

42 – Nitzavim-Vayelech – Outline

Nitzavim-Vayelech Summary:

- many think of Nitzavim-Vayelech as a single portion that is occasionally split in half when needed (rather than two separate portions that are sometimes combined)
 - these are the two shortest portions in the Torah
- the portion schedule is arranged each year so that a few will always fall either before or after a certain day; Nitzavim is one of these – it always occurs just before Rosh Hashanah
 - the sages have seen a strong link between Nitzavim and Rosh Hashanah
 - some say Moses delivered Nitzavim on Rosh Hashanah
- “Nitzavim” = “stand”
 - “You stand today, all of you, before your God...” to enter into the covenant with God
- “Vayelech” = “and he went”
 - “So Moses went and spoke these words to all Israel.” (31:1)
- Topics include some of Moses’ last words to the people about being in covenant with God
 - portrait of a person or family that becomes an idolatrous stumbling block
 - description of a devastated Israel and the nations shaking their head at what God has brought on them
 - a description of Israel’s repentance and restoration from captivity.
 - including the verse that says, “...the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, so that you may live.”
 - the curses are turned upon Israel’s enemies, and Israel prospers
 - another important verse: “For this commandment which I command you today is not too difficult for you, nor is it out of reach. It is not in heaven...Nor is it beyond the sea...But the word is very near you...” (30:11-14)
 - “I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live,” (Deuteronomy 30:19)
 - the Torah is completed, given to the priests, and laid next to the ark of the covenant
 - God personally commissions Joshua
 - God tells Moses that the people will stray after he dies, and that he is to write out a song that will be a witness against them (the “Song of Moses,” the next portion)

Placing Nitzavim-Vayelech

- it’s significant that the description of the completion of the Torah is found here in this last portion that is always read before Rosh Hashanah

- the Torah ends, in a way, but not quite – the final chapters are stretched out for a month
 - the end is enwedged in the beginning
 - in the calendar, a new journey begins at Rosh Hashanah, but in the Torah, we continue reading the end as that new journey is beginning
 - there are 2 overlapping 7-month journeys in the year
 - months 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7
 - the journey of light – receiving truth
 - months 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 1
 - the journey of darkness—“bringing it down, walking that truth out in the nitty-gritty and mundane things of life”
 - the sukkah is both a symbol of ending and beginning
 - the place of celebration and community
 - temporary homes used as Israel’s journey began as a nation
- ideas connected to this complex season referenced in the portion:
 - 30:2 – Repentance (the goal and harvest of the first journey in the year)
 - 30:6 – circumcision of the heart (necessary for success in the second journey in the year)
 - quick connections connecting circumcision of the heart to Yom Kippur:
 - heart circumcision is associated with the New Covenant
 - Torah is written on the gut and on the heart
 - the New Covenant is the latter covenant with Israel
 - Mosaic comes first, New comes later, so in terms of the calendar, we should look for the Mosaic first, the New second
 - Mosaic is associated with Shavuot; New is associated with Yom Kippur
 - Yom Kippur is when Moses descends with the second set of tablets, the tablets that are not broken (picturing the covenant that is not broken, the New Covenant)
 - we discern Moses descending on Yom Kippur by looking at his 3 40-day trips up Sinai starting near the beginning of the 3rd month
 - “Nitzavim (stand),” “Vayelech (walk),” and the calendar
 - when beginning a new journey, we want to stand on the foundation of the covenant with God and the truths we have learned, and then we walk, bringing our light into the darkness
 - that “standing” is an anchor within us as we walk

Nitzavim: Standing Together and Rosh Hashanah

- First sentence: “You are standing today, all of you, before the LORD your God: the heads of your tribes, your elders, and your officers, all the men of Israel, your little ones, your wives, and the sojourner who is in your camp, from the one who chops your wood to the one who draws your water, so that you may enter into the sworn covenant of the LORD your God, which the LORD your God is making with you today, that he may establish you today as his people, and that he may be your God, as he promised you, and as he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.” (Deuteronomy 29:10-13)
 - plain meaning: they are entering into a covenant, and they are showing their choice by standing, standing together as a unified body
 - if you don’t want to be part of this covenant with God, go sit down somewhere
 - we see other ways people enter covenants in Scripture, but here it is by standing together
 - this generation has grown, grown through the wilderness experience, and they know how to be a body, and they can stand tall
 - there is a theme at Rosh Hashanah of renewal of the covenant with God – we crown Him as King once again
 - what flows from this seed action are the other Tishrei mo’edim, the renewal working itself out through Yeshua at Yom Kippur and Sukkot
 - on unity
 - “...all of you...the heads of your tribes, your elders...the sojourner in your camp...”
 - any body is made of unique parts, but I don’t think that’s the emphasis for why all these different parts of Israel are named here: what is emphasized is that ALL OF THEM ARE STANDING EQUALLY before God at this moment
 - no matter who you are or what station you have in the body, your walk with God and your relationship with Him is no different from the one who is most respected
 - there are times to focus on uniqueness, and there are times to focus on our root similarities, and Rosh Hashanah is a time for focusing on root similarities
 - “It is not with you alone that I am making this sworn covenant, but with whoever is standing here with us today before the LORD our God, and with WHOEVER IS NOT HERE with us today” (Deuteronomy 29:14-15)
 - this next sentence even brings in a unity across time
 - note that the list includes the sojourner among them, standing with them to enter into the covenant with God
 - Robin on the opening sentence: “This is an invitation to THE WORLD.” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ABSRgwWapOo> 2m)

- the walls we build to separate us from others are often built on such small things, yet they truly come between us
 - we quickly see the surface and, almost subconsciously, we weigh them and put them in a box; we form cliques
 - usually we dismiss people as someone we wouldn't want to hang out with, for example, based on things like their age, their hairstyle, their clothing, their self-assurance or awkwardness
 - these contribute to a person's place in society, but how well do they reflect their place in the kingdom of God?
 - Lubavitcher Rebbe: "...who is to say who is ultimately higher on the ladder of achievement? Appearances can be deceiving and we tend to over-evaluate ourselves while under-evaluating others. Secondly, even if we have evaluated ourselves correctly, just because we are a leader in one particular aspect of life does not mean that there are not other aspects of life in which others are leaders" (<https://www.chabad.org/media/pdf/682/cmmc6820591.pdf>).
 - maybe the spiritual giant in the room is not the pastor or the wizened sage – maybe the real spiritual giant is the person whose job it is to stay late and mop the floor
 - how do you know what spiritual progress that person has made in this life? How do you know what thoughts are going on in that mind and how God weighs them? How do you know what acts of kindness that person does so routinely for people that compassion and generosity have become effortless to him?
 - the point of seeing others with this kind of humility is that it helps to tear down the barriers we set up
 - the people we casually write off might be able to teach us how to be better friends or better spouses – what does it matter if their clothes don't fit well?
 - Chana Weisberg tells a story that the Alshich comments upon: "The Talmud (Pesachim 50a) tells the story of Rav Yosef, the son of Rabbi Joshua ben Levi, who fell ill and was at the brink of death when his father's prayers brought him back to life. When he came to, his father asked him: 'My son, what did you see (in heaven)?' Rav Yosef replied: 'I saw an upside-down world. Those who are on top here, are on the bottom there; and those who are regarded as lowly, are exalted in heaven.' That the leader or the sage is superior to the wood-hewer or the water

carrier is only from our earth-bound perspective, which sees a 'hierarchy' of roles. But when 'you all stand before G-d' there is no higher and lower – what seems 'low' here is no less lofty and significant in G-d's eyes."

(https://www.chabad.org/multimedia/video_cdo/aid/1920763/jewish/United-As-One-Pre-Rosh-Hashanah-Reflections.htm).

- Rosh Hashanah connection with unity
 - unity in Israel is an important theme at Rosh Hashanah
 - it is a time to stand before God with your community, and faced with His vastness and the weight of judgment, our petty differences seem unimportant
 - all we can do is say, "I'm a person living in this shadowlands, and so are you, and God has put us near to each other here in this moment, and I'm really glad you're standing here with me on this weighty day."
 - Rosh Hashanah is a powerful day for uniting us
- R'Trugman brings from R'Carlbach on "You are standing today, all of you..."
 - "all of you" can be read to be talking to the individual: "When you stand before God, it needs to be all of you, your whole heart and soul; bring your whole being before Him

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uJKdIJW0B3s&list=PLYztuC2svll4DRkxkK59PMXmkJ2dG7-N&index=50> 6m)

On Walking

- again, we are to take our light into the darkness, and this is the essence of the second journey in the year that begins at Rosh Hashanah
 - Rosh Hashanah is one of the two equinoxes in the year, when the day and the night are both 12 hours; after Rosh Hashanah, the nights are longer than the days – the darkness grows
 - God is calling us now to enter the inky blackness with faith
 - in that walk we will find great purpose and meaning and nearness to God
 - the haftarah speaks of being the light in the darkness: "For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not be quiet, until her righteousness goes forth as brightness, and her salvation as a burning torch. The nations shall see your righteousness, and all the kings your glory, and you shall be called by a new name that the mouth of the LORD will give." (Isaiah 62:1-2)
- Moses is an example to us of how we walk
 - the verse that gives Vayelech its name is about Moses: "And Moses WENT and SPOKE all these words to Israel" (Deu 31:1)
 - Moses brought his light to his own people who were trapped in darkness at the time, and he brought them words that God, Himself, gave him to speak
 - but Moses was reluctant at first – even a bit stubborn, stiff-necked
 - he was afraid, and that fear made him stubborn

- he is one of his people, and his story is like Israel's, and like humanity in general, too
 - but over and over again we read in these portions that God will work with them to “unstiffen” their necks, as he worked with Moses until he overcame his fears and grew much as the leader of Israel who had previously only led sheep
 - what book do we read at Yom Kippur? Jonah
 - the story of a stiff-necked prophet who God worked with and who eventually was used for the salvation of the nations, the great city of Nineveh
- from both Moses and Jonah, as well as from Israel in general, we see that it is part of God's plan that we stumble; He tells us that we will up front so that we won't be too shaken when it happens
 - God tells them in this portion that they will play the harlot after Moses dies
 - they don't have it in them to stay faithful
 - couldn't God have found another way? yes, but that's not His plan
 - God also tells them what happens after the stumbling – the repentance, the restoration, the fruitfulness
 - think about Joshua hearing that the people will “play the harlot” after Moses dies
 - should that make him feel uneasy?
 - no, the opposite – it takes some pressure off of Joshua who can relax a bit and say to himself, “This is out of my hands. All I can do is the best I can do in each moment and let God work it out with the nation.”
 - it's about God, not him; it's about God, not the people
 - maybe today you are feeling daunted by some task of leadership
 - understand that you truly aren't good enough to lead perfectly, and you will stumble, and the people under your care are not good enough to follow perfectly, and they will stumble
 - also understand that God will be there to pick up the pieces and make you stronger in the end
 - in recognizing how salvation works, in recognizing that the stumbling is going to happen, we are strengthened to stand up again when the stumbling does occur

Is the Torah Too Hard for Us

- “For this commandment that I command you today is not too hard for you, neither is it far off. It is not in heaven, that you should say, ‘Who will ascend to heaven for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?’ Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, ‘Who will go over the sea for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?’ But the word is very near you. It is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it” (Deuteronomy 30:11-14)
- Christians say, “It's too hard. Look at all the verses in the Apostolic Scriptures (like Hebrews). Look at Israel's struggles over the centuries.

- Messianics and Jews say, “It’s not too hard. We are made for this, so doing Torah is only getting in line with our nature.”
- Which is it? Both!
 - we have to look at the question through the lens of development:
 - first, when we are younger, God allows us to approach Torah observance from a motivation of fear and duty – not the best motivators
 - as we mature, by His grace, He helps us to write the Torah on our hearts
 - same Torah, different covenant, the Torah written in a different place, and that makes all the difference for us
 - a heart of love and a deeper understanding are much more powerful motivators
 - when we are young, the Torah is not yet written on our hearts, and in that case, it truly is too hard for us. But this struggle serves a purpose that leads to repentance. And the repentance is followed by God gradually writing the Torah on our hearts. And so when we are older, truly the Torah is not too hard for us. It becomes a natural expression of our inner being.

Yeshua

- in terms of walking, He is called “The Way,” like the roadway where we walk:
 - “Yeshua said to him, ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me’” (John 14:6)
 - Yeshua is our example of what it looks like to live out the Torah in the nitty gritty of everyday life, to apply the Torah to every part of life, fulfilling the Torah. And He is also our guide on that path.
- it is through Yeshua’s perfect walk that Israel achieves its potential
 - Moses is saying “choose life!” and a Jewish descendant centuries later, Yeshua of Nazareth, did that perfectly
 - and Yeshua’s students (and many with them) also fulfilled the Torah beautifully in their lives (though not perfectly, as Yeshua did)
 - they supported each other, both men and women, and they suffered much, but they walked brilliantly
 - Paul was perhaps the highest point of these because he was called from such a low point, persecuting the Believers
 - he knew he was headed into death when he went to Rome, but he also knew that the heart of darkness also needed to hear the gospel, so he bravely went
 - it’s in Yeshua first but also in these men and women that followed after Yeshua that we begin to see what we are capable of as human beings

42 – Nitzavim-Vayelech – Transcript (not exact)

Hello and welcome to Beth Tikkun and Spiritual Seasons. In this series, we are studying the weekly Torah portions in the context of the overall calendar, seeing how it is that each portion fits into a larger year-long pattern of salvation. This week we are in parsha Nitzavim-Vayelech, from Deuteronomy 29:10 through the end of chapter 31.

Nitzavim-Vayelech Summary

Although this is a combined portion, many think of Nitzavim-Vayelech as a single portion that is occasionally split in half. Other cases of combined portions are really two distinct portions that are sometimes read together, but this one is different in that it's really one portion that can be split if needed in order to make all the portions fit into the calendar properly. One consideration for dividing up the portions each year is that certain portions are always meant to be read before or after certain special days. Nitzavim is one of those. The calendar purposely planned out each year so that Nitzavim is always read just before Rosh Hashanah. So, clearly, the sages have seen a strong link between Nitzavim and the mo'ed of Rosh Hashanah. In fact, one tradition says that Moses spoke out Nitzavim on Rosh Hashanah.

“Nitzavim” means “stand,” and the name comes from the first phrase in the portion in which Moses is addressing all the gathered people. He says, “You stand today, all of you, before your God...” and he goes on to say that they are gathered together to enter into the covenant with God to establish them as His people and Him as their God. The second part, “Vayelech,” means “and he went,” referring to Moses in the first verse of chapter 31, which reads, “So Moses went and spoke these words to all Israel.”

Topics in the portion include some of Moses' last words to the people about being in covenant with God, including a portrait of the Israelite or family that turns away from God and becomes a stumbling block. This stumbling block description flows into a description of a devastated Israel and the nations shaking their head at what God has brought on them, which leads to a description of Israel's repentance and restoration from captivity. In this restoration part, we have the verse that says, “...the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, so that you may live.” The curses are turned upon Israel's enemies, and Israel prospers.

We also have here the famous verse in which Moses says, “For this commandment which I command you today is not too difficult for you, nor is it out of reach. It is not in heaven...Nor is it beyond the sea...But the word is very near you...” (30:11-14).

Moses again lays out the path before them, life or death, which is maybe the main theme of all of Deuteronomy, and he famously says here, “So choose life” (30:19).

In chapter 31, Moses says that he's 120 years old. He assures them that under Joshua, God will be with them and deliver up their enemies. He tells them to be strong and courageous, and he says the same to Joshua in front of the people.

We also have here the description of the completion of the Torah. It says that Moses wrote this law and gave it to the priests, instructing them to read it aloud to the people once every 7 years at the Sukkot of the shmitah year, when the land is rested in the seventh-year and debts are forgiven.

At the end of the portion, God calls to Himself Moses and Joshua as God, Himself, commissions Joshua. God says here that Moses is about to lie down with his fathers and that Israel will, indeed, “play the harlot with the strange gods of the land” (31:16). He tells Moses to write out a song that will act as a witness against the people. That song is recorded in the next portion. At the end of Vayelech, God commissions Joshua, once again telling him to be strong and courageous. And it looks like God speaks directly to Joshua here, in the same way that God would speak directly to Moses, which is interesting. Finally, the Levites take the Torah and place it beside the ark of the covenant, and Moses assembles the people to hear the song, which we call the Song of Moses. So we’re ready for that song in the next portion.

Placing Nitzavim-Vayelech

It’s significant that the description of the completion of the Torah is found here in this last portion that is always read before Rosh Hashanah. In a way, the Torah ends, and we come to Rosh Hashanah. But it doesn’t QUITE end, does it. In fact, we extend the reading of the last chapters of the Torah for a whole month. So, the Torah is SORT OF ending but sort of not ending. Now, catch this: it’s like the ending is overlapping with a new beginning; the end is enwedged in the beginning. Rosh Hashanah is a new beginning, but we keep reading the end of the Torah beyond Rosh Hashanah. The ending of the Torah is stretched out over top of that new beginning for almost the whole month. We won’t start again in Genesis until the second week of October, this year. The new journey begins and the tail end of the Torah keeps going.

Can you feel that the seventh month is finishing a journey but it’s also, at the same time, beginning a new journey? The seventh month is doing double-duty, so to speak. Let me repeat this idea here because we’re seeing a fascinating clue here in Nitzavim that this double-duty is, indeed, the case: the idea is that there are two 7-month journeys in the year. The way we get 14 months when we actually only have 12 months is by realizing that the beginnings and the endings overlap; we count the first and seventh months as both beginning months and ending months. So the first journey is months one through seven, and for the second journey, we count the seventh month again and it goes around to also include the 1st month a second time. The first journey emphasizes a walk in the light, while the second emphasizes a walk in the darkness. In the first we acquire the light of spiritual truth, and in the second we walk that out in the mundane world; we “bring it down;” or we can say that we “become the light” as the world grows dark.

And so, even as we rest in the seventh month from one journey, and we celebrate with the big party of the community rejoicing as a body in the sukkah, we recognize that the seventh month is also the preparation and sending out for a second journey. And what’s lovely is that the sukkah is not only a symbol of rejoicing and harvest, it’s also the symbol of journey. The original

sukkot were portable homes used when Israel journeyed out of Egypt and through the wilderness. The sukkah represents both the ending celebration and the launching out on a new adventure.

We see ideas connected to this complex season clearly referenced here in the portion. Chapter 30 begins by speaking of repentance, the idea of teshuvah in chapter 30 verse 2. The big harvest that the first journey in the year leads to is a deeper vision of self and repentance. And this idea of teshuvah is followed in verse 6 with the idea of circumcision of the heart.

Circumcision of the heart is the critical act of grace that opens the doorway to success in the second journey of the year. In order to be successful in phase 2, we need the circumcision of the heart. And circumcision of the heart is associated with both Elul and Tishrei, both the 6th and 7th months. God is bringing more clarity just recently on this circumcision topic, which we will hopefully address more fully in the Yom Kippur teaching. So stay tuned for that. It's quite an amazing picture regarding the connecting of the circumcision of the heart, the ears, and the lips and how each of these is connected to the calendar.

For now, I'm going to make a quick string of connections regarding circumcision and Yom Kippur for those interested, and you can find this in the notes I've posted below the video. If it's hard to follow, just tune out for about two minutes.

It goes like this. Heart circumcision is associated with the New Covenant. Recall that the New Covenant involves the Torah being written on the gut and on the heart. The New Covenant is the second covenant, the one that follows the Mosaic Covenant, and so we should particularly be looking for the New Covenant at some point after we see the picture of the Mosaic Covenant in the progression of the yearly calendar. We associate the Mosaic Covenant with Shavuot. And we can see a Scriptural connection between the New Covenant and Yom Kippur. It is at Yom Kippur that Moses comes down the mountain with the SECOND set of tablets, the tablets THAT WERE NOT BROKEN. So again, the Mosaic Covenant is pictured at Shavuot, and the New Covenant, associated with Torah on the heart, is connected to Yom Kippur partly through the giving of the second set of tablets, the tablets that were not broken, which is a picture of the covenant that comes with the power for us to be faithful. Now, the Torah doesn't explicitly say that Moses descended with the second set of tablets on Yom Kippur, but we can work that out by working out Moses' three 40-day trips up and down Mt. Sinai.

Moving forward now with connections to the calendar here in the portion, let's just hone in on the two key words that we combine to name this portion, Nitzavim-Vayelech. How do these words speak to this moment in the calendar? The first means "stand," and the second means "walk."

Well, imagine you are sending away your son or daughter to college for the first time. A new journey is beginning for him or her. And what do you want to tell your child? First, you say, "Stand!" "Stand on the foundation we tried to provide for you. Stand on the truths you know. Stand on the covenant with God. Stand firmly. Even if you slip and you experience some

consequences from that, because that is going to happen, stand back up! Don't lose hold of your relationship with God through the Messiah! Root yourself in that.

And the next thing you want to tell him or her is, "Now start walking; carry your light out there." At some point, we have to leave our point of origin and walk into the dark unknown and be the light there that God has made us to be. We have to bring our voice of truth into the place of lies. And the nature of walking is that EVERY step requires leaving the last place behind. We can never afford to get too comfortable. Walking isn't so much about comfort as it is about movement to a goal.

Again, as we stand on the precipice of a new phase of growth with the Lord, a new walk through the darkness of the winter half of the year, the message we hear in this portion is "Stand, and walk." Stand on the foundation of the covenant with your Maker, and walk forward with that anchor within you.

Nitzavim: Standing Together and Rosh Hashanah

I want to go a little deeper now with an idea from the first sentence of the portion. It's a theme that has a strong connection to Rosh Hashanah. The first verse of Nitzavim in its fullness reads: "You are standing today, all of you, before the LORD your God: the heads of your tribes, your elders, and your officers, all the men of Israel, your little ones, your wives, and the sojourner who is in your camp, from the one who chops your wood to the one who draws your water, so that you may enter into the sworn covenant of the LORD your God, which the LORD your God is making with you today, that he may establish you today as his people, and that he may be your God, as he promised you, and as he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob." (Deuteronomy 29:10-13)

First, the plain meaning here is that they are entering into a covenant, and they are showing their choice by standing. If you're choosing to stand here in this moment, then you're choosing to be a part of this covenant. If you don't want in, then go sit down somewhere outside of the body of Israel; if you're standing in the body now, then you're claiming oneness with Israel as you also claim this covenant relationship with God. I find this interesting. This is a generation that can stand tall. They've been through a lot of growing up in the wilderness. And they're a desert-toughened, God-fearing army now.

On this first point, let's connect to Rosh Hashanah by recognizing that there is a covenant renewal happening on Rosh Hashanah, a crowning of God as our King again, and what flows from that day are the other Tishrei mo'edim. Our choice on Rosh Hashanah to accept God's invitation to crown Him as King once again, the renewal of the covenant, gets worked out through the Messiah in the days that follow, first on Yom Kippur, then on Sukkot.

What I want to hone in on here, though, is the idea of unity. We see it all over this first sentence: "You are standing today, ALL OF YOU," and then it names a range of types of people from the heads of the tribes down to the one who chops wood and the one who draws water – ALL OF THEM. As we know, any body must be made up of many different specialized parts in

order for the whole body to function. So we're not looking for uniformity. We know that there's diversity in the body, and that's good and necessary. On the other hand, I think the emphasis here is not on the differences but on the idea that **ALL OF THEM ARE STANDING EQUALLY** before God at this moment, the prince next to the water drawer. When it comes to entering into the covenant with God, they are all equal – all are equal participants. No matter who you are or what station you have in the body, your walk with God and your relationship with Him is no different from the one who is most respected. There are times for us to focus on our uniqueness, and there are times to focus on our root similarities, and this is a time for focusing on root similarities.

And if we look at the next sentence, it brings in yet another aspect of unity, unity over time. It says, "It is not with you alone that I am making this sworn covenant, but with whoever is standing here with us today before the LORD our God, and with **WHOEVER IS NOT HERE** with us today" (Deuteronomy 29:14-15). A thread here is being cast into the future to connect this moment to all of us who will enter into the covenant. By the way, the previous verse explicitly mentions the sojourner in their camp, the non-Israelite, standing to enter into the covenant with them. In Grant and Robin's discussion this week, Robin said, in talking about this sentence in general, "This is an invitation to **THE WORLD**" (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ABSRgwWapOo> 2m).

One point I want to make today on the topic of unity is that the walls we build to separate us from others are often built on very little that's substantive, anyway, but they truly keep us apart in many ways. We quickly see the surface and put people in a certain box. We form cliques. And this happens so quickly that it's almost more subconscious than conscious. Usually we dismiss a person as not being someone you'd enjoy spending a lot of time with based on things like their age, their hairstyle, their clothing, their self-assurance or awkwardness. These all do contribute to a person's place in society. But how well does their place in society reflect their place in the kingdom? That social position is not meaningless, and Moses even names all these people in descending order, but social position is not the totality of a person or even the most essential part of a person. The Lubavitcher Rebbe comments on this passage by saying, "...who is to say who is ultimately higher on the ladder of achievement? Appearances can be deceiving and we tend to over-evaluate ourselves while under-evaluating others. Secondly, even if we have evaluated ourselves correctly, just because we are a leader in one particular aspect of life does not mean that there are not other aspects of life in which others are leaders" (<https://www.chabad.org/media/pdf/682/cmmc6820591.pdf>). So, we can't really trust our eyes in terms of trying to size up a person. Maybe the spiritual giant in the room is not the pastor or the wizened sage. Maybe the real spiritual giant in the room is the one whose job is to stay late to mop the floor. How do you know what spiritual progress that person has made in this life? How do you know what thoughts are going on in that mind and how God weighs them? How do you know what acts of kindness that person does so routinely for people that compassion and generosity have become effortless to him?

And the point of seeing others with this kind of humility is that it helps to tear down the barriers we set up: "That person is not terribly self-aware and dresses like they rolled around in a pile of clothing heaped on the floor at the Salvation Army; they're on a different wavelength

from me. They're on a different planet. I'm not that interested in getting to know them," even. And yet, what do you know about that person's stature in the spiritual realm? And what do you know about how that person could lead you and teach you in some aspect of life that you're lacking in? That person might be wearing frumpy clothes, but who cares about that if they can show you how to be a better friend or a better spouse? We are too reductionist, and we miss out on much that other members of the body have to teach us, much truth that they can lead us into.

In this same vein, Chana Weisberg tells a remarkable story that the Alshich comments upon: "The Talmud (Pesachim 50a) tells the story of Rav Yosef, the son of Rabbi Joshua ben Levi, who fell ill and was at the brink of death when his father's prayers brought him back to life. When he came to, his father asked him: 'My son, what did you see (in heaven)?' Rav Yosef replied: 'I saw an upside-down world. Those who are on top here, are on the bottom there; and those who are regarded as lowly, are exalted in heaven.' That the leader or the sage is superior to the wood-hewer or the water carrier is only from our earth-bound perspective, which sees a 'hierarchy' of roles. But when 'you all stand before G-d' there is no higher and lower – what seems 'low' here is no less lofty and significant in G-d's eyes."

(https://www.chabad.org/multimedia/video_cdo/aid/1920763/jewish/United-As-One-Pre-Rosh-Hashanah-Reflections.htm).

Ok, to bring this back around to the calendar and Rosh Hashanah, unity in Israel is a very important theme for Rosh Hashanah. And why is that? Rosh Hashanah is a time to stand before God with your community. And that's a moment when our petty differences seem very unimportant. As we just said, what do we really know about how God sees us? What do we know about how I've been doing with what He gave me versus what someone else has been doing with what God gave that person? We can't know these things. And what if, in the end, we all actually look very similarly tiny as we are standing across from an infinitely big God? The King of the Universe is too much of an unknown, and that's wonderful, because we don't want to be able to completely understand our God. If we could completely understand God, then WE would be God. In the face of that awe-inspiring moment of standing before Him, all we can do is say, "I'm a person living in this shadowlands, and so are you, and God has put us near to each other here, and I'm really glad you're standing here with me on this weighty day." Everything seems insignificant in the face of God and under the weight of judgment, even our petty reasons for not getting along with each other. On Rosh Hashanah, the small differences and the water under the bridge fade away. It's a powerful day for uniting us.

One last thought here on this topic: R'Trugman brings from R'Carlbach that one way to read, "You are standing today, all of you, before the LORD your God..." is that "all of you" can speak to the individual, meaning every part of you, yourself, your whole heart and soul (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uJKdIJW0B3s&list=PLYztuC2svlI4DRkxkK59PMXmkJ2dG7-N&index=50> 6m). When you are standing before the Lord, you need to bring all of you, on Rosh Hashanah especially, but at any time, really. When we approach Him and stand before Him, we each bring our whole being to that moment. It's a good word to us as we prepare for Rosh Hashanah now.

On Walking

Ok, so those were some thoughts about Nitzavim, standing before the Lord. I have a few further thoughts now about walking, Vayelech. We are given a firm foundation not so that we will stay in the home but so that we will take our light out into the darkness, to walk by faith with God. Again, this walk in the darkness is what's about to happen as we cross the fall equinox at Rosh Hashanah and the night begins to dominate the day in the Northern Hemisphere, where Israel is located. God is calling us now to walk into that inky blackness bravely, with faith. And in that walk we will find great purpose and meaning and nearness to God. And so even as we know ourselves to be standing before the Lord on the firm foundation of the covenant with Him, we also walk.

The haftarah emphasizes this idea of Israel walking out to be the light in the darkness of the nations. It says in Isaiah 62: "For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not be quiet, until her righteousness goes forth as brightness, and her salvation as a burning torch. The nations shall see your righteousness, and all the kings your glory, and you shall be called by a new name that the mouth of the LORD will give." (Isaiah 62:1-2)

The main point I want us to notice here is that, while we can apply this standing and walking to ourselves, the actual context here is that MOSES is walking, and we can take some lessons from that for what we can expect in our own walking. Moses is an example to us. The verse that introduces Vayelech reads: "And Moses went and spoke all these words to Israel" (Deu 31:1). Moses brought his light to his own people who were trapped in darkness at the time. He brought words to them, words that God, Himself, had given him to say. God literally says to Moses, "Go speak these words to Pharaoh and to my people." And Moses is faithful.

But Moses also is reluctant at first, to the point of sort of arguing with God over his commission to go into the darkness of Egypt with the word of God. I think he was afraid. You could say that his fear made him a bit stiff-necked. You see, Moses is one of his people. He's an Israelite, and his story is like the story of Israel, and that includes being a bit stubborn, at least at first. But over and over again we read in these portions in Deuteronomy that God will work with them to unstiffen those necks. An important point here is that God worked with Moses until he overcame that fear. And in the end, Moses went, and he spoke. And Moses grew over the course of his walking and speaking to the people. He didn't come to a point of perfection, but we see him growing and learning, learning how to be the leader of a nation after he had been the leader of a few sheep. And God will do the same with us. Our journey is no different, and it's going to include some fearful looking steps, but we will overcome the fear with God's help. God might have to use the rod to bring some humbling now and then. But the end of the story is always reconciliation and blessing, fruitfulness.

Remember the book of the Bible we read at Yom Kippur? It's Jonah. Jonah is a great example of one who was a bit stiff-necked, but God didn't accept that, and in the end, Jonah is sent with the words of God, and the result is salvation for the nations, salvation for the city of Nineveh.

One idea to take from these examples of Moses and Jonah is that it is part of God's plan that we have a time of stumbling as we learn to walk at a higher level, but God tells us about the

stumbling up front so that we won't lose faith when it happens. In God's plan, we need to fall down a bit in order to see what we have within us, our weakness. He simply does not give us right away what we need to fully succeed. The stumbling is built in. But He gives us a protection by letting us know about all this ahead of time. In this portion, God tells Moses that the people will, indeed, play the harlot and worship the strange gods in the Land. They will stumble in their walk because they don't have it within them to not stumble. Well, couldn't God have found another way? Surely. But this stumbling is part of the plan. And don't miss this point: God also shows them that the plan goes on: after the stumbling and the severe consequences, He will pick them up and breathe new life into them, and they will be blessed and fruitful in the end. The stumbling is never the end of the story. Jonah was swallowed by a whale after he took a misstep, and I would say that qualifies as pretty severe consequences. But after he repented, his life bears much fruit.

Think about Joshua in this moment hearing that Israel will fall into idolatry after Moses is taken from them. If you are Joshua, how does that make you feel? At first, we might think that it would make him feel uneasy. But I think it's the opposite. Joshua knows that the instant, perfect walk is not what God's plan is. It's not His design. So after hearing that the people simply don't have what it takes to stay faithful, Joshua can relax and say to himself, "This is out of my hands. All I can do is the best I can do in each moment and let God work it out with the nation." It's actually a great burden that is being lifted off of Joshua. Joshua can say, "Ok, God, this is far beyond me and above me, and so this is all You. You are the real Leader. Now, send me wherever you want me to go with these people."

Maybe today you are feeling daunted by some task of leadership, and the burden of that role is sitting heavy on you, and you're feeling the great weight of the responsibility. That's not entirely bad. But understand that whoever you are overseeing is going to stumble. The flock will step wrong under your care. So just accept that this will happen, but know, too, that God is going to be there to pick up the pieces and make you stronger in the end. It's not all about you and your leadership skills. You don't have what it takes, and they don't have what it takes to follow you, even if you did have what it takes. This whole thing is much more about God than you.

Again, in recognizing how salvation works, in recognizing that the stumbling is going to happen, we are strengthened to stand up again when the stumbling does occur. After we fall, God picks us up and gives us a deeper empowerment to walk faithfully.

Is the Torah Too Hard for Us?

And this discussion brings us right to what I would consider a rather contentious issue mentioned in this portion. It's the question of whether or not the Torah is too hard for us. Moses says to the people in this portion: "For this commandment that I command you today is not too hard for you, neither is it far off. It is not in heaven, that you should say, 'Who will ascend to heaven for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?' Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who will go over the sea for us and bring it to us, that we may

hear it and do it?' But the word is very near you. It is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it" (Deuteronomy 30:11-14).

The Christians have read especially in the Apostolic Scriptures many verses that are interpreted to say that the Torah is, indeed, too hard for us to do. Just read Hebrews and you'll find a lot of this kind of language. How many of us grew up with preachers telling us that the Torah was only meant to show us that we are too weak to keep it? And on the other side, the Messianics and Jews would say that it's no problem to do the Torah. It's easy. We are made for this, so doing Torah is only getting in line with our nature.

So which is it? Well, as ever, the answer is it's both! The Christians who say the Torah is too hard are not wrong; but that's only part of the story. Even the description of the New Covenant, itself, in Jeremiah 31 says that the new covenant is not like the original covenant made with the fathers at Sinai, the covenant they broke (Jeremiah 31:32). Truly there is the sense that the first covenant gets broken, and that's part of its purpose. And haven't we seen Israel struggle over the centuries of exile and redemption, exile and redemption? But does that mean that the Torah is too hard, or does it mean that the first covenant doesn't quite yet bring us to the goal? Is the issue with the Torah or the covenant? There's nothing wrong with the Torah. What we're seeing is a progression of covenants that shepherd us into growing up in the Lord.

We have to look at the question through the lens of development, the development process. There is a growth process we have to go through with the Torah in order to walk it well, in order to walk faithfully, and that growth process involves starting out with the Sinai covenant and moving on to the New Covenant, both of which involve keeping the Torah, which is perfect. At first, when we are younger, God allows us to try to keep the Torah from a youthful place where our motivation is often fear or duty. Fear and duty aren't the best motivators. As we mature, by His grace, God helps us to write the Torah on our hearts. It's the same Torah, but under the second covenant, it gets written in a different place. And that makes all the difference for us. When the Torah is written on our hearts, we keep it from a place of experience and from love, and this is much better. The empowerment for faithfulness comes with the deeper understanding and the engagement of the heart, the heart of love for God and others.

And so it's both. When we are young, the Torah is not yet written on our hearts, and in that case, it truly is too hard for us. But this struggle serves a purpose that leads to repentance. And the repentance is followed by God gradually writing the Torah on our hearts. And so when we are older, truly the Torah is not too hard for us. As we mature, the Torah becomes the natural expression of our inner being. And many of us have experienced the Torah as a light yoke, not a burdensome one.

And so seeing this question through the lens of development, what I call the Salvation Pattern, helps to make sense of all the various verses and passages we read from the beginning to the end of the Bible.

Yeshua

Well, let's turn now to a few quick points more focused directly on Yeshua regarding today's conversation. In terms of walking, in John 14, Yeshua is called "the Way." He is the roadway in which we walk. It says there, "Yeshua said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me'" (John 14:6). So, what does this mean? It means that Yeshua is our example of what it looks like to live out the Torah in the nitty gritty of everyday life, to apply the Torah to every part of life, fulfilling the Torah. He is our example of how to do this perfectly, so He is the Way in which we walk. And He is also our guide on that path.

And we can take heart in Yeshua's perfect walk on this earth because it is through Yeshua that Israel achieves the greatest walk of any people ever on the planet. Yeshua is a Jew. Moses is crying out to them here, "Choose life! Walk in the right way!" And many centuries later, one Jewish descendant of Israel born in the backwater Galilee walked it absolutely perfectly! Moses must have been so proud. This was the fulfillment of Israel's potential.

And it didn't stop with Yeshua, either. Yeshua was the only one to walk it perfectly, but His students also walked wholeheartedly in the Torah, and there were many others – both men and women – who supported each other and walked out this fullness of Torah together. These were Jewish descendants of the generation we read about today in Deuteronomy. And they suffered greatly as they walked, and they sacrificed everything. We walk in THEIR shadows, too. The Apostle Paul is perhaps the highest point of all of these because he was turned to the fullness of truth from such a low point to begin with, actually persecuting the Believers. But once he turned to the path the Messiah called him to, he was fearless, a fearless Israelite. He knew that he would end up in Rome, the heart of the western Gentile world at the time, and he knew what the Romans were capable of, but he knew that he was called there because even they needed to hear the gospel. And God gave him the opportunity to bring the Word to the heart of darkness, the heart of Rome. It's in Yeshua first but also in these men and women that followed after Yeshua that we begin to see what we are capable of as human beings.

Well, that's all for today. Thank you for listening. May God bless us to see and embrace the ending of a journey even as we already begin a new journey in the year. May He fill us with exactly what we need for that coming journey now and the faith that He is supplying everything we need. May He help us now to see past the walls we foolishly put up between us so that we can experience a great oneness as we stand before Him on Rosh Hashanah as one people. May we actively learn about the pattern of salvation He has established for us to walk in, the pattern of Yeshua, so that we can always walk with sureness and joy. And may we rise up to be the people He has made us to be. Shalom.