

*Rabbi Packouz's*



**Shabbat  
Shalom  
Weekly**

Insights into life,  
personal growth  
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## **Nitzavim-Vayelech** (Deuteronomy 29-31)

**GOOD MORNING!** Studies have shown that people usually remember the beginning of something (first impression) and the end of something (last impression), while the middle is mostly remembered kind of hazily.

**It general**, the part that is most clearly remembered is how something ends, because that is most fresh in our memory and it tends to color how we feel about the entire experience.

**This is** particularly true in relationships. For example, when there is a sudden and bitter end to a long-term marriage it often becomes very hard for either party to remember that the vast majority of the years spent together were happy and worthwhile. Instead of appreciating their good years, they tend to allow the end to define the entirety.

**The human** condition is to have long-term perspective amnesia. We lazily view the quality of our lives by how we are feeling today. This is why most people look at their personal and business relationships through the lens of "What have you done for me lately?" But perhaps we can use that perspective deficit to our advantage as well.

**This upcoming Shabbat** is the last Shabbat of the Jewish year 5780. May I suggest that you do something to make it a memorable Shabbat for which to end the year? Perhaps make an effort to add some extra spirituality to it or elevate the physical experience with beautiful flowers or specialty foods and wines. Perhaps most importantly, a special effort should be made to spend it in the company of close family and friends.

**I am reminded** of the story of a man who was grocery shopping on Valentine's Day and was about to checkout with a bottle of wine and a

bouquet of roses. Just before paying, he set the two items aside and said, "I'll be right back." He ran off, only to return a minute later with a second bottle of wine and another bouquet of roses. "Two girlfriends?" asked the cashier. "No," he said. "Just one really angry one."

**Obviously**, in many ways 5780 has been an unusually difficult year. Last year Rabbi Kalman Packouz and his wife spent Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur with me and my family. Barely a month later our beloved friend, teacher, and mentor passed.

**As we all know**, the coronavirus has claimed many lives. Millions of people have lost loved ones and tens of millions have lost their livelihoods as entire industries teeter on bankruptcy. Even those "fortunate" enough to not be directly impacted have been suffering from nearly six months of isolation. These are certainly challenging times.

**Still**, one of the most empowering aspects of Judaism is that in times of distress we can call upon thousands of years of wisdom for comfort and guidance. 5780 certainly qualified as a "time of distress" and it is now that we must draw on that deep well of wisdom to give us perspective.

**Last Shabbat** we read the portion of *Ki Tavo*, which is replete with dire warnings and explicit descriptions of punishments that result from not following the Torah and sinning against the Almighty. The punishments that follow from straying from God and behaving immorally are truly horrible.

**In fact**, in the portion of *Ki Tavo* the Torah commits over fifty verses to detail the depths to which we will fall and the nearly unimaginable suffering we will endure as a result of our misdeeds (e.g. financial and societal ruin, horrible diseases, starvation to the point of cannibalism of one's own children, etc.).

**Our sages** in the Talmud (*Megillah* 31b) inform us that *Parshat Ki Tavo* is purposefully read annually prior to Rosh Hashanah. The Talmud states that Ezra the Scribe (who lived circa 450 BCE) instituted the practice of reading the terrible punishments and afflictions that appear in *Parshat Ki Tavo* prior to Rosh Hashanah: "So that the year would end along with its curses."

**In other words**, Ezra the Scribe enacted a powerful mechanism to remind the Jewish people that Rosh Hashanah is a time to turn the page. Yes, the past year had its difficulties, and perhaps on a personal level many things didn't go our way or we are not proud of how we reacted to certain situations. However, Rosh Hashanah is the time to turn the page and recreate our reality.

**The message here** is that the mistakes we made in the past or the terrible things that have happened to us need not define us. Of course we must take responsibility for our actions and I will discuss this in further depth in the next week or two when we delve into Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and the Ten Days of Repentance.

**But it is important** to understand that we are not locked in the past, we can commit to being better and we must always plan for a brighter future. Thus, Rosh Hashanah is a time of tremendous opportunity.

**Still**, it must be pointed out that although *Ki Tavo* is read before Rosh Hashanah, it isn't the last portion in the Torah to be read before Rosh Hashanah. This week's Torah reading includes *Parshat Nitzavim* and *Parshat Vayeilech* and they act as a respite between the curses and punishments of *Ki Tavo* and the new year that is ushered in by Rosh Hashanah.

**The famous** Biblical commentator Rashi teaches us the essence of this week's Torah Portion:

*"You are being brought into a covenant with Hashem your Lord [...] He is establishing you as his nation and he will be your God as he swore to your forefathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" (Deuteronomy 29:11-12).*

**Rashi explains** that when the Jewish people heard all the horrific consequences that would be visited upon them if they strayed from God and failed to follow the Torah, their faces turned white with fear. Moses comforted them by saying, "Although you have angered the Almighty quite often, you are still standing before me today. God has promised that you will endure as a people, that no matter what travails may come, you will survive."

**In this week's** Torah portion we find the origins to the strength and longevity of the Jewish people. Most nations are an amalgamation of people bound together and defined by geography. The Jewish nation has an entirely different national definition.

**The Jewish people** were founded on the vision of their forefather Abraham; that the purpose of mankind is to bring God and His truths into this world. The Jewish people are bound together not by geography but rather by a set of beliefs. This unified vision raises the Jewish nation to the status of a single entity; it is a unified body made up of many millions of cells.

**Our sages** teach us that in last week's Torah portion the Jewish people became responsible for one another. Similarly, in this week's Torah reading we find that we are responsible to respond when our brethren stray from the proper path. Much like a physical body where an illness in any one of its many parts will affect the entire entity, so too the Jewish people must help one another stay the path for the wellbeing of the entirety.

**This is** the secret to the longevity of the Jewish nation: we are as one body. Just as a physical body is a mass of cells that die and are replaced yet the individual identity remains the same, so too generations of the Jewish people pass and been replaced, but the identity, as defined by our Torah, remains the same and endures.

**However,** there is an even deeper concept here. The Jewish people have a mission: To bring the ultimate revelation of God and His Torah to the world. We are charged with the responsibility of bringing the world to it's completion, to the day when the entire world accepts God as the true king and the world and all of His creations will be unified.

**To be sure,** the Jewish people have an illustrious past, a history of great people with remarkable accomplishments and the wisdom of past generations is unmatched. Likely as not, the legendary heights of scholars, leaders, and personalities of previous generations will never be reached again.

**But for** all their greatness, they need us. Every single Jew who has ever lived needs succeeding generations to step up and complete the mission that has been assigned to the everlasting entity of the Jewish people. While we may be standing on the shoulders of giants, it is us who now comprise the Jewish people. It is us who must take the responsibility to see this mission fulfilled.

**The entire history** of the Jewish nation is relying on us to bring the ultimate fulfillment of our forefather Abraham's mission for the world. When we achieve that we will be worthy of the messiah and the ultimate redemption for the Jewish people and the entire world.



## TORAH PORTION OF THE WEEK

### **Nitzavim-Vayelech, Deuteronomy 29:9 - 31:30**

**On the day** of Moshe's death he assembles the Jewish people and creates a covenant confirming the Jewish people as the Almighty's Chosen People for all future generations. Moshe makes clear the consequences of rejecting God and His Torah as well as the possibility of repentance. He reiterates that Torah is readily available to everyone.

**Nitzavim** concludes with perhaps the clearest and most powerful statement in the Torah about the purpose of life and the existence of free-will: "I have set before you this day life and good, death and evil ... the blessing and the curse. Therefore, choose life that you may live, you and your descendants."

**Vayelech** begins with Moshe passing the torch of leadership to Yehoshua. Moshe then gives Yehoshua a command/blessing, which applies to every Jewish leader: "Be strong and brave. Do not be afraid or feel insecure before them. God your Lord is the One who is going with you, and He will not fail you nor forsake you."

**Moshe writes** the entire Torah and gives it to the Cohanim and Elders. He then commands that in the future at the end of the Shmita (Sabbatical Year) the king should gather all the people during the Succot festival and read to them the Torah so "... that they will hear and learn and fear the Lord your God and be careful to perform all the words of the Torah."

## “ Quote of the Week ”

**Every ending is a beginning. We just don't know it at the time.**  
– Mitch Albom

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Yitzchak Zweig

