

This week's parashah, Nitzvaim/Vayeilech, always falls on the Shabbat before Rosh Hashanah. It contains many gems, but the thought I want to discuss with you comes from near the end of Parashat Nitsavim, from Deut. 30:15-19:

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה רְאֵה נָתַתִּי לְפָנֶיךָ הַיּוֹם See, I set before you this day - life and prosperity, death and adversity. For I command you this day, to love Hashem your God, to walk in [God's] ways, and to keep [God's] commandments, laws, and rules, that you may thrive and increase, and that Hashem your God may bless you in the land that you are about to enter and possess. But if your heart turns away and you give no heed, and are lured into the worship and service of other gods, I declare to you this day that you shall certainly perish; you shall not long endure on the soil that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day: I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life—if you and your offspring would live..”

See what I set before you this day!

Our various commentators note how the parashah emphasizes human free will, even as it gives substantial nudges in the direction of “life,” “good,” and “blessing.”

This is what it means to be human, perhaps. God, or the universe, or whatever you want to call it, loves diversity. Loves the abundance of life. But we strange humans, self-aware as we are, have free will to pursue life, or to pursue self-destruction. And it is not clear, always, perhaps it is rarely clear, what choosing life means. Stay? Go? Look out for ourselves? Help others? Some of the most important choices are only clear in hindsight.

As we studied this passage in Torah study yesterday, we of course couldn't help but read Torah into our current smoky, fiery reality – or our reality into Torah. I was particularly struck by CHizkuni's commentary on heaven and earth as witnesses. He wrote, hundreds of years ago:

“I call as witness against you this day both heaven and earth;” Witness is in the positive as well as in the negative sense of the word. If you will perform the commandments in the Torah heaven and earth will testify on your behalf; if not, they will testify at the heavenly tribunal against you. They will do this by heaven denying the essential rain to make your crops ripen.

I find this fascinating – that when the rains don't come, it's not God, per se, punishing, but heaven and earth's own testimony of our misdeeds. What would it mean to imagine the pandemic, to imagine the fires, not as God's punishment per se- but, in Chizkuni's framing, as *heaven's witness against us* - against our failures to pursue sensible climate policy, against our misguided use of resources, against the ways we have failed to take care of the land, and of each other. . .

The important thing about *witness*, though is that it happens when a case is open. The verdict has not been delivered. And the timing is incredible, we are a week before Rosh Hashanah, also known as Yom Din, the day of judgment. The jury isn't out yet; it hasn't even convened yet!

What can it mean to look at the world around us and say, this isn't the judgment – it's the witness – the witness to heaven, and the testimony to us of what has gone wrong and must be repaired? What can it mean to choose life in such a moment, when so much already is devastated?

We all want to choose life, of course, at least hypothetically. But it is so easy, especially in this moment, to focus on all that is out of our hands - I can't bring the rain. I can't force the government to have more sensible climate or public health policy. I can't magically change federal and state funding priorities to take care of all who will need help. . .

I think the most key line of this passage is in fact in the very first phrases. *Re'eh natati l'fanecha hayom et hachayyim v'et hatov, et hamavet v'et hara.* "SEE! I place *before you today* life and good, death and curse." The challenge is for us to see the choices before us today. Not the choices made by others more powerful than us, or the choices we have already made and regretted. Not to spend all of our energy as spectators to life, but as people in active choice, today.

As Rabbi Shefa Gold writes: "Not just every year, week or day, but every single moment we can choose Life. This means choosing to let go of a negative thought or judgment; it means choosing to live with uncertainty; choosing the kind word or generous attitude; choosing to let go of tension and relax. In every moment we can choose to "be chosen" by God for the best possible Life, for the life we were meant to live fully. In each moment, we can choose to accept the gifts, challenges, opportunities and responsibilities that we are being given. . ."

To be sure, it may be asking too much of any of us in this moment to "let go of tension and relax!"

But nonetheless, the call remains, to notice the options that are before us, and to let go of worrying the choices that are not ours to make. So much is already lost, yes. We *must* grieve it. But we also must notice the choices that are still in our hands to make – we make them anyway, whether we notice or not.

See! I place the choice before you today! We are called to attend to the choices that we have, and to fully bring our intention to choosing life and good, in any way that we can.

This is not just hypothetically inspirational. On a practical note, I want to point out that for those who have the physical strength there is much need to volunteer to help those who have been displaced by fire. And many directions to donate money. There will be the advocacy work for next week and after. And choosing life also means making good preparations for our own lives, so I encourage everyone to have to have emergency bags packed in case of need.

And may we be able to notice all of the choices before each of us, individually and collectively, and may we support each other to choose life, and good.

Shabbat shalom.