

Parashat Nitzavim  
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by Jay Jacobs

Two weeks ago, Katrina was on everyone's mind, but she didn't directly affect us. Still the images of Torah scrolls in New Orleans being rescued from flooded sanctuaries will stay with me. Last week I was worried about Hurricane Rita and my cousins in Houston who decided to stay and not evacuate. Now, I find myself looking north beyond the hills at the fire in our valleys. Our world of today changes so quickly, and it is so easy to forget how precarious our lives can be. These disasters remind me of one line from the unetaneh tokef prayer. "Mi va'aish oo'mi v'mayim" Who by fire and who by water? This prayer literally talks to us about life or death. To me it shows how precarious life is that the future is still unwritten. We fill in the unwritten pages with our actions. The unetaneh tokef is a call to action, to seize today even when it is filled with smoke and ash.

How many people here have actually been through a hurricane? Well, having been through one hurricane on the ground and two in the air, there is nothing like Hurricane season, which fills me with a sense of awe. I still clearly remember being at my parents house after their house survived Hurricane Andrew. We were all happy to have survived relatively unscathed, yet I wanted nothing more than to go away, far away to someplace without debris without the sound of chainsaws creating more debris and most importantly someplace with air conditioning. (I think we can all relate to that this week) Still, I had a roof over my head and our family was together. Now it seems that we are entering period where we can expect more of these natural disasters. As Angelenoes, many of us can empathize with Hurricane victims because we have our own, all to present, natural disasters. However, our disasters occur generally without much warning if any.

Now, you're probably wondering what a swirling mass of tropical moisture (also known as a hurricane) and brush fires have to do with this week's pareshah. We've seen that natural disasters bring out the best and the worst in people. I was listening to a news piece about New Orleans, talking about the residents who decided to ride out the storm. A scientist from the Oak Ridge National Labs called them prisoners of the past, trapped in their own life experiences and unwilling to move. That really struck me. So much of our lives are based on our past experiences. For me, every time I see a hurricane barreling toward a coastline, a little part of me is back in my parents' house riding out the storm. You see it is not always easy to realize or visualize or actualize change. This is part of the process of t'shuvah, adapting ourselves to survive in the world around us.

The name for this week's portion is nitzavim, which means, "you are standing," in Hebrew. (As it turns out this was my bar mitzvah portion.) As Moses speaks to the Israelites, Moshe rabeinu talks about our relationship with G-d today. Rashi comments that this also applies to us, you and me. In Deuteronomy 30:19 "I call-as-witness against you today the heavens and the earth: life and death I place before, blessing and curse; now choose life, in order that you may stay-alive, you and your children." Moses is reminding us to choose life. Is it any wonder that we read this same portion on Yom Kippur? Each year during the yamim nora'im, the days of awe, we traditionally stock of our deeds from the past year and perform t'shuvah, a returning to our true selves that we may *live* as our true selves. Many of us started this examination at Selichot services right here at BCC. Some people start by keeping a journal throughout the month of Elul, which precedes Rosh Ha'Shannah. Others spend a great deal of time

reflecting. Still others, like me, practice Torah chanting or choir singing or pitch writing. There is no fixed ritual, but it helps to find activities meaningful to us as we all struggle to clean our spiritual slates for another new year. The prayers we read on Yom Kippur are communal, so maybe we need each other's help for t'shuvah? In Deuteronomy 30:14 Moshe says, "Rather, near to you is the word, exceedingly, in your mouth and in your heart, to observe it!" It is not enough to examine yourself, it is in the doing, by our actions, performing t'šuvah, that we can return. In our doing can't we help each other to return as well? Moses reminds us that our deeds and speech are important in the present. His words are not just meant for those Israelites listening to him in the wilderness but rather for all generations. Just as the pareshah has a poetic blending of generations across millennia, we also see a link through time. In this pareshah, Moshe says Ha'Yom, which translates as today or more figuratively NOW, linking the present today's of the countless generations before and after us. Ha'yom is written ten times. Ten is the minimum number of a minyan. It is also the number of Jews required for a community. The rabbis recognized that communities are necessary for us to live and prosper. A wise cantorial soloist said today, "As a community, let us all take an opportunity to choose life, so that we may live and find joy." At some point in life people say "yes", and then the rest of one's energy is directed in the doing rather than the deciding to do. We all know that "doing" is much easier than "deciding to do". Personally, I am very excited about what the new year holds for us and BCC. May each of us have a healthy and happy new year.

Shabbat Shalom!

