

## Thought of the Week

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By RABBI ZVI YEHUDA

**STANDING AND GOING:** The two portions, Nitzavim and Vayelekh – read together on this Shabbat – start with two complementary phrases which symbolically reflect the dynamics of the Jewish condition: “Nitzavim” indicates standing, and “Vayelekh” going. We must stand – firmly fixed on our ground with our heads up. But we must also go -- constantly moving and progressing ahead.

The delicate balance between stability and change, between clinging to tradition on the one hand and opening up to prospects for the future on the other, is -- in midrashic style -- the secret of the intricate blend of Nitzavim and Vayelekh: To stand firmly while moving ahead, and go further while remaining stable.

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## RABBI ZVI YEHUDA

**STANDING AND GOING:** The two portions we read together on this Shabbat, *Nitzavim* and *Vayelech*, intriguingly convey by their opening phrases two contrasting messages, which symbolically reflect the dynamics and mystery of Jewish existence. While "Nitzavim" demands standing, "Vayelech" calls for going.

In order to survive, we must do both, in a careful and balanced blending. Firmly standing on our ground, we must also constantly be looking forward, moving ahead and progressing toward the new demands of the future.

This is the challenge and dilemma of Jewish continuity: maintaining stability amidst change; being open to progress while clinging to tradition. Our survival depends on our ability to wisely combine both, to read *Nitzavim* and *Vayelech* together, as we do this last Shabbat of the Jewish year.

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## THOUGHT OF THE WEEK

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Friday, September 14, 1990

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By RABBI ZVI YEHUDA

STANDING AND ADVANCING: The two portions, *Nitzavim* and *Vayelekh* – read together on this Shabbat – start with two complementary phrases which symbolically reflect the dynamics of the Jewish condition: “*Nitzavim*” indicates standing and fixity, and “*Vayelekh*” going and movement. We must *stand* – firmly fixed on our ground with our heads up. But we must also *go* – constantly moving and progressing ahead. The delicate balance between stability and change, between clinging to tradition on the one hand and opening up to future prospects on the other, is – in Midrashic style – the secret of the intricate blend of *Nitzavim* and *Vayelekh* – standing firm and advancing forward.

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Rabbi Zvi Yehuda

NITZAVIM-VAYELEKH

September 14, 1990

**STANDING AND ADVANCING:** The two portions, *Nitzavim* and *Vayelevh* -- read together on this Shabbat -- start with two complementary phrases which symbolically reflect the dynamics of the Jewish condition: "*Nitzavim*" indicates standing and fixity, and "*Vayelevh*" going and movement. We must **stand** -- firmly fixed on our ground with our heads up. But we must also **go** -- constantly moving and progressing ahead. The delicate balance between stability and change, between clinging to tradition on the one hand and opening up to prospects of the future on the other, is -- in midrashic style -- the secret of the intricate blend of *Nitzavim* and *Vayelevh* -- standing firm and advancing forward.

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**TO STAND AND TO GO:** The two portions read together on this Shabbat, *Nitzavim* ("standing") and *Vayelevh* ("going"), symbolically reflect the dynamics of the human condition: These two phrases are complementary: We must *stand*; be firmly fixed on the ground with our heads up (*nitzavim*). But we must also *go*; constantly moving ahead (*vayelevh*).

We search for the right balance between stability and change; continuity and renewal; between clinging to the past, its memories and traditions, and being open to the future, its promises and prospects -- between the steadfastness of *Nitzavim* and the adventure of *Vayelevh*. Can we stand firm while moving ahead; progress while remaining stable? We link these portions in our Torah reading; we must learn to blend their symbolism in our life -- to stand and to go!

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**.. TORAH AND THE HUMAN DOMAIN:** "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. All views and insights within the scope of Torah's outlook must be argued and tested based on man's logic and experience. Any claim based on miracles or mystical inspirations has no bearing whatsoever, (Talmud, BM 59b). Judaism stresses the autonomy and dignity of human reasoning, shunning authoritarianism. The authority of Torah views is invested in and is 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's domain, there to stay and flourish.

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*EXILE OF THE DIVINE PRESENCE (Galut Ha-Shekhina) is derived from Isaiah's imagery, dramatizing God's identification with the people's sufferings: "In their every affliction, He feels afflicted; the power of His facing them saves them; with His love and compassion, He redeems them, holding and raising them up, always and forever" (63:9). This concept comprises two complementary ideas: (1) The light of God is obscured during Galut; its conditions deter and mar religious life. (2) Even in Galut, the Divine presence is manifest in the people's life. This expresses both, the tragedy of Galut and the positive conviction that in any situation, even in the darkest moments of Galut, God's ultimate concern for His people does prevail. The Galut Ha-Shekhina concept instills in the Jew a consummate striving for redemption, but also a dynamic urge and power to maintain dignified and creative life even during Galut.*

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**“CHOOSE LIFE!”** (“u’vaharta bahaim;” Deut. 30:19) is Torah’s urgent call to man to affirm life. This is a choice man must make: accepting and treating his existence either as an accident and burden or as an opportunity and challenge. The agony and vanity of life can lead man to despair and confusion – asceticism or hedonism, escapism or nihilism – either to the denial and rejection of life or to its defiance and exploitation. Torah teaches that life – here, in this world – is a manifestation of divinity; it matters. It is to be embraced, celebrated, elevated and sanctified by man, by his participation and involvement. Man must cling to life and work to make it beautiful and meaningful; in the words of the Kabbalists: to perfect the world, by revealing and redeeming its sparks of holiness. To choose life – to live in the light of Torah – is a constant experience of true worship.

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**“THEREFORE CHOOSE LIFE!” (Deut. 30:19):** Clinging to life is considered in Judaism both a right and a duty. We are granted free-will; we are given the choice between life and death, good and evil, success and failure. Human destiny, Torah, teaches, is determined neither by blind fate nor by pre-ordained decrees, but by our own free determination and moral responsibility. Together with the awesome power to choose, we also have the duty to choose life. “Life” (“hayim”) is a dominant theme in the prayers of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. We acknowledge our human limits. We recognize the ultimate source of life, God. To Him we pray to grant us life, and to inspire us with the fortitude and wisdom not only to choose life but to enhance and enrich it.

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**By Rabbi Zvi Yehuda**

**FREEDOM OF CHOICE** is a basic doctrine in Judaism (Deut. 30:19). Man himself – within the limits of his given situation – is responsible for his decisions and actions. He is free to choose between good and evil. Man's moral condition is thus attributed to his own conscience; neither to Divine pre-destination, nor to capricious fate or blind chance. This element of freedom of choice makes man accountable for his conduct; it also determines its ethical or religious quality. Any act committed by coercion is ethically and religiously neutral, neither good nor evil. An enforced act is morally meaningless. Only if it expresses human free volition and determination is a "good" human act virtuous and meritorious. Religious and ethical living cannot be imposed; it must be embraced.

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