

[Kohelet Discussion](#)

D'VAR TORAH: Nitzavim

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Parshah Nitzavim is always read on the Shabbat just prior to Rosh Hashanah. This is the last day of Moses's life. The Israelites are a month away from crossing over into the promised land. The older generation has died off. Those that are set to cross over have never had any personal experience with slavery, but they are still living with its legacy. Throughout the book of D'varim, Moses has been preparing the Jewish people to live independently in their own land, to form a proper society, and to live according to the laws of the Torah. In this parshah, Moses renews the covenant between God and the Jewish people. He lets us know that even though none of us here were yet born, the covenant applies to all future generations, which of course included us. A covenant implies that both parties have to agree to certain terms and responsibilities. If future generations were not yet born, how could they agree on anything? Moses solves this issue by letting us know that all of us were there at Sinai, where we first received the covenant whether we were born or not. Thus, all future generations, including us, voluntarily agreed to the term of the covenant. Moses also tells the people that they will eventually be exiled from their land, but that God will redeem them, and they will return.

Moses goes on further to tell the Jewish people that the commandment to live a life of Torah is not in heaven, not across the sea, but it is very close to them. They could do it. It was within reach. And because they had freedom of choice, they were advised to always choose life.

On one hand, this parshah is very comforting to me. The covenant with God goes on from generation to generation. We are not necessarily better than other people—just different. We have responsibilities to be a light unto the nations, and no matter what happens, God is with us, even when it doesn't seem that way.

I have no problems with the advice to choose life. I can't imagine choosing anything else. But I have problems when Moses tells me that the Torah is within reach. Is it really? Some people seem to be naturally holy. I don't think I fit into the category. If it's so attainable, why do so many of us fall short? It's as if God has expected that we would. We spend the entire month of Elul doing teshuvah, reflecting upon our wrongs, and trying to get closer to God. We have entire holidays where we confess multiple times how we have fallen short of what God has laid out for us.

To keep us on track, we have the mitzvot—all 613 of them. I'd like to introduce you to a book from the Kohelet library. This is *The 613* by Archie Rand. This is a great resource for the

curious and the ignorant—and I could qualify in both categories. It simplifies and graphically each of the 613 mitzvot. Some of them are irrelevant now—such as how to bring sacrifices to the Temple, how to manage your agriculture on many levels, how to treat your slaves, etc. Others are timeless and universal such as having no other gods before Hashem. That seems pretty straightforward, but depending on how you define a god, it doesn't have to be an idol. It can be many things that we have all struggled with. It also includes all the ethical teachings of Judaism.

So, does that mean that all I have to do is follow everything in this book, and I've got it made? It's a big book. Some of the mitzvot are impossible for us to do. Even for the mitzvot that we can do, it seems very hard to keep track of them all and remember to always do them. And we often, maybe even usually, fall short. We're about to enter a time of year when we reflect on all the ways we have been less than we could have been. It seems that many of these don't come naturally to us.

God certainly knows how we are full of frailties, yet He demands so much of us and we are threatened with horrendous curses if we disobey. We are free to make choices, and so often we make unwise ones, in spite of this big book telling us what we should do.

Rabbi Sacks has said that if we are looking for God and can't find Him, we are looking in the wrong direction. God is near, and we just have to open our eyes and ears and look and listen.

There were never any promises that it would be easy. When we struggle and reflect deeply, we grow. If it were completely easy and we always did the right thing with no thought, we would be like robots. That's not what free will is, and that doesn't allow for growth. Still, is it really doable, not just for a few holy individuals, but for everyday people? And if so, how?