D'var Torah Nitzavim, 5774

Parashat Nitzavim is a dramatic *parashat*—filled with Moses' endings, and moving, sometimes even stern, discourses that will help the Israelites cope with those endings. Moses gathers all the people to give them these teachings, knowing now that he cannot go with them. And they (and perhaps we), are comforted by the now well-known passage: the mitzvah to love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul is not far off, not at the edges of the distant sea, but within us and within our hearts.

The passage is worth listening to again:

> …For the Lord will again rejoice over you for good, as he rejoiced over your ancestors, if you shall hearken to the voice of the Lord your God, to keep His commandments and his statutes which are written in this book of the law; if you turn to the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul. For this commandment which I command you this day, it is not too hard for you, neither is it far off. It is not in heaven, that you should say, who shall go up for us to hear it, that we may do it? Neither is it beyond the sea that you should say, who shall go over the sea for us, and bring it to us, and make us hear it, that we may do it? But the Lord your God is very near to you, in your mouth, and in your heart, that you may do it. (Deuteronomy 30: 9-13)

Almost everyone I know who has written or spoken on this *parashat* also refers to this passage—it is one that transcends Jewish denominationalism and also transcends religious boundaries. It is about the truth we carry within us, it is about the fact that God is always with us, and it is about not being alone. It is deeply inspiring. And I was tempted to do the same—because you can write infinitely about this passage without ever exhausting it. It is a seedling of truth that has borne many fruits. So take the fruit again this year in reminder and in comfort.

But this time as I read *Nitzavim* I was drawn to another passage entirely—one that is also about not being alone, but in a surprising new way. I have been thinking of the urgent gathering before Moses' discourse—men women and children who are now second generations of Israelites, along with the strangers.

Moses says,

> You are standing this day all of you before the Lord your God; your heads, your tribes, your elders, and your officers, even all the men of Israel, your little ones, your wives, and your stranger that is in the midst of your camp, from the hewer of your wood to the drawer of your water, that you should enter into the covenant of the Lord your God, and to his oath, which the Lord your God makes with you this day, that he may establish you this day to himself for a people, and that he may be to you as a God….

One could interpret Moses' convening this group as a kind of emergency family meeting. But it is a really really big family by now. It includes even those who are not here with them on this day, for the future as well as the past nations who have seen the idolatry in Egypt and Canaan. Moses includes both past and future generations in the covenant. We are included in the covenant.

And here is the thought that stayed with me throughout the week—that the gathering included strangers. We don't really know who the strangers were that accompanied the Israelites—and I found myself endlessly curious. They were as we know the non-Israelite groups, the "mixed multitude" that accompanied the Hebrews out of Egypt, as it states in Exodus 12.38 and Numbers 11.4. And the strangers were hewers of wood and drawers of water—they were performing menial duties for the individual families. So of course the larger message was that all classes of people had to join.

But how did they experience daily life with the Israelites? Could they also have been companions along the way that did not want to fully join? Could they have been simply the people who had married into the families through conflict, or chance meetings, between the Israelites and others? Could they have been people who lived nearby whenever the Israelites camped, but who were not deemed hostile? Who were these strangers, and how did they understand the journeying that this really really big family did over the course of their years in the wilderness?

Later rabbinical tradition has great ambivalence about these strangers. And yet they were clearly part of the covenant. The strangers came to hear Moses speak, and they did so because they were compelled by him and his final message. If I had been a stranger, I would have been too. I would have wanted to know what was next, what was waiting, and how this community of which I was a part was going to take its next steps.

So I have been thinking about the fact that the crowd included strangers, and that it was a sudden, ad-hoc gathering. I was struck by how much this final discourse of Moses more like a flash-mob than an emergency family meeting. And I have been thinking about how powerful an experience of community that such quick, urgent gatherings can be. The famous 20th century anthropologist Victor Turner calls is spontaneous *communitas*—when a group comes together suddenly, and feels a common and unexpected bond, usually because of ritual or religious circumstances, but also because of circumstances of extremity.

Turner argued that there was both regular and spontaneous *communitas*—one being more sudden than the other. In both forms, there are fewer if any social boundaries. They are erased because the situation that people find themselves in is experienced as outside of time, outside of the regular routine and placed in another world. Turner wrote about this phenomenon because he studied pilgrimages to sacred sites—both historical accounts and contemporary ones. But we also feel it in rituals of time as well as space—the sense that, for a while, we are set apart. That condition allows us to connect and engage with our fellow strangers in ways which fundamentally recognizes that they are not strangers, but kin.

Regular *communitas* occurs in an expected way—a sense of sacred belonging because one is going on a long sacred journey with someone else, or because one is going to a liturgy or ritual that occurs on a periodic basis. It is even what we occasionally might feel on a Shabbat morning before we go back into the everyday, routine world.

And then there is spontaneous *communitas*—unexpected, sudden, something that happens and then may or may not continue. There is a kind of fragility to this kind of quickly-forming community. There is a whole website on managing spontaneous communities of volunteers in disasters—and one of its cautions is that such volunteers do need to be managed, given their high level of emotion and feeling. And indeed there must have been a high level of feeling at this moment of Moses' parting speeches. The Israelites know their leader cannot go with them. They know they must cross over. There is grief and anticipation at the same time, and there is fulfillment of the ancient promise that must have seemed, at those times in the desert, so ridiculously far-fetched.

The Jewish tradition is filled with stories of such sudden crowds—gathering suddenly and experiencing their peoplehood anew. Moses calls together his people a number of times—when they are murmuring in the desert, when they need to build the tabernacle. But we also find such urgent gatherings in the Book of Esther, when Esther and Mordechai first hear of the decree of Haman to destroy the Jewish people, they gather the Jews together hastily to try to find a remedy to his violent edict. They are, suddenly, a people plotting for their own survival.

And there is the deeply compelling story of the restoration of the first temple in the Book of Second Kings, during the reign of Josiah. As the story tells us, Josiah wants to pay the people who have been working on the interior of the temple fairly, and asks that the silver inside the temple be melted down. The high priest Hilkiah finds a scroll of the Teaching in the House of the Lord, and reports it to the scribe and the king.

The scroll describes the covenant, and is thought by scholars to be a version of the very book we are reading today—the Book of Deuteronomy. The leaders fear that they have broken the covenant described in the scroll of the teaching, and they ask the prophetess Hildah, who is living in Jerusalem, what to do. The prophetess says that the people of Israel will indeed be punished by calamity, but that the king of Judah and his people, because they have softened their hearts, will be saved.

And the king summons all the elders of Judah before him, as well as all the inhabitants of Jerusalem and the priests and prophets. And he reads to them the entire texts of the covenant scroll which had been found in the temple. And the King stands by the pillar and solemnizes the covenant again before the Lord,that they would follow the Lord and observe his commandments, and follow the Lord with all their heart and soul. We are reading that covenant, that very book, that very scroll, today, and we would not be doing so had it not been discovered again in Jerusalem, had the sudden crowd not formed and reaffirmed their commitment to the covenant.

And then there are the more recent stories. In 1943, there is the story of Purim in the Vilna Ghetto. M. Dvortsky, a Holocaust survivor, remembers:

> In the evening, crowds of Jews rushed to the reading of the Megillah. The synagogue on the street of the butcheries was packed to the point of bursting. There was darkness and gloom everywhere. Next to the *bima* there was a small candle burning. The people stood crowded together, and, as if from a great distance, the voice of the reader reached their ears. And the ancient verses, which the people had repeated automatically for so many years, took on a living meaning in that room. It seemed as if some mysterious voice was breaking through and rising up from under the ground.

And the crowds gathered again spontaneously in Buchenwald on Purim, 1945. Jacob Frankel remembers how they gathered stray papers amongst the camp and worked with bits of broken pencil, passed from one hand to the next, to write down the verses from the Book of Esther that they could remember. He goes on:

> And at the end of the fast of Ta'anit Esther, we all gathered at the predetermined time in the attic of the barracks. The excitement that we felt was palpable, and some of the other prisoners in the camp approached us: We also want to take revenge on the wicked Haman. Their dull eyes sparkled with the last flash of faith and hope. And we began the reading of the Megillah late at night for fear that our wonderful plan would be discovered by the murderous guards. And it was clear to us that according to the law we could not bless the reading of the Megillah, since it had been only copied by us with trembling fingers on a bunch of unmatched pieces of paper. But the reading itself evoked sublime elation and great fervor.

He goes on:

> When we finished, we broke into the song, *Shoshanat Yaakov*, and with this song in our mouths, we burst into a whirlwind of dancing. It seemed to us that the whole Buchenwald camp was holding its breath and listening to us, trembling. But later that same day, Avraham Eliahu, the most energetic man in our group, came to sweeten our ears with a big secret—the Ukrainian capo whispered to one of us today—"Hitler is finished."

The story of Purim throughout history is always filled with urgent meetings. The Book of Esther, with its story of sudden crowds, is read by other, sudden crowds, gathering anew for their own survival.

And then there is the story told by people all over the world when the state of Israel was founded. *The New York Times* reports that plans for the ceremony had been laid with great secrecy. None by the hundred or more invited guests and journalists was aware of the meeting until it started, and even the guests learned of the site only ten minutes before. It was held in the Tel Aviv museum of arts, a white modern design two story building. Crowds suddenly gathered to hear the proclamation read, and, says the times, "There was great cheering and drinking of toasts in this blacked out city" of Tel Aviv, even more so when the word was received that the United States had recognized the provincial government. As *The Times* put it, "The effect on the people, especially those drinking late in Tel Aviv's coffee houses, was electric. They even ran into the blackness of the streets shouting, cheering and toasting the United States."

What moments of sudden crowds have you experienced? And who were the strangers that were amongst you? What was the bond between you that moved beyond family and yet created a people? In the month of Elul, and now just before Rosh Hoshanah, there are so many possibilities for moving beyond our comfort zone, into the unknown crowd. What were the moments when we found ourselves in a crowd that surrounded us but was not completely familiar to us? What was its purpose? And how did we find God in that crowd—in the discomfort as well as the elation of becoming, suddenly, a people?

In Rosh Hoshanah, there will be many expected, not so sudden crowds. There will be the usual gatherings that we know and recognize. The familiar liturgies and prayers we know. And then this holiday season there will be others—the joyful gatherings we don't expect and don't realize have happened until we are in them. It is our great fortune that they will probably not be, thank God, like the Jews gathering around Mordechai and Esther, in a time of communal disaster. But our spontaneous gatherings may still have the emotional power of both loss and anticipation that Moses felt when he gathered his people on the mountain. Or the deep power of repentance that the people of Israel had in First Temple Jerusalem, when they had re-discovered the Scroll of the Covenant, and read it again to themselves. Our meetings may have the fire of the people in the Vilna ghetto, where God's voice seemed to be coming up from the very ground. Or the elation of the sudden dancing in Buchenwald. Or the joy of the rushed gathering in the darkened streets of Tel Aviv in the new state of Israel.

This Rosh Hoshanah, may you experience sudden mysterious meetings like so many others have throughout the history of the Jewish people. May your holidays be filled with rushed, breathless, joyful gatherings, where we realize, anew, that we have become a people, knit together by God.

—Laurie L. Patton