

Thank you for inviting me to present to you the Dvar Torah for this week's parshah ,
Nitzavim-Vayelech.

The portion of Nitzavim is always read on the Shabbat before Rosh Hashanah. Nitzavim means "standing," and the first verse appropriately sums up the mood of the day, "And all of you are standing this day before the Lord your God" The portion bids us to repent or undertake teshuva, and reminds us, "Life and death have I placed before you." We are urged: "And you shall choose life"--make the commitment to repent and to live a way of life that will be worthy of judgment for a renewed life, come the High Holy Days!

This year it is combined with the Torah portion, "Vayayelech," which comes from the Hebrew root for the word, "Go." Vayayelech represents movement, going, and is in sharp contrast to Nitzavim, which means "standing." The combination of Nitzavim and Vayayelech therefore seemingly teaches us two different positions: one-- to stand still, and the other--to move on. This confluence offers us the opportunity to be thoughtful of how we want to prepare for the new year. We must not only stand and take stock of what we have accomplished, but we also must make the commitment to move forward and make the coming year a productive one.

Parshat Nitzavim is filled with many ways which the children of Israel can use to ensure that they are on the correct path . The High Holidays are times that are especially conducive to *teshuva* (or repentance) and reflecting on our accomplishments in the past year and looking to do better in the new year. The concept that Yom Kippur, the day of fasting during which judgment for the year is sealed makes Jews strive their hardest to make certain that they have performed *teshuva* or atonement before the end of the day.

The Vilna Gaon points out that there are really two aspects of Teshuvah or repentance based on the descriptions in these portion. - Teshuvah through the heart and Teshuvah through actions.

The children of Israel have to allow the blessings and curses to touch their hearts and must fully understand what they mean. As Moshe said "And it will be when all of the these things, the blessings and curses, come to you, you will take it to your heart among all of the nations where God has put you" (30:1) In the second pasuk or verse, Moshe says "The children of Israel will return to God and they will listen to Him, according to everything that I (Moshe) command you today" (30:2). This refers to teshuva through actions as the children of Israel must actively return to God. However the pesukim (or verses of the portion) are in this particular order as **thought** must come before **actions**. If Bnei Yisrael or the Children of Israel were to simply return to God without understanding the meaning behind their Teshuvah, then the whole process would be worthless. Conversely, if Bnei Yisrael were to simply do Teshuvah in their hearts but not through actions, then their acts of repentance would not be enough. To perform a complete Teshuvah it requires both thoughts and actions as Moshe shows through these verses. However, a simple one-time Teshuvah that encompasses both thoughts and actions is not enough.

Teshuvah is a continual process that must be done all the time to ensure that a person will never sin again. During these days leading up to Yomim Noraim it is important to keep this concept of Teshuvah in mind.

As we turn to the matter of Jewish genetic diseases, how can this be compared to the above description of Teshuva? We know that the diseases like Familial Dysautonomia and Tay-Sachs are inherited as autosomal recessive traits. These are essentially hidden traits that you don't know about unless you get tested or have a child with one of several diseases that we call Jewish genetic diseases. So the genes are always there even when you don't know about them. If you are a carrier of a gene mutation or alteration for one of these diseases it has no effect on your health. But it is important to know about this. When 2 carriers of a gene mutation for the same disease have a child together, there is a 25% risk of having a child affected by that disease with every pregnancy. This is preventable with education and screening.

So how is this related to Teshuva? If we consider the model offered by Teshuva, that it needs to be an ongoing part of our lives, I would like to suggest a parallel, that education of the community about Jewish genetic diseases needs to be an ongoing part of our communal activities and we should all be trying to do this all the time. Those of us who know about the Jewish genetic diseases and that screening and prior knowledge can prevent the birth of children who are sick, have an obligation to share this with the whole community.

This Torah portion also presents the Children of Israel at their own moment of transition. Literally standing on the steppes of Moav, they are nearing the time when they will cross over the Jordan River to take possession of the Promised Land. Moshe, fully aware that his long life and extraordinary leadership that has spanned 120 years, is at its end, begins his final exhortations of the people to carry forth the legacy of holiness.

Moses says to the Children of Israel

“This command which I charge you today is not too wondrous for you nor is it distant. It is not in the heavens, to say, ‘Who will go up for us to the heavens and take it for us and let us hear it, that we may do it?’ ...But the word is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to do it.” (Deuteronomy 30: 11-12, 14) . He is basically telling them to do things for themselves and not expect to have him do it for them.

Like the people of Israel back in biblical times now is a transitional time in science and genetics and we should not ignore it. We should use Moses’ exhortation to the people of Israel as an example and become the mouthpieces of the community and exhort all the community members to learn about the Jewish genetic diseases. It is not distant information with no relevance, it has direct relevance to us here and now and this is a simple lesson we can all teach to somebody once we have learned it. Our siblings, our children, grandchildren and even our school students if that is where we find people for whom this is relevant. We should not leave it to others but take responsibility ourselves to do this. And in fact screening for genetic diseases is relevant to everyone, as every ethnic group is at risk for some genetic disease and each person should be encouraged to find out for himself what he should be tested for.

In the Ashkenazi Jewish community 1 in 5 individuals is a carrier for one of several Jewish genetic diseases. A simple blood test can tell you if you are a carrier. But until people are educated they are not going to seek the testing. The Victor Center for JGD at Einstein offers education, counseling and affordable screening to members of the Jewish

community both in our office and on college campuses where we have successfully replicated the TS screening programs done in the 1970s. Now we have 11 diseases on our panel and it may increase in the future as more genes are identified and the testing shown to be reliable. Our next goal is a big community wide screening in the Old York Road Kehilla where you will all need to become advocates and educators to exhort the community to come out and participate. If pikuach nefesh or saving a life is one of your goals for 5770, this is a great place to start.

As I started out quoting from the parsha Nitzavim, we are urged: "And you shall choose life"—, may it be a healthy life.

Let us make the commitment to make sure our community is well informed and that children are born to live a healthy life because we have made the effort to be out there talking and educating about his important cause. The Victor center will be your partner. Just contact us and we will help to bring this information to the community the way we are tonight.

Thanks and Shabbat shalom.