

PARSHAT NITZAVIM

MI K'AMCHA YISROEL

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At the very end of Parshat Nitzavim, the Torah gives us one of its most famous instructions: **"Uvacharta bachaim."** You should choose life.

But there is something unusual about these words. Just before them, the Torah tells us, **"Hachaim v'hamavet natati lifneichem, habrachah v'haklalah."** I place before you life and death, blessing and curse. And then Borei Olam says, **"Choose life."**

But if Borei Olam is giving us free choice, why tell us which one to choose? Present the two paths, give us the ability to choose, and allow us to make the decision. Why present a choice and then tell us which choice to make?

Rashi gives a beautiful answer.

Imagine a father dividing an inheritance among his children. He shows his son the different portions that are available. The son is completely free to choose, but then the father points to one particular portion and says, **"Son, choose this one."**

Why? Because the father knows something that the son doesn't. He knows the true value of every portion of land. He knows what lies beneath the surface. He knows which choice will ultimately give his child the greatest future.

The son, of course, still has free choice. But free choice doesn't mean that his father stops being his father.

And that, says Rashi, is what Borei Olam is telling us. **"Uvacharta bachaim."** My child, of course the choice is yours, but I love you. I know what lies beyond what you can see, and because I love you, I'm telling you: choose this one. This is life.

There's an extraordinary perspective hidden in those words.

We often think of Torah as Hashem telling us what He wants from us, but Nitzavim teaches us something deeper. Torah is also Borei Olam telling us what He wants for us.

And sometimes, when Borei Olam directs our lives differently from the way we would have chosen ourselves, we struggle to understand, because we see the moment. We see the disappointment. We see the closed door.

But the father can see something further down the road that his child simply cannot see.

And every once in a while, Borei Olam allows someone to reach the end of that road and actually look back.

As an example, toward the end of World War II, the Allied armies were advancing rapidly. The Nazis, yemach shemam, knew liberation was approaching, but in Bergen-Belsen, there was still hunger, disease, and brutality.

For the prisoners, every additional day was another struggle to survive.

One morning, the Nazis, yemach shemam, made a surprise announcement. The British would soon arrive. They said that they wanted the prisoners to tell them how well they had been treated.

So what did they do?

They brought something almost unimaginable into the camp: fresh-baked rolls.

For men who had been starving for years, the smell alone would have driven them crazy.

One Jewish prisoner joined the line. He watched the basket carefully. The line moved; the rolls disappeared. Six people remained in front of him. Seven rolls remained. He calculated immediately that there would be one for him.

Finally, his turn came. They placed the last fresh roll into his hands, and after years of starvation, he held it like a treasure.

And then he noticed something.

Nearby were more baskets, more rolls.

A thought entered his mind: There are so many prisoners here. Surely the Germans won't recognize me.

So, guess what he did?

He slipped back into the line, and eventually he reached the front again.

The Nazi, yemach shemo, asked, "Who's next?"

The Jew stepped forward and said, "I am."

And unbelievably, he received a second roll.

Two fresh rolls in Bergen-Belsen.

At that moment, he must have felt like the luckiest man alive.

Then he felt a hand grab him from behind. A Russian prisoner had watched everything.

"Give me the second roll."

The Jew refused. And after everything he had endured, after years of starvation, he wasn't surrendering that bread.

The Russian grabbed him and, together with two other prisoners, dragged him into the barracks. They beat him savagely. They kicked him, punched him, and left him lying on the floor, barely conscious.

And, of course, they took both rolls.

Broken and bleeding, the Jew looked toward Shamayim.

"Five years! Five years I suffered in this place. If You wanted to take my life, You had hundreds of opportunities. Why now? Why allow me to survive until liberation is almost here, only to let me die like this on the floor?"

And he lost consciousness.

Hours later, he opened his eyes, and something was different.

There was sunlight.

For five years, the prisoners had been awakened before dawn for roll call, but the sun was already shining, and no one had awakened him.

Slowly, he understood.

The Nazis, yemach shemam, were gone.

The camp had been liberated.

He was free.

But something wasn't right.

It was silent.

He looked around.

Everybody around him was dead.

And then he understood clearly.

The rolls had been poisoned.

The two rolls he had fought so desperately to keep would have killed him.

And the man whom he thought had nearly murdered him had unknowingly saved his life.

Ladies and gentlemen, that man received something very few of us ever receive: an answer.

The night before, lying broken on the floor, he looked toward heaven and asked, "Why? Why?"

But by morning, he knew.

Most of us don't get the next morning.

Sometimes we wait years. Sometimes ten years. Sometimes we wait an entire lifetime. Then there are questions whose answers we may never receive in this world.

And that is why the lesson of this story cannot simply be that eventually everything will make sense, because sometimes it doesn't. At least not to us.

The deeper lesson is this:

Eemunah is not knowing why. Eemunah is knowing Who.

The child in Rashi's parable doesn't understand why his father is pointing him toward one portion instead of another. He can't see what his father sees.

But he knows something perhaps even more important.

He knows who's pointing.

And in just a short time, we will stand before Borei Olam on Rosh Hashanah and ask Him for another year of life.

We will ask for health and parnassah, nachas, success, shalom bayis for the people that we love, and dreams we desperately want to see fulfilled.

And we should ask for every one of them.

But perhaps Nitzavim gives us one more tefillah to carry with us to Borei Olam:

Give me what is good.

Give me what I need.

Give me a year filled with bracha.

But when Your answer is different from the answer I wanted, when the door I begged You to open remains closed, when something I was certain was a bracha is taken from my hands, give me the emunah to remember Who is pointing.

Because sometimes what looks like life is the poisoned roll, and sometimes what looks like everything is falling apart is Borei Olam quietly leading us somewhere we cannot yet see.

"Uvacharta bachaim." Choose life.

Perhaps those words are not only a command from our King. Perhaps they're also the whisper of our Father in Heaven:

"My child, you see today only today. I see tomorrow. Trust Me."

Shabbat Shalom Umevorach.