
Thought of the Week

By Rabbi Zvi Yehuda

FREEDOM OF MORAL CHOICE is basic to Torah's outlook (Deut. 30:15): "Behold, I offer you today a choice of life and good or death and evil." The Hebrew antonyms "tov" and "ra" entail double meanings: "tov" means morally good as well as generally successful; "ra" – morally evil as well as generally failing. To what degree there is an underlying correlation between the two: moral integrity leading to prosperity; corruption to disaster, is the subject matter of a vast literature since biblical days. One principle, however, remains clear: man's free choice fully operates only within the moral sphere. Try as he may to shape his destiny, improve his lot and avoid adversity, ultimately "everything is in the hands of Heaven." There is only one exception: morality. There, man alone is the master, the final arbiter and ruler. He can and must constantly choose between good and evil, take stand, make a decision. Even when he does not, when he refrains from making a conscious choice, he is also choosing. Thus, he is always responsible – by omission or commission. Even as man is denied the power to determine in this world and "tov" and "ra" in their general sense – physical success or failure – he still retains the exclusive and ultimate authority to choose between "tov" and "ra" in their moral sense – between good and evil, spiritual life or spiritual death. Torah's slogan is (30:19): "Choose life!"

Friday, September 6, 1991

THOUGHT OF THE WEEK

By RABBI ZVI YEHUDA

THE RESTORATION OF JERUSALEM is a dominant theme in Isaiah's prophecies (62:1): "For Zion's sake, I will not be silent! For Jerusalem's sake, I will not stay quiet! Till her vindication shines forth like the brightness of dawn; her victory like a torch aflame!" Isaiah insists that the people join him in his outspokenness. They must become the vocal guardians of Jerusalem. They must persistently "remind" God to keep His pledge to Jerusalem and give no "rest" to God until He keeps it (6-7):

*Upon your walls, O Jerusalem,
I have stationed guardians;*

All day, all night, never unmindful!

O you, reminders of the Lord!

Take no repose!

And give no repose to Him –

Until He re-establishes Jerusalem;

Until He makes of her

The pride of the earth.

The people must never be unmindful or silent. Both mean apathy and inactivity. The people must be both alert and vocal. The ultimate responsibility for the glorious future of Jerusalem rests with the people. Even as God is the ultimate Source of the people's redemption, the people must "give no repose to God" – until He fulfills His promise.

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THE CENTRALITY OF JERUSALEM in Jewish life is eloquently expressed in Isaiah's prophecy (62:1): "For Zion's sake I will not be silent; for Jerusalem's sake I will not be quiet, until her vindication shines forth like the dawn, and her triumph like a burning torch." For Jews, Jerusalem is more than territory, more than a capital city or a holy city; it is a tangible manifestation of the very essence of the people—their history and destiny. Jerusalem (also called Zion, Excellence) is a living symbol of Judaism's faith in ultimate redemption. Bleak and threatening as the international, political climate may seem, Jews draw strength from Isaiah's vision, that Jerusalem's victory and glory will ultimately shine forth.

Friday, September 17, 1971 THE CLE

THOUGHT OF THE WEEK: "It is not in heaven" (Deut. 30-12), said Moses of the legacy of Torah. Rooted in the reality of human interaction and concerned with perfection of life in this world, Torah is accessible, reasonable, natural and conducive to man's sensitivity and judgment. Torah, therefore, should be approached from an earthly-human vantage. Any opinion or decision backed by "Heavenly" support, supernatural evidence, or revelatory proof is utterly rejected in Judaism (Talmud, BM 59 b). All views and insights, within the scope of Torah's outlook, must be argued and tested within the realm of man's logic and experience. Any claim based on miracles or mystical inspirations has no bearing whatsoever. Judaism stresses the autonomy and dignity of human reasoning, shunning authoritarianism. The authority of Torah views is invested in, and derived from, man's honest search to discover truth. Ascertaining the meanings and teachings of Torah, through its living historical heritage, is done by means of free and open inquiry within the framework of Torah itself. Torah, with its comprehension, interpretation, elaboration and implementation, is entrusted to man. It is not in Heaven but in man's domain; there it ought to stay and flourish.

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“STANDING BEFORE GOD” – *NITZAVIM* (Deut. 29:9): More than an erect posture, the Hebrew *nitzavim* implies steadfastness of spirit, firmness of purpose, and self-esteem. We are taught to “stand” before God, erect and firm, maintaining our dignity and self-respect, not prostrate ourselves in degradation and self-abuse. And as we pray, to appeal, not beg; praise, not flatter; revere, not dread; adore, not succumb – to “stand” *nitzavim*, not grovel.

God desires to see us “standing” before Him as erect human beings, in our full humanness – in our glory, not misery; with vigor and determination, not despair and resignation. We face the Divine Presence not by losing or abandoning our humanity, but rather by cherishing and enhancing it. This is why Jewish worshippers throughout the ages, from Abraham to Levi Yitzhok of Berdichev, mustered the courage and conviction to argue and protest before God. They “stood” before Him.

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“STANDING BEFORE GOD” (Deut. 29:9) is a unique Jewish quality. The Hebrew “nitzavim” indicates more than mere physical posture of standing erect; it implies as well steadfastness of spirit, firmness of purpose, rootedness, positive pride and self-esteem. In contradistinction to other religions, Jews are taught to “stand” before God – erect and firm – with dignity and self-respect, not in degradation and self-abuse. Jews are taught to worship God as their father, as being dear to Him: to pray, not beg; praise, not flatter; revere, not dread; adore, not succumb. We face His Presence not by losing or abandoning our humanity, but rather by maintaining and enhancing it. God desires to see us not in our misery but in our glory; not in total submission and resignation but in our vigor and determination – “standing” before Him. That is why Jewish worshipers throughout the ages, from Abraham in Genesis to Levi Yitzhok of Berdichev, mustered the courage and conviction of faith to protest before God. This is the Jewish mystery of “standing before God.”

THOUGHT OF THE WEEK

Rabbi Zvi Yehuda

NITZAVIM

September 22, 1995

"STANDING BEFORE GOD" -- *nitzavim* (Deut. 29:9): More than an erect posture, the Hebrew *nitzavim* implies steadfastness of spirit, firmness of purpose, and self-esteem. We are taught to "stand" before God, erect and firm, maintaining our dignity and self-respect, not prostrate ourselves in degradation and self-abuse. And as we pray, to appeal, not beg; praise, not flatter; revere, not dread; adore, not succumb -- to "stand" *nitzavim*, not grovel.

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THOUGHT OF THE WEEK

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RABBI ZVI YEHUDA

NITZAVIM is always read on the last Shabbat of the month of *Elul*, just before Rosh Hashana. It is a befitting introduction to the High Holy Days.

At the sealing of the Divine Covenant with the people, Moses declares: "You are 'nitzavim' (standing) before Hashem your God!" More than physical posture, nitzavim implies steadfastness of spirit and self-esteem. Torah teaches us to "stand up" before God, erect and firm. As we adore the Divine, we treasure our humanity, not renounce it. As we pray, we appeal, not beg; praise, not flatter; revere, not dread. We approach God with vigor, not despair; determination, not resignation. We stand *nitzavim* before the Almighty.

This nitzavim approach illustrates the call for

teshuva, which is in the core of both the *parsha* and the Holy Days. In contrast to the depressing notions of self-debasement and contrition commonly associated with repentance, *teshuva* implies assertiveness and self-affirmation – "standing up before God" with human dignity.

The basic meaning of *teshuva* is returning, implying self-improvement, turning away from the wrong way and returning to the right way. By becoming a better person, one virtually returns to one's true self – to God.

As we acknowledge our shortcomings, and respond to our innermost yearnings for a constructive and meaningful life – we progressively engage in *teshuva* – in the spiritual posture of nitzavim.

TORAH

51 CLEVELAND JEWISH NEWS / SEPTEMBER 3, 1999

RABBI ZVI YEHUDA

THE FINAL SHABBAT OF THE CONCLUDING YEAR: The Torah reading of *Nitzavim* (with or without *VaYelech*) always occurs on the last Shabbat of the month of Elul, just before the New Moon of the Seventh Month (*Tishrei*), which is Rosh Hashana. On every other last Shabbat of the month, it is customary to recite in the synagogue a special blessing (*Birkat Ha-Hodesh*) welcoming the new moon. The only new moon not proclaimed on its preceding Shabbat is that of *Tishrei*. *Tishrei* is in itself blessed and its first day is already consecrated as a holy day in the Torah. Also: The very words of our weekly portion, "*atem nitzavim*" ("You are standing before God"), constitute the highest blessing and serve as the most appropriate introduction to Rosh Hashana.

The Torah reading for the last Shabbat of the Jewish year prepares us for the holy days of the new year. Starting with the summons of *nitzavim* (standing; Deut. 29:9) and focusing on *teshuva* (30:1), the *parsha* culminates with the idea of *behira* (free choice; 30:15-20), urging us to choose life. These three pivotal lessons define our proper way of approaching God.

Sealing the covenant, Moses declares: "You are standing (*nitzavim*) before *Hashem* your God!" *Nitzavim* implies steadfastness, resolution and self-esteem. Torah teaches us to "stand" erect before God in our glory, not misery; with vigor, not despair; evincing determination, not resignation. We face the Divine Presence not by debasing or abdicating our humanity, but rather by cherishing and enhancing it.

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The one and only exception is Shabbat Nitzavim. For the only New Moon which is not proclaimed on its preceding Shabbat is that of Tishrei. Tishrei is in itself blessed and its First Day is already consecrated as a Holy Day in the Torah.