



DVAR TZEDEK

Parshat Nitzavim-Vayelech 5770

By Rachel Farbiarz

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The double portion of *Nitzavim-Vayelech* recounts Moses's last days. Complicated to the end, Moses takes leave of his people in longing, rebuke, anger and blessing. Amidst this stormy stew, Moses offers comfort: "Be strong and resolute; be not in fear or in dread," he implores. "For it is God who walks with you. God will not fail you or forsake you."¹

Alone, with hand outstretched, God smashed and cleared Israel's path to the Exodus. And for forty years, through cloud and smoke, God had blazed the way and hovered above, cloaking the people in heavenly protection. Now Moses assures his almost-orphaned nation: *God will walk with you*. Not above nor ahead, but with. Among the camps, flags, wagons and herds, the Lord's footfalls will land beside theirs.

The promise of walking together, though, seems odd, misplaced—almost an accidental slip. The utterance is barely audible: a negligible prepositional variance—this *with* that is not *ahead* nor *before*—conveying a different sort of comfort to the people. Indeed, as quickly as Moses so assures Israel, he returns to consoling the nation with reference to a God who leads the way, instructing Joshua not to fear, for "it is the Lord who walks before you."²

Perhaps Moses does slip. At the end of his days, he longs to remain with the people. His yearning detains him in this world as he casts about for a means of stowing away among the living. And so maybe the-Moses-who-says-what's-on-his-mind slips—unwittingly modeling his description of God's relationship with Israel on the one that he, to distraction, craves.

Moses, to be sure, finds his way to stay. *Parshat Vayelech*, the second in our double portion, opens with Moses set upon the way: "And Moses walked; and spoke these words unto all Israel."³ The verse, with its passing mention of Moses walking, is peculiar. To where does Moses go and why is his destination not named? Is not this fragment superfluous in the account of Moses's departure?

Midrashic accounts suggest that Moses goes precisely where the text directs: "unto all Israel." The people have dispersed since their assembly in *Parshat Nitzavim*, but Moses still has more to say—words too intimate to deliver to a gathered congregation. Thus, on the last day of his life, the old man who insists that he can "no longer go out and come in"⁴ walks the entirety of the encamped nation's boundaries. He goes from tribe to tribe and tent to tent—saying goodbye, blessing his people and begging forgiveness for the harshness with which he so often met them.⁵

¹ Deuteronomy 31:6.

² Deuteronomy 31:8.

³ Deuteronomy 31:1.

⁴ Deuteronomy 31:2.

⁵ H.N. Bialik & Y.H. Rawnitzky (eds.), *The Book of Legends*. New York: Schocken, 1992. 101-5.

Said otherwise, Moses walks *into* the people.⁶ Before taking leave of his body, Moses grafts a piece of his soul onto each of theirs; he enters them. Henceforth neither Israel's leader nor caretaker, exhorter nor commander, Moses will be, instead, its companion. Gracefully or otherwise, the great man refuses to go.

Moses's *with* begs of us some uncomfortable questions. When we—Americans, Westerners, Jews—encounter those around the globe facing the long, hard road of poverty, disease or oppression, how do we find ourselves walking? Do we march to the forefront, dictating terms and solutions? Do we hover above, insisting upon the primacy of our ideas and the virtue of our leadership? Or do we walk from tent to tent and camp to camp? Do we lock arms and synchronize strides?

This, Moses's last act of humility, begs too a recognition that communities facing critical challenges require not only leaders who will blaze the way, but also travelers with whom to walk it. They need those who embolden and empower rather than simply command and instruct. They need companions to help enable the realization of a leader's charge—*Chazak v'amatz*: Make yourself strong and courageous.⁷

The possibility remains, of course, that Moses's *with* was said not in inadvertence, but in aspiration—not a slip to the nation, but an exhortation to God. Between the lines, we can make out Moses's appeal to the Almighty: *Overbear less, bear the load beside them more. Strengthen their hearts; hold up their arms; match their strides.*

And while it is hard to imagine Moses's God walking alongside without forging ahead, it would seem that, in time, this is just what the Divine too comes to crave. Long after Moses, through the mouth of the prophet Micah, God beseeches Israel: "And what the Lord requires of you—Only to do justice, and to love goodness and to walk modestly with your God."⁸ It is by walking together that justice will be done and goodness venerated. Together—abreast and astride—we are to make our way.

In gratitude and loving memory of Rabbi Asher Abittan ZTz"l



Rachel Farbiarz is a graduate of Harvard College and Yale Law School, as well as of an Orthodox yeshivah high school. After clerking for a federal appellate judge in San Francisco, Rachel practiced law focusing on the civil rights and humane treatment of prisoners. In this role, she helped to improve the basic living conditions on California's death row at San Quentin. Rachel currently lives with her husband in Washington, D.C., where she works on her own writing and art. This is the second year that Rachel has penned *Divrei Tzedek* for AJWS. Rachel can be reached at rachel.ajws@gmail.com.

⁶ "Ma'ayanah Shel Torah." Chabad.org. http://www.chabad.org/parshah/in-depth/default_cdo/aid/314016/jewish/In-Depth.htm

⁷ Deuteronomy 31:6-7.

⁸ Micah 6:8.

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45 West 36th Street, New York, NY 10018 • t 212.792.2900 • f 212.792.2930 • e ajws@ajws.org • www.ajws.org