



DVAR TZEDEK

Parashat Nitzavim-Vayelech 5774

By Adina Gerver
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I consider the most beautiful passage in the Torah to be found in *Parashat Nitzavim*:

Surely, this *mitzvah* that I enjoin upon you this day is not too baffling for you, nor is it beyond reach. It is not in the heavens, that you should say, “Who among us can go up to the heavens and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may observe it?” ...No, the thing is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to observe it.¹

One reason I love this passage is because it utterly fails to define “this *mitzvah*,” leaving each of us to attach our own personal meaning. I understand “this *mitzvah*” as an amalgam of the interpretations of the medieval commentators Ramban and Sforno. Ramban says that the phrase refers to the entire Torah, and Sforno explains it as *teshuvah*—repentance or return.² By pairing Torah, which at its essence demands that we pursue justice, and *teshuvah*, our capacity to right wrongs, we can understand this passage as a mandate to believe that we have an innate capacity to fight the status quo when it is unjust and create change in the world around us.

By telling us that “this *mitzvah*” resides within us—in our mouths and in our hearts—this passage acknowledges and strongly rejects the human tendency toward defeatism: to believe that change, hope, and progress are beyond our grasp. We may sometimes wish that we could be passive receptacles for the difficult, transformative *mitzvot* that help us enact change in the world around us, that someone else could do this hard work for us, but this passage vehemently rejects that notion. Rather, it insists that the capacity to effect change resides within us.

Yet, the passage neglects to tell us how we each can come to actualize and act on this capacity. I believe that the answer lies in *Nitzavim*’s paired *parashah*, *Vayelech*:

Every seventh year...you shall read this Torah aloud in the presence of all Israel. Gather the people—men, women, children, and the strangers in your communities—that they may hear and so learn...to observe faithfully every word of this Torah.³

This practice, called *hakhel*, is an all-inclusive, free, public education, granted to women, men and children, both community members and strangers. According to medieval commentators Avraham Ibn Ezra and Hizkuni, *hakhel* takes place at the beginning of the *shmittah*, or sabbatical year, when agricultural work is forbidden. This enables the full year, when the entire community is free from physical labor, to be devoted to study.⁴ This model of universal access to education is the Torah’s built-in system to activate our capacity to change and improve the world.

¹ Deuteronomy 30:11-12, 14.

² Ramban on Deuteronomy 30:11. Sforno on Deuteronomy 30:11.

³ Deuteronomy 31:10-12.

⁴ Avraham Ibn Ezra on Deuteronomy 31:10. Hizkuni (on Deuteronomy 31:12) adds that during this year no one has the excuse of being too busy to study.

Although imperfect due to its extreme infrequency—one year out of every seven does not provide for a very thorough education—*hakhel's* messages of universal access and the need for sufficient time away from work in order to study are relevant today.

This is especially true in the contemporary Global South, where the necessity of earning a livelihood often imposes a formidable barrier to education. Children mired in poverty—especially girls—often must perform a great deal of domestic labor, leaving them no time for schooling. The United Nations notes the strong association between child labor and lack of access to education.⁵

Inversely, expanding primary school enrollment has proved to be one of the most effective ways to relieve persistent poverty.⁶ Universal education is one of the eight Millennium Development Goals articulated by the United Nations and adopted by major world leaders with the goal of reducing poverty worldwide. The goal is to “[e]nsure that, by 2015, children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling.” Recognizing this, many grassroots NGOs focus on providing families with the means to generate sufficient income so that children do not need to work—creating a *shmittah*-like pause in labor that creates time for learning.

We who accept the message of *Parashat Nitzavim*—that the Torah’s mandate for change resides in all of our hearts and minds, just waiting to be activated through education—must extend to all of humankind the opportunities that have allowed us this outlook. We must ensure that *hakhel* and *shmittah* exist for all of the children of the world, so that they can access the knowledge that will free them from the cycle of persistent poverty. Only then will progress, change and hope truly reside not in the heavens or across the sea, but in the mouths and hearts of all of us.



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⁵ “World Day Against Child Labour marks the need to tackle the worst forms of exploitation.” UNICEF. 12 June 2009. http://www.unicef.org/media/media_49972.html

⁶ When primary education is achieved, it leads to an improvement in “individual incomes, economic growth, child and maternal health, resistance to disease and environmental practices.” See “Education vital for achieving other anti-poverty targets, Ban stresses,” UN News Centre, 25 September 2008. Available at <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=28254#.U6riVUrHiVU>.

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