

Shabbat Nitzavim 5785
Standing Together Before the New Year
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Shabbat Shalom.

I was 12 years old when I went away to overnight camp for the first time, at Camp Ramah in Wisconsin. I quickly had to figure out who ran the place: the Rosh Eidah (unit head) and director. *They* made the announcements. They went to the important morning meeting. And *they* were the ones who made the big decisions.

Fast forward 6 years, and I became a counselor. From this new vantage point, who ran camp? Same answer. The Rosh Eidah and director were the key authority figures. They were my supervisor and his supervisor.

5 years later, I became a Rosh Eidah, in charge of 70 kids and a staff of 20 bunk counselors. Now I attended that big meeting and worked closely with the director. Who was really in charge? The counselors! There were so many of them, and so few directors. *They* were the ones who lived in the cabin with the campers. *They* formed close relationships with the kids. *They* really made the magic happen. That's who the kids remember best years later.

Actually, a whole army of staff was needed to keep the place running smoothly: doctors in the infirmary, assistants to make photocopies, photographers to snap photos of kids and post on the website, social workers to help deal with kids having challenges. And more. They all filled important roles that I simply couldn't do myself, as a Rosh Eidah. Now I noticed - and depended on - even more staff, who of course had been there all along. There was the kitchen staff who served hundreds of meals a day. And there was the maintenance staff who saved the day time and again by fixing toilets, showers, and other things teenagers have a penchant for breaking. Without them, camp would go hungry and fall apart - literally.

I only really saw them - learned their names and said hello - when I had a position of authority. Though I myself was perceived to be a "higher-up," I looked to all these staffers as having supremely important positions as well. Camp simply can't run without people in charge, like the director or Rosh Eidah, or without people doing jobs that are mistakenly seen by some as "less prestigious." In that sense, though not all staff at camp are equally replaceable, all are equally important because each makes a distinct contribution to camp as a whole. My example serves camp, but you can apply this idea to any community or team working together.

Our Torah reading this morning, Nitzavim, reflects this crucial idea as well, that everybody has an important role to play.

We learn that Moses gathers the whole people shortly before entering the Promised Land.

אַתֶּם נֹצְבִים הַיּוֹם כְּלָכֶם לִפְנֵי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם רָאשֵׁיכֶם שְׂבֵטֵיכֶם זְקֵנֵיכֶם וְשֹׁטְרֵיכֶם כָּל אִישׁ יִשְׂרָאֵל:
טַפְּכֶם נְשֵׁיכֶם וְגֵרְךָ אֲשֶׁר בְּקֶרֶב מַחֲנֶיךָ מִחֹטֵב עֹצֶיךָ עַד שֹׂאֵב מִיַּמֶּיךָ:
לְעִבְרְךָ בְּבִרְיֹת ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ

“You stand this day, all of you, before Hashem your G-d - your tribal heads, your elders and your officials, all the men of Israel. Your children, your wives, even the stranger within your camp, from woodchopper to water drawer - to enter into the covenant of Hashem your G-d” (Dt. 29:9-11).

“All of you” are to enter G-d’s covenant, as the Jewish people are perched on the edge of the Jordan River. They are finally about to enter Israel, albeit without Moses. So much hangs in the balance as the leadership torch is passed from Moses to Joshua. And as the Israelites transition from wandering the desert to settling in Canaan.

At this crucial juncture in the people’s history, G-d renews the covenant. But with whom? This includes some people we would expect, who are few in number and difficult to replace: “the tribal heads, the elders, the officers.” But it’s not just them, and not just the men. All the women are to be present too, same as all the kids, since they are the future. All that is well and good. But what’s that about the wood chopper and water drawer?

They too have a crucial role in making society work, just like at camp. Who could live without heat or water? Nobody. For a society to function, every role is important, no matter where it is perceived to be on the social ladder. These positions are ranked top to bottom as people might based on prestige, but the passage emphasizes that they *all* enter G-d’s covenant. In G-d’s eyes, they are all equally worthy.

This is just the right message for the Israelites as they stand before G-d in this pivotal moment thousands of years ago.

But what about us today? We're not on the verge of entering Israel. But we are on the precipice of entering the new year, as Rosh Hashanah is only a few days away. For us too, the opening line of the portion rings true:

אַתֶּם נִצְבִּים הַיּוֹם כְּלָלְכֶם לִפְנֵי ה' אֱ-לֹהֵיכֶם ...

“You stand this day, all of you, before Hashem your G-d”

We too come together as a full community - adults and children alike - as we stand before G-d to renew the year and renew our commitment to living as our best selves.

Part of the wisdom of the Torah is that every Parsha connects to us today in some way. Each year we read this portion before Rosh Hashanah to prepare us for crossing over into the new year.

The Israeli journalist Sivan Rahav Meir expands on this idea in her book #Parasha. The core idea is hers, and I will add a little commentary.

She suggests that there are three messages in this verse for us now, before the big holiday.

“The first is that we come together as one, as the Torah says ‘You are all standing here today.’ The power and influence of individuals coming together to pray is greater than an individual's prayer. Unity is a popular buzzword. However, in this verse the unity we should strive for is ‘before the L-rd your G-d.’”

A vital element of the High Holidays is that we do this together. Some Jewish rituals are centered in the home, like Hanukkah candles and the Passover Seder. But Rosh Hashanah is to be done at synagogue because we need each other. We need each other to help us commit to being better in the year ahead. We need each other to help gain forgiveness, because where I fell short, other people excelled. And we need each other because this is how we internalize that community is a vital part of who we are. On our own, we are a disparate collection of people. But when we come together for the same purpose and intention, to live an active Jewish life, then we become one unified group. Exactly as the verse says, “before the L-rd your G-d.” In a society with more social divisions than I can remember, this is ever more important.

The journalist continues: “Second, all the different sections of the people are included when we come together. The leaders and the woodcutters, the upper echelons of society and the man on the street. We are all in this together and share the same story.”

It's really a special thing to have this room filled with different types of people, as the beginning of Nitzavim outlines. We will have people here who are great-grandparents,

grandparents, parents, and children, even babies. (Only the babies have permission to sleep during the service). People who have prestigious work titles and people with ordinary work titles. People who have more means and people who have less. Nevertheless, each of us remains an important part to the Beth El community, as well as the Jewish people.

Rahav Meir concludes: "The third approach is based on Hasidic thoughts and explains this verse as speaking to the individual. We are told to bring together all the different parts of our personality, from the 'heads of your tribes' to your 'woodcutters and your water drawers.' These describe the compartments of our soul. There were periods when we were the 'heads' and others when we were 'woodcutters.' Sometimes we were successful and happy and at other times we sinned, were confused, and missed out on opportunities. As the year draws to a close, we enter the period of the Days of Mercy with the sum of all of our parts."

In other words, during this year we each had moments when we excelled, and others when we fell short. We were experts in some ways, and novices in others. Each of us is a complex character, and we must account for our full selves on Rosh Hashanah in the hopes of being better people next year.

This reminds me of another Hasidic teaching, appropriate for all year, but especially this important season of judgment. Rabbi Pinchas Horovitz goes back to the opening verse, "You stand this day, all of you, before Hashem your G-d - your tribal heads, your elders and your officials, all the men of Israel." The rabbi adds: "G-d says, [as it were] 'Even though I designated tribal heads, elders, and officials, they are all equal before me, as the verse says "all the people of Israel." By human accounts some might be tribal heads, but by my Divine account, they are all equal. Before G-d there is no difference between those perceived to be powerful and those perceived not to be."

People in our world judge us, as is human nature. Even though it's problematic in many ways. This begins when we are children, and continues through adulthood. As we approach the year of 5786, let us remember one more thing: that G-d judges us differently from other people; not by our social status, but by our character.

Shabbat Shalom.