COVID NITZAVIM

Atem Nitzavim kulchem, lifney Adonai elohechem... These are the words we will read from the Torah tomorrow morning...
You stand this day all of you, before Adonai your God; your captains of your tribes, your elders, and your officers, Kol Ish Israel..all the men of Israel. Your little ones, your wives, and your stranger who is in your camp, from the hewer of your wood to the drawer of your water; that you should enter into a covenant with Adonai your God....And not with you alone will I make this covenant; But with those who stand here with us this day and also with those who are not here with us this day

This is a covenant with me, I think to myself upon hearing these words as I do the 21st century equivalents of chopping wood and drawing water. All of us are included in this covenant. All of us are standing together on the banks of the Jordan river on Moshe’s last day alive...just as we all stood together at Sinai...and just as we all stand together tonight on Zoom. It was always a virtual, metaphoric togetherness. The Haggadah says it best for me – “it is as if you were...” and so this year we do not physically stand together in a synagogue or at Kehillah HS, but we are, in fact, all standing together as a community before God. And this covenant is with all of us...your adult children
who choose not to observe the holiday, this covenant is with them. Your spouse who just couldn’t bear one more Zoom session, this covenant is with him or her. Those who have chosen to be Jews..this covenant is with them. And all the Jews who usually feel so left out of Jewish religious life are included in this covenant, too--the LGBT community, the single people, the Jews of color, the widows and widowers who don’t feel comfortable in so many of our synagogues. Today we all hear once again that between God and Israel there will be an everlasting bond.

Moshe goes on to tell us:

For this commandment which I command you this day is not too hard for you, nor too remote. It is not in heaven that you should say, “Who will go up for us to heaven and bring it down to us” ...No, it is very near to you, in your mouth and in your heart, and you can do it.

On YK we hear the voice that comes not from heaven, but from the quiet place inside of us. The Torah we receive is the Torah of our lives--the divinity we encounter in our relationships with other people, the holiness of our own stories. Knowing that each of our stories is part of the Jewish story gives us the power and the confidence to claim our tradition. We were there; we
can discover what God wants from us, we can learn how to create lives of meaning and purpose. It is not too hard for us, not something we must leave to experts, the rabbis, or the prophets. It is part of each one of us, the one who chops wood and the one who draws water, the one who sews masks, and the one who makes the supermarket run. It is in our mouths and our hearts--and we can do it.

At this point, I know you’re all wondering what is the “it” Moshe is talking about. And he tells us...

I call heaven and earth to record this day, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore, choose life, that both you and your seed may live.

How, I wonder, is it conceivable to state, “Perform a certain action in order that the action come into being?” If the question facing us is whether to choose life or death, we cannot be advised to choose life in order to live. The means cannot be synonymous with the end. And what kind of choice is this anyway, life or death, blessing or curse? Who would not choose life? But have we chosen life? Are we truly alive or living a kind of death, stuck in the mitzrayim the narrow places, of our lives? Are we alive to the holiness of our lives, the moments of wonder, the surprise of listening to God’s voice in
the laughter of a child, the challenge of God’s voice as we listen to a homeless person’s cry for help or to the pain in our own families? Choose life our Torah tells us -- but does our tradition tell us how?

I believe it does. Usually when I hear this parsha, I think of t’shuva and by truly doing t’shuva we are showing God that we are choosing life. But this year I am reminded of a different part of our heritage. In liberal congregations like ours, on YK afternoon, we read the section of Leviticus commonly known as the Holiness Code. Included in the many instructions for how we are to become a holy people is the commandment to love our neighbors as ourselves. In the days when this was being documented, your neighbor was not some arbitrary person who happened to have had enough money to buy the house next door. You neighbor was frequently your kinsman and most often your friend…a person with whom you are in relationship, who knows your spouse and your children, a person you probably trust and have affection for.

In this year of the pandemic, I want to turn this commandment on its head…I suggest that for me (and probably for many of you) the way to choose life right now is to love myself as I love my neighbor. If I have a friend who is going through a difficult time, I listen to them and offer sympathy. If that friend was
expressing impatience at not being perfect at living his or her life, I would refrain from judgment but rather I would notice and encourage them to celebrate their progress so far. And I often sign up on the spreadsheet to bring a meal or run an errand for friends recovering from surgery. I love my friends and I treat them accordingly (most of the time). But when I am having a difficult time, do I offer myself empathy? Do I refrain from judgement and offer cause for celebration? Do I ask for the help I might need? The answer for me is “not often enough.” I am generally warm and friendly to other people. And yet to myself, I tend to be harsh and exasperated.

And so I beat my chest in confession...In the past 6 months I have not cleaned out one closet, I have forgotten that the pandemic is not my husband’s fault, I have not organized one file folder, and I certainly have not, as one of my friends did, learned how to make a 18 strand braided round challah for the chagim. My t’shuva challenge for this year is not to apologize for not doing those things and certainly not to make a laundry list of new resolutions, but rather to turn away from my perfectionism and turn toward self-compassion.

Some may say that given all we are facing in the world, self-compassion is a frivolous luxury. I am convinced that it is essential. When we are depleted and struggling, self-
compassion brings us back to life: to the moment, not some fantasy of what should be happening, but what’s happening right now. And self-compassion can be a gateway to laughter, to acceptance, and to joy. This is the way we can best serve our neighbors, our families...and our God. This year, in this time, self-compassion is the way for me to choose life...so that I might truly live.

May each of you be sealed with the ability to move past the fear, uncertainty, and imperfection so that you can know the simple and precious victories that greet you each day.