



DVAR TZEDEK

Parshat Nitzavim 5768

By Rabbi Elliot Rose Kukla

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There are a few lines from a poem by Mary Oliver on a tattered post-it note on my fridge door. "Tell me," it asks whenever I reach for orange juice or milk with bleary eyes in the morning, "What do you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?"¹ *Parshat Nitzavim* contains the famous commandment to choose life. We read: "I call heaven and earth to witness you today: I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse—therefore choose life!"²

This phrase is a classic example of a "merism," a figure of speech that is used frequently in the Bible, where two parts or elements are used to denote the whole. For example, in *Bereshit* 1:1, when God creates the heavens and the earth, the two parts indicate that God created the entire universe. When the Torah states that God puts life and death before us, our tradition is not telling us to decide whether to live or die, but that every choice we make from birth to death matters. These choices range from how we treat our loved ones to how we spend money; from whom we bring into our world view, to how we choose our food. In each of these choices, we should choose life.

But what then does it mean to "choose life?" What is it about each of these seemingly small decisions that warrants the weightiness of life and death?

As I see it, the answer lies in the impact each choice has on all other beings on the planet. As Martin Luther King Jr. said, "We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny."³ Our choices affect not only ourselves, but life on a global level—when we choose to drive less, spend less and consume less, we are choosing life. And we choose life each time we lift our voices to advocate for civil rights or environmental protection.

Disasters on a global scale highlight the impact for the planet of human choices that don't affirm life. Although disasters may seem "natural," human choices play a large role. First of all, global climate change caused by human manufacturing is exacerbating our planet's vulnerability to unpredictable weather patterns. Furthermore, poverty and low labor standards are leading more people than ever before to live in flood plains or in areas prone to landslides, especially in the Global South.⁴

Finally, poverty and a global imbalance of wealth created by human economic decisions greatly affect the scale of disasters. As Elizabeth Ferris from the Brookings Institute notes, "Chances of surviving a natural disaster are much higher in developed countries than in developing ones. For example, in 1988, an earthquake registering 6.9 on the Richter scale hit Armenia, killing some 55,000 people and leaving 500,000 homeless. Less than a year later, an even stronger earthquake, 7.1 on the Richter scale, hit San Francisco, California, killing 62 and leaving 12,000 homeless."⁵

¹ Mary Oliver, "The Summer Day" from *New and Selected Poems*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1992

² *Dvarim* 30:19

³ Martin Luther King Jr., Letter from a Birmingham Jail, 16 April 1963

⁴ <http://www.unwater.org/downloads/unwaterseries.pdf>

⁵ http://www.brookings.edu/opinions/2008/0515_natural_disasters_ferris.aspx?p=1

These statistics may seem far away from our own lives in the Global North. However, *Nitzavim*, this week's *parshah*, indicates the importance of standing together as one human community. The *parshah* opens with the words:

You stand this day, all of you, before the Eternal One your God—your tribal heads, your elders and your officials, all the people of Israel, your children, your wives, even the stranger within your camp from woodchopper to water drawer—to enter into the covenant with the Eternal One Your God.⁶

All of humanity, residents and strangers, tribal heads and water carriers, stand together in a web of mutuality in this portion, ready for what's next, for what will be created together. When we are told to choose life for ourselves, we are also commanded to choose sustainability for the planet.

This week we are just a few days away from Rosh Hashanah. Traditionally these days are spent doing an intensive inner inventory of our lives and our choices as we think about how we want to live in the coming year. In this season, may we stand together in choosing life for ourselves and for the world. As we look toward each other with bleary eyes in the dawn of the New Year, may we ask one another: Tell me. What do you plan to do with this one wild and precious world?



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⁶ Dvarim 29:9-10

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