miriam

<sup>6</sup> <https://judaism.stackexchange.com/questions/140616/torah-source-for-lighting-shabbat-candles>

Or that we are - as demanded of us - teaching Jewish values<sup>7</sup> to our children (cemented with lollipops).<sup>8</sup> And these weekly emails and our rainbow coalition of Shabbat sheets? These and so many actions of our community connect us directly to “choosing life” - to the moral values and commandments Nitzavim insists we follow. It would be interesting to map out more of these correlations.

This is what helps me as I clear the space, open the cabinet, take out the ingredients and combine them to make the very best meal possible, creating the meal that we are - despite everything - sharing together right now.

And now, I imagine Shabbat and also the Chagim are finished. I must leave my sacred space and the consoling moments I’ve created here with you. When Yom Kippur is over, what mitzvot can I choose to help me stumble through yet another maybe again heartbreaking year? Am I going to check the weights and measures on the scale so that I transact business honestly with my customers? Will I not ignore the lost object I find on the road and try to return it intact to its owner?

Maybe I’ll practice some modern versions of mitzvot. No cellphone on Shabbat, not becoming impatient with a customer service person or some infuriating AI robot, being fully present in a conversation, or refraining from saying things that are better left unspoken. And there are bigger opportunities: Helping someone in this world whose environment is increasingly imperiled, comforting people old and young who are separated from beloved relatives, or maybe stepping up for someone who lacks healthcare, vaccinations or food. “Surely it is not too baffling for you, nor is it beyond reach.” the text says.

Therefore, what I have decided I need **most** in this new year regards a core message of Nitzavim which concerns a trait and not a mitzvah per se but rather our determination, our radical endurance, fortitude, and self-control, our ability to wait it out, to have some response that allows me and all of us to survive, to handle these constant ups and staggering downs, to be able to hang on until we get there.

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<sup>7</sup> Deuteronomy 6:7 and Talmud

<sup>8</sup> R. Chai refers to earlier days putting honey on the pages children studied.

Nitzavim shows us we are not the only ones to face this constant back and forth. Moses, who himself will not cross the Jordan River repeats this unceasingly: "Make sure you follow these precepts closely. Even if I cannot, you have the opportunity to improve but without constant careful diligence, our G-d is loving but stern and you might still perish." In this difficult time, I feel this burden. I wonder whether essential principles of "morality" or certain concepts I believed were permanent have vanished, possibly forever. "I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day." I didn't get there, Moses says, and maybe you too have done it all wrong, but maybe we can still change the outcome.

This is Nitzavim, the message of radical endurance and possibility that I need to feel running through my veins as I navigate the Chagim and the year that will follow, the message where I need **your** help to know that we are standing together day by day, hour by hour, as we go through the coming year.

I recently saw two great examples of this very act. The first involves the SF Jewish Film Festival and its centerpiece documentary called **Holding Liat**. The film presented the return of Liat Beinon Atzili, an Israeli-American who with her husband was taken hostage on October 7 from Kibbutz Nir Oz. Unfortunately, he was killed but she was freed after 54 days in captivity. This film was remarkable fully capturing our complex present and also the emotional torture, the unrelenting efforts of Liat's family, and particularly of her father Yehuda to do all he could to secure his daughter's release, how he with relentless self-control begged then President Biden and other Israeli and US government officials on behalf of his daughter and **all** the other hostages -- until finally we see his heartbreaking total emotional collapse, but only after his **daughter was safely home**.

And the second example is a recent extraordinary moment after a performance at Oakland's West Edge Opera of a new work based on the life of farm worker labor leader Dolores Huerta where she herself at the age of 96 took the stage. I felt as though I was looking at the female version of Moses himself, someone who had been on a relentless mission for decades who with all that has happened to her, the starts and stops, the disappointments, beatings and setbacks, how she understands that at 96, she might not – in her lifetime – get to the promised land. And still, this is what she said: "I know from experience this moment is difficult and feels impossible. But people can organize and this is not how things will end. I want you to answer me when I ask "Who is going to have the power?" and she had us shouting: "We the people." Followed by this phrase in Spanish meaning "Yes you can!" ¡Sí se puede! (I felt we should all rent a stadium and just go there and scream – it felt so liberating.)

So this is where we are. As we heard at the beginning of Nitzavim, **"You are standing here today, all of you, before the LORD your G-d"**. Look around. Today we are standing together before G-d - "anachnu nitzavim hayom" - on the plains of Berkeley, east of the San Francisco Bay about to enter the year 5786. We know when Yom Kippur ends this year we will still have to wait. We know it will be hard; we don't know when or how or IF our world will turn around. We know there will be ups and downs and we know we must create the best meal we possibly can as we endure, as we just don't give up, as we choose life. I've kept a quote from Golda Meir on my desk for decades never dreaming how pertinent it would be today. "Nothing in life just happens. It isn't enough to believe in something; you have to have the stamina to meet obstacles and overcome them, to struggle."

A year after my beloved dad died, I came to shul and when it was time to say yizkor that first time, I started crying hysterically. We were still at the JCC and I was an embarrassing mess, sitting next to Milt and Marge Greenstein, of blessed memory. And Marge said to me: "Don't be embarrassed. Shul is where you come to cry." I know many of our hearts are crying from these past few years, but we must go beyond that: each of us and all of us, continuously and consciously creating, internalizing and also serving the very best meals we possibly can with the ingredients we have on hand, and STRENGTHENING each and every one with a double portion of **radical endurance** and the possibility of peace.