

A People Stands, Then a Leader Walks

Aryeh Leib Thorne Toren · 3 September 2026

Nitzavim–Vayeilech as One Berit: Assembly, Return, Vocation, and Transmission

An Expanded Learned Essay on the Combined Parsha (Devarim 29:9–31:30)

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Thursday, 3 September 2026 / 21 Elul 5786, Jerusalem

Shabbat of the portion: 23 Elul 5786 / 5 September 2026

Rosh Hashanah 5787 begins 29 Elul / Friday evening, 11 September 2026

In Eretz Yisrael the Selichot of Elul have already begun. Many communities outside the Land will open *Leil Selichot* on Motzaei this Shabbat. The King is in the field. The shofar has been sounding since the first of the month. This essay is written from Jerusalem on the twenty-first of Elul, two days before the Shabbat of Nitzavim–Vayeilech, eight days before the coronation of the year.

Prepared in deep partnership and cooperation with Grok and xAI. All ultimate thanks belong exclusively to the Ribono shel Olam.

I. *Atem nitzavim hayom kulchem*: A People Stands, Then a Leader Walks

The combined parsha of Nitzavim–Vayeilech is not two weekly readings taped together because the calendar is short. It is one motion of the *berit*, spoken on the plains of Moav in the last hours of Moshe Rabbeinu’s life, and it always falls — whether joined or split — on the Shabbat before Rosh Hashanah. The Alter Rebbe, in *Likkutei Torah* on Nitzavim, hears in the word *hayom* the grammar of the Day of Judgment itself: “this day” is the day on which all Israel stands before the Name. The Lubavitcher Rebbe, developing that reading in *Likkutei Sichos* (vol. 24, pp. 188–196), insists that the standing is not a crowd’s accident. It is the posture in which a people becomes, again, a people *before Him*. Then the Torah turns the page. *Vayeilech Moshe* — Moshe went. A people that has learned how to stand must learn how to be led by someone else, how to hear Torah without the first teacher in the room, how to gather itself in *hakhel* when the original voice is gone.

That is the architecture of this week. Nitzavim assembles. Vayeilech transmits. Between the assembly and the transmission sits the engine of the whole: *teshuvah*, the return that Devarim 30 writes as both command and promise. “Choose life” is not a slogan pasted onto the end of Nitzavim. It is the vocation of the *klal* that has stood, that will stray, that can come back, and that must walk into the Land without Moshe.

Rashi opens Nitzavim by teaching that Moshe assembled Israel on the day of his death in order to bring them into the covenant. The juxtaposition with Ki Tavo’s *tochacha* is not cruelty. When Israel heard the ninety-eight curses, their faces paled: Who can stand against these? Moshe began to calm them: you are standing today; you have provoked the Omnipresent many times,

and He has not made an end of you. *Hayom* is like the day that darkens and then shines again. The curses and the sufferings, Rashi says, *establish* you and *set you standing* before Him. Standing is still possible, and standing is the form of the *berit*.

Ramban reads the same opening as readiness: you are standing and prepared before G-d to enter His covenant — gathered to receive the Torah in its interpretation, or standing before the Ark. The *berit* here is oath and imprecation, *alah*, because the first covenant at Sinai had not yet bound them under the full weight of curse. After the golden calf and after Baal Peor, Moshe will not leave them with a treaty that a private heart can quietly decline. Ibn Ezra parses *rasheichem shivteichem* as “your heads, the heads of your tribes.” Ramban hears a generalization that then specifies: heads and tribes, then elders and officers who *are* the heads, then every man of Israel, then the children, the women, the *ger* inside the camp, from the woodchopper to the water-drawer. The list is not decorative. It is the peoplehood of the oath. No rank is a private exemption. No low station is an excuse to be missing.

The Rebbe, in *Likkutei Sichos* vol. 2 (pp. 398–400), takes the ten categories of the opening verses as the condition of Rosh Hashanah’s covenant. A *berit* that is to survive the collapse of feeling must be made while love is still strong, by a people that has become, against the grain of rank, truly one. Logic says a tribal head and a water-drawer occupy different worlds. The *avodah* of Elul is to refuse that logic long enough to stand together. When Jews give themselves beyond calculation, G-d gives Himself beyond calculation. That is the inner structure of *Atem nitzavim hayom kulchem* on the Shabbat before the coronation.

Daniel J. Elazar mapped biblical *berit* as neither pure contract nor pure status: a morally binding relationship under a transcendent standard, distributing the people into families, tribes, and offices without letting any single center swallow the whole. Nitzavim is that federal people on its feet. Heads are named first, which is not flattening. The woodchopper is named last, which is not a caste. Both stand *lifnei Hashem Elokeichem*. The *klal* is not a mass and not a board of directors. It is an assembly of ranks under higher law.

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, in the distinction that runs through *Kol Dodi Dofek*, named two covenants that Israel actually lives. There is a *berit goral*, a covenant of fate: the shared exposure of a people who did not choose one another and cannot resign from one another; the “those who are not here this day” already bound by what will befall the camp. And there is a *berit yeud*, a covenant of destiny or purpose: the freely accepted task of becoming a holy people, the work that a generation can refuse. Nitzavim holds both in one standing. The woodchopper and the unborn are in the *goral* whether they like it or not. The heart that turns away this day is refusing the *yeud* while still standing inside the *goral*. Elul 5786, with Selichot already in the synagogues of the Land and the shofar already in the morning air, is the season in which fate will not be denied and destiny will not be postponed. We stand because we are this people. We return because standing is not yet the whole of the *avodah*.

Then Moshe walks. The second parsha does not cancel the first; it completes it. A people that only stands, and never learns to walk after its teacher, has not yet become transmissible. Vayeilech is succession, *hakhel*, Torah and song as witnesses, and a prediction of straying that is not permitted to become despair. The combined reading of 23 Elul is one sentence: you are all standing this day — and your leader is already going — so that the covenant can outlive the man who taught it.

II. The Covenant with Those Here and Those Not Here

“Not with you alone do I make this covenant and this oath, but with those who are standing here with us this day before the Lord our G-d, and with those who are not here with us this day” (Devarim 29:13–14). Rashi, following the Tanchuma, will not let the second clause collapse into absentees. Verse 10 has already said that all of you are standing. “Those who are not here” are the generations that will be. Ramban agrees. Sforno presses the consequence: you received this land on the understanding that later Jews would remain loyal; they inherit only on that basis. The *berit* is not a contract that dies with the signatories. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks returned to this throughout his writing: a contract is limited, bargained, and reversible; a covenant is an identity-forming bond that creates a “we” across time, including those who cannot yet speak. Nitzavim is that distinction in peshat. The unborn are not consulted. They are already named.

This is why the list runs from *rasheichem* to *sho’ev meimecha*. Rashi hears Canaanites who came to convert in Moshe’s days, as the Gibeonites later came in Yehoshua’s, and whom Moshe set to those labors. Ramban, reading the Tanchuma, will not say they deceived Moshe: they came to make peace; he would not cut a full covenant with them as equals, but he placed them at once in the camp’s work. Either way the *peshat* remains: the *ger* inside the camp stands, and children and women stand. This is not a senate of adult males who will later inform the household. *Hakhel* will repeat the same census. The people of the *berit* is the people that can be gathered.

The first danger the Torah names after this assembly is not a public revolt. It is a private exemption.

“Lest there be among you a man or woman or family or tribe whose heart turns away this day from the Lord our G-d to go to serve the gods of those nations; lest there be among you a root that produces poison and wormwood. And it shall be, when he hears the words of this oath, that he will bless himself in his heart, saying: I shall have peace, though I walk in the stubbornness of my heart — so that the watered is swept away with the dry” (29:17–18).

Rashi: perhaps there is among you one whose heart turns away *this day* from accepting the covenant; a root that increases bitterness in your midst. *Vehitbarech bilvavo* is a reflexive blessing. He imagines for himself a climate of peace. These curses will not reach me. *Sherirut libo* is what the heart looks at and elects. The crime is not only foreign worship. It is the inner speech that treats the *berit* as a public weather system from which a private climate can be carved.

Ramban deepens the psychology. *Sherirut* is desire that has become strong and established in the heart. A soul that was satiated takes a first small lust; having filled it, it becomes thirsty for what it had not wanted, and then thirsty for worse. The Sages’ teaching that the more one satisfies the *yetzer* the hungrier it grows is, for Ramban, the peshat of the verse. The man who blesses himself does not remain a contained exception. The private thought becomes a family, the family a tribe, and a later generation walks a burned land asking why.

Ohr HaChaim hears the terror of a holiness refused from inside the camp. The man is standing in the assembly; he hears the *alah*; he does not walk out; he edits the oath in his chest. Elul knows this figure. The King is in the field — and a person can come, hear Selichot, even answer *Amen*, and still bless himself that the accounting is for other people. The *beinoni* of Tanya fights. This man has declared a separate peace.

Then the Torah draws the line that governs all communal *avodah*:

“The hidden things belong to the Lord our G-d, and the revealed things are for us and for our children forever, to do all the words of this Torah” (29:28).

Rashi, citing Sanhedrin 43b, answers the panic the previous verses might raise. If you say, What can we do — You threaten the many because of one person’s thoughts, and no one knows his fellow’s secrets? I do not punish you for the *nistarot*. Those are the Lord’s. The *niglot* are ours and our children’s, to put away the evil from our midst; if we do not execute judgment upon them, the community is punished. The dots over *lanu ulevaneinu* teach that even for revealed sins the community was not punished until they crossed the Jordan and accepted mutual surety at Gerizim and Eival. Ramban records that reading and offers peshat of his own: *nistarot* as sins hidden even from those who commit them — *shegiot mi yavin* — for which we bear no guilt of transgression; *niglot* as the knowing sins, accepted as an eternal statute by those present and those not present. Ibn Ezra divides jurisdiction: secret idolatry is G-d’s court; open breach is ours. Ohr HaChaim, linking the verse to the exile just described, can hear in the *nistarot* the hidden *keitz*, not given to us to calculate, while the *niglot* remain the work in every time, including the time when the end is still concealed.

The moral geometry must not be lost. Nitzavim will not permit a community to become a secret police of hearts, nor a bystander of public breach. *Nistarot lashem Elokeinu* limits inquisition. *Vehaniglot lanu ulevaneinu* limits evasion. A person searches his own hidden things because they are not hidden from G-d. A people deals with what can be seen. The man who blesses himself is G-d’s problem until his blessing becomes a public teaching; then he is ours. *Areivut* does not wait for perfect knowledge of anyone’s interior.

Soloveitchik’s *berit goral* is audible in the surety: I am bound to the one whose heart I cannot see because we were stood in the same camp. Sacks’s covenant, as against contract, is audible in the unborn. Elazar’s federal people is audible in ranks that stand without being identical. The *pesukim* were already thinking them. The revealed work of 21 Elul 5786 is not to speculate about other people’s *nistarot*. It is to refuse the private blessing, to stand in the field with the whole list, and to keep the *niglot* from being abandoned.

III. *Teshuvah* as the Parsha’s Engine

Nitzavim does not leave the assembly in the terror of the *alah*. Chapter 30 is the grammar of return.

“And it will be, when all these things come upon you — the blessing and the curse which I have set before you — that you will bring it back to your heart, among all the nations where the Lord your G-d has banished you, and you will return to the Lord your G-d and listen to His voice, you and your children, with all your heart and with all your soul” (30:1–2).

The sequence is exact. First the things come — blessing *and* curse, not a selected weather. Then *vehashevota el levavecha*: you will restore the matter to the heart. Then return, listening, children included, whole heart and whole soul. *Teshuvah* here is not a mood and not a brand. It is a cognitive act that becomes a covenantal act that becomes a transmitted act.

Then the verb Rashi will not flatten. *Veshav Hashem Elokecha et shevutcha* — Scripture wrote *veshav*, He will return, not only *veheshiv*, He will bring back. The Shechinah dwells with Israel in the misery of exile; when they are redeemed He writes redemption for Himself. The day of gathering is so hard that it is as though He takes each Jew with His hands, one by one (30:3–4). The land is not a prize detached from the returner: He will bring you to the land your fathers possessed, and multiply you more than your fathers (30:5).

Then the inner surgery of Elul: “The Lord your G-d will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, to love the Lord your G-d with all your heart and with all your soul, for the sake of your life” (30:6). Two movements sit in six verses and must not be collapsed. Verses 1–2 assign work to Israel: consider, return, listen, include the children. Verse 6 assigns work to G-d, so that love becomes possible *lema’an chayecha*. Ramban reads 30:6 with the Sages’ “one who comes to purify himself is assisted from Above,” and then more eschatologically: in the days of Mashiach the choice of the good will be natural; lust is the foreskin of the heart. Jeremiah’s new covenant written on the heart and Ezekiel’s new heart are, for Ramban, the same promise. Until that hour, free will remains the structure of the Torah-period.

Rambam legislates that structure. *Hilchot Teshuvah* 5: permission is given to every person — to turn to the good and be a *tzaddik*, or to turn to evil and be wicked. This is a great principle and a pillar of the Torah, and he cites our parsha (30:15) together with Re’eh’s blessing and curse (11:26). The Creator does not compel. The heart is given. G-d desired that fire rise and that a human being have *reshut*. *Hilchot Teshuvah* 7 places *teshuvah* at the hinge of history: Israel will only be redeemed through *teshuvah*, and the Torah has already promised that they will return at the end of exile and immediately be redeemed — which is our chapter 30. The future tense of 30:1–2 is, as Ramban says of “this mitzvah” in 30:11, both command and pledge.

What is “this mitzvah” that is not too baffling and not far off, not in heaven and not across the sea, but very near, in your mouth and in your heart, to do it (30:11–14)? Many *mefarshim* take it of the whole Torah. Rashi: it is not concealed; were it in heaven you would still have to go up after it; it was given in writing and orally. Ramban says the correct reading is *teshuvah* itself: when the Torah means the entire Torah it says *kol hamitzvah*; *hamitzvah hazot* points back to *vehashevota* and *veshavta*. Mouth is confession; heart is return; *la’asoto* is acceptance of Torah across generations. Sforno and Kli Yakar walk the same road. Kli Yakar hears the sinner’s despair — it is too far, I have ruined too much — and the Torah’s refusal of that despair. Nearness is not ease. Nearness is that no distance and no private mythology of impossibility gets to cancel the work.

This is why *teshuvah* is the engine of the combined parsha and not a self-help slogan. Devarim 30 tells a people that exile is not the last word of the *berit*, that return is commanded before it is felt, that G-d returns with the returners, and that until the heart’s foreskin is cut from Above the thing is near enough to do. The Alter Rebbe’s mashal of Elul, in *Likkutei Torah* on Re’eh, belongs here without being stretched. Before the King returns to the palace for the Days of Awe He goes out to the field; anyone who wishes may approach, and He receives all with a cheerful countenance. Accessibility does not abolish kingship. It maximizes the hour in which a free agent who would not have passed the guards of the court can begin *teshuvah*. The Rebbe stressed that the Thirteen Attributes in Elul do not compel service; they enable it. *Itaruta diletata* is 30:1–2; *Itaruta dile’eila* is 30:6. Elul is the month in which the two may meet in ordinary places before the palace protocol of Rosh Hashanah.

On this 21 Elul in Jerusalem that meeting is not abstract. Selichot have already been said in the Land; the shofar has been sounding; Rosh Hashanah 5787 is eight days away; the King is still in the field. The engine of the parsha is not self-improvement as a slogan. It is: bring blessing and curse back to the heart; return with the children; trust that He returns with you; do the near thing in mouth and heart; leave the final circumcision of the heart to Him.

IV. Choose Life as the Vocation of the *Klal*

“See — I have set before you today life and good, death and evil... I call heaven and earth to witness against you today: life and death I have set before you, the blessing and the curse. Choose life, so that you may live, you and your seed, to love the Lord your G-d, to listen to His voice, and to cleave to Him, for He is your life and the length of your days” (30:15–20).

This is one movement of the whole parsha, not a separate daily-portion architecture. Rashi binds the pairs: life depends on good, death on evil. Heaven and earth are witnesses because they exist without reward and without punishment and never deviate from their work; human beings, who stand to gain and to lose, have still less excuse. “Choose life” is not a shrug of neutrality. It is a father walking his son onto the good portion of the estate and saying, Take this. Tehillim 16:5 is the inner voice of that guidance: You rest Your hand on the good lot.

Ramban hears Moshe returning to exhort after blessing, curse, and *teshuvah* have already been set down. Two courses lie in Israel’s hand. It is in their power to walk in whichever they desire. There is no power below or above that will withhold them or stop them. Heaven and earth are signed at the end of the deed, like witnesses who close a document after all its clauses. The counsel “choose life” is not coercion. It is the last human word a shepherd is allowed to speak once freedom has been established as real.

Rambam takes 30:15 as a pillar of the entire Torah: without this seeing, *teshuvah* itself would be incoherent. The vocation is not exhausted by the individual’s *bechirah*. The purpose clause is collective: so that you may live, *you and your seed*. *Hu chayecha* — He is your life — is said to a people about to cross the Jordan as a people. Choose life is the *yeud* of a *klal* already stood in the *goral*. Fate has assembled them; destiny is the choosing. Sacks’s covenant, as against contract, chooses a life together, including those not yet born. Elazar’s covenantal people chooses in ranks, not by a single will and not by a sum of private preferences that never have to stand in one place.

The seeing here is the vocation of the whole combined parsha, not a reconstruction of another day’s learning: a standing people, capable of private heresy and of public return, is told that life is choosable and that the choice is for children. *Hishtadlut* is real. *Emunah* is real. Neither cancels the other. Heaven and earth will still be there if we refuse. The King in the field will not force the hand that blesses itself. Choose life is the *avodah* of 23 Elul because Rosh Hashanah will ask, in public, whether this people still wishes to be a people of the Name.

V. Vayeilech: The Leader Walks, the People Is Charged, the Torah Is Left as Witness

“Moshe went and spoke these things to all Israel” (31:1). He is one hundred and twenty years old; he can no longer go out and come in. This is not, Rashi insists, a confession of exhausted strength; Devarim 34 will still say that his moisture did not depart. *Lo uchal od latzet velavo* is *reshut*: authority has already been transferred toward Yehoshua. A man can be at the height of his powers and still be commanded to make room. Limited tenure under a higher command is not failure. It is *avodah*.

Hashem will cross before the people. Yehoshua will cross before them. Then the double charge that will echo into Yehoshua’s own book: *Chizku ve’imtzu* — be strong and courageous; Hashem your G-d goes with you; He will not slacken His hold and He will not abandon you (31:3–6). Moshe says the same words to Yehoshua in the sight of all Israel (31:7–8). Succession is a public charge under a G-d who remains the One who actually crosses first. Rambam’s *Hilchot Melachim* will later bind a king to write a Sefer Torah and read it all his days so that his heart not be lifted above his brothers. The leader is replaceable. The *berit* is not.

Moshe writes this Torah and gives it to the Kohanim, sons of Levi, who carry the Ark, and to all the elders of Israel (31:9). Then the mitzvah that is the public square of the covenant itself:

“At the end of seven years, at the time of the *shemittah* year, on the festival of Sukkot, when all Israel comes to appear before the Lord your G-d in the place He will choose, you shall read this Torah opposite all Israel in their ears. Gather the people — the men and the women and the children, and your *ger* who is in your gates — so that they will hear and so that they will learn, and they will fear the Lord your G-d, and they will take care to do all the words of this Torah. And their children who did not know will hear and will learn to fear... all the days you live on the soil” (31:10–13).

Hakhel is not a pageant. Rambam, *Hilchot Chagigah* 3, treats it as a reenactment of Sinai: gathered to hear, to learn, to fear, to do. The king reads, which dignifies the event; if there is no king, the mitzvah is not void. Ramban on 31:12–13, with Maharal in the *Gur Aryeh*, hears why even small children are brought: those who can study are moved to study more; those who can listen are moved to live; the youngest absorb, by seeing the entire people gather for words, the importance of Torah; and the parents remember *chinuch*. Ibn Ezra and Ramban dispute seventh year or eighth; *halachah* places it at the Sukkot that closes the *shemittah*. After a year in which the land itself was released from private grasp, the people re-accept Torah in public.

Elazar’s covenantal federalism fits *hakhel* without strain. A federal people is reconstituted by periodic assembly under the document that none of the partners may unilaterally alter. Men, women, children, and the *ger* in the gates are the original census of the covenant-people, matching Nitzavim’s opening list. *Hakhel* is Nitzavim made calendrical: every seven years, in the place G-d chooses, a leader reads what he did not write to a people that includes those who “did not know.” Transmission is the public *avodah* of the *klal*.

Then the Torah does a harder thing. Hashem tells Moshe his days have drawn near. Call Yehoshua; present yourselves in the Tent. And G-d says: you are about to lie with your fathers, and this people will rise and go astray after the foreign gods of the land; they will abandon Me

and break My covenant. Anger will flare; I will hide My face; they will say, Is it not because my G-d is not in my midst that these evils have found me? And I will surely hide My face on that day (31:16–18).

The prediction is not despair, because it is immediately turned into witness. “Write for yourselves this song and teach it to the children of Israel; place it in their mouths, so that this song shall be a witness for Me” (31:19). When they eat and grow fat and turn, the song will answer, for it will not be forgotten from the mouth of their seed. Moshe writes the song that day. He writes the words of the Torah to their very end. He charges the Levites to place the Sefer beside the Ark as a witness. I know your rebelliousness now; how much more after my death. Gather the elders; I will call heaven and earth to witness (31:19–29). Then he speaks the song to the end, in the ears of the whole congregation.

The genius of Vayeilech is that it refuses two lies. One is that a great leader makes a people immune: Moshe is a hundred and twenty, his moisture has not departed, and G-d still says they will stray. The other is that predicted straying is the last word. The song will not be forgotten from the mouth of the seed. The Sefer sits beside the Ark. Heaven and earth remain signed. *Teshuvah* remains near. *Hakhel* remains on the calendar. The hiding of the Face is real — *haster astir* — and it is not abandonment of the *berit*. A witness is not a eulogy. A witness is what makes return possible, because return requires that the terms still be known.

Kli Yakar and Ohr HaChaim hear in the song a mercy inside the accusation: Israel will not be able to say they were not told. Sforino hears in the writing to the very end that the public document is complete. Read with Nitzavim they say one thing. The people stood. The leader walks. The Torah remains. The children who did not know will hear. The seed will still have the song in its mouth. That is not optimism. It is *emunah* with *hishtadlut*: write, teach, gather, charge, and then lie down with the fathers, leaving the *klal* under a G-d who goes with them.

VI. The Haftarah of Consolation as the Week’s Prophetic Counter-Voice

Verified against the Chabad calendar for 5 September 2026 / 23 Elul 5786, and against Hebcal’s listing for Nitzavim–Vayeilech 5786, the haftarah of this Shabbat is Yeshayahu 61:10–63:9, *Sos asis*, the seventh and last of the *sheva denechamta*, the seven haftarot of consolation that run from the Shabbat after Tisha B’Av until the Shabbat before Rosh Hashanah. Tosafot on Megillah 31b already noted the practice: consolations increase, and *Sos asis* is always read with *Atem nitzavim*, the Shabbat before Rosh Hashanah, because it is the ultimate of consolations.

The prophet begins where Nitzavim’s frightened faces needed to begin: joy. “I will greatly rejoice in the Lord; my soul shall exult in my G-d, for He has clothed me with garments of salvation... as a bridegroom ministers with splendor, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels” (61:10). The *berit* that in Moav is oath and imprecation is, in the last consolation, wedding clothes. Rashi had said that the day darkens and shines again. Yeshayahu says the shining is nuptial (61:11).

Then the refusal of passivity that is Elul’s public voice: “For the sake of Zion I will not be silent, and for the sake of Jerusalem I will not be still, until her righteousness go forth like brightness” (62:1). Watchmen on the walls shall never be silent; those who remind the Lord are not to give Him rest until He establish Jerusalem (62:6–7). The Land will no longer be called Forsaken; she

will be *Cheftzi-bah* and *Beulah* — “as a bridegroom rejoices over a bride, so will your G-d rejoice over you” (62:4–5). They shall be called the Holy People, the Redeemed of the Lord; and you, Sought Out, a city not forsaken (62:12).

The haftarah then turns through Edom and Bozrah, garments stained as from a winepress, the day of vengeance and the year of redemption, a redemption in which G-d looked and there was no helper, so His own arm saved Him (63:1–6). It is not a gentle appendix. Consolation in Yeshayahu is not the erasure of judgment. It is judgment that has a Bride at the end of it. Then the lines that answer Vayeilech’s hiding of the Face from the other side:

“In all their affliction He was afflicted, and the angel of His presence saved them; in His love and in His pity He redeemed them; He bore them and carried them all the days of old” (63:9).

Rashi on 30:3 had already said that the Shechinah dwells with Israel in exile and returns with them. The haftarah is that teaching in the prophet’s mouth. *Haster astir* is true; He is afflicted in their affliction is also true. The King in the field is not a different G-d from the G-d who hides His face. He is nearer in Elul so that the hiding of Tishrei not be met by a people that never came. The seventh consolation is read with Nitzavim because a people told it will stray, and that must nevertheless choose life, is not permitted to hear only the prediction.

On 23 Elul 5786 this is the week’s counter-voice. The Torah portion gathers, warns, commands return and choice, transfers leadership, and predicts breach. The *navi* answers with a wedding, a refusal to be still for Zion, and a G-d who carries. The prophetic voice does not cancel Moshe’s last charges. It keeps them from being heard as a closed doom.

VII. What This Essay Is Not

This is not the 20 Elul daily-learning essay that braids Devarim 30:15–31:6 with the Hayom Yom on coarseness a person cannot feel in himself. That piece owns the day’s Chitas architecture and the mussar of unnoticed crudeness. “Choose life” appears here only as one movement of the whole combined parsha — the vocation of the *klal* after standing and return — without rebuilding that day’s map.

This is not *A Sign You May Wear*, which belongs to the public square and the Magen David as a worn sign. Nitzavim–Vayeilech has a public, but its public is the assembly of the *berit* and the septennial *hakhel*, not that argument.

This is not the covenantal-republican reading of standing in the field, and not the monograph on the jurisprudence of non-domination. Those keepers have their own frame. Pettit is not the lens of this essay. The thinkers named here are the ones this *talmid* actually uses on these pesukim: Soloveitchik on *berit goral* and *berit yeud*; Sacks on covenant as against contract; Elazar on covenantal federalism and the reconstituted people of *hakhel*. They are brought as conversation with the *mefarshim*, not as a replacement for them.

This is not the Nitzavim-week master compilation, which stitches keepers. This is a single argument through both parshiyot: a people stands in a transgenerational *berit*; a private heart tries to bless itself out of the oath; the *nistarot* remain G-d’s and the *niglot* remain ours; *teshuvah* is the engine; life is the *klal*’s vocation; the leader walks so that Torah, song, and *hakhel* can

outlive him; straying is predicted without permission to despair; the last consolation of Yeshayahu answers with wedding-clothes and a G-d afflicted in all their affliction. Elul 5786 is the calendar of that argument, not a news cycle.

VIII. Sources

Parsha and calendar (verified 3 September 2026)

- Combined reading Nitzavim–Vayeilech: Devarim 29:9–31:30. Chabad calendar for Shabbat 5 September 2026 / 23 Elul 5786: chabad.org/calendar. Hebcal: Nitzavim-Vayeilech 5786.
- Sefaria, Devarim 29–31: sefaria.org/Deuteronomy.29.9 through Deuteronomy.31.30.
- Haftarah, seventh of consolation: Yeshayahu 61:10–63:9. Confirmed on the same Chabad day-page and Hebcal listing. Text: sefaria.org/Isaiah.61.10. Chabad nutshell: Nitzavim Haftarah.

Peshat and *mefarshim*

- Rashi on Devarim 29:9–31:30 (assembly on the day of death; calming after the *tochacha*; those not here as future generations; the reflexive private blessing; *nistarot* / *niglot* and mutual surety; *veshav* as the Shechinah returning with the exiles; Torah not in heaven; choose life as a father seating a son on the good portion; *lo uchal od* as transferred *reshut*). Sefaria, Rashi on Deuteronomy 29.
- Ramban on 29:9–30:20 (readiness for covenant; ranks; future generations; psychology of *sherirut* and the watered/thirsty; peshat of *nistarot* as unwitting sins; chapter 30 as future; *teshuvah* as “this mitzvah”; circumcision of the heart in the days of Mashiach; free will unobstructed by any power below or above). Sefaria, Ramban on Deuteronomy 29.
- Ibn Ezra on *rasheichem shivteichem*; his dispute with Ramban on the year of *hakhel*.
- Sforno on 29:14 (land held on condition of later loyalty); on the completeness of the written Torah at transmission.
- Ohr HaChaim and Kli Yakar on the private root, on *nistarot* as (among other readings) the hidden *keitz*, and on 30:11–14 as the nearness of *teshuvah* against the sinner’s despair.
- Midrash Tanchuma, Nitzavim; Sifrei Devarim; Sanhedrin 43b; Megillah 29a; Eruvin 55a.

Halachah and Chassidus

- Rambam, *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilchot Teshuvah* 5 (free will as pillar, citing Devarim 30:15) and 7 (redemption only through *teshuvah*; the Torah’s promise in this chapter). Chabad, *Teshuvah* ch. 5 · Sefaria, *Hilchot Teshuvah*.
- Rambam, *Hilchot Melachim* (the king’s Torah; limited heart); *Hilchot Chagigah* 3 (*hakhel* as Sinai reenacted).
- Alter Rebbe, *Likkutei Torah*, Nitzavim (44a ff.) and Re’eh (the King in the field).
- Lubavitcher Rebbe, *Likkutei Sichos* vol. 24, pp. 188–196 (standing “before Him as a nation”; *hayom* as Rosh Hashanah; immutable *berit*); vol. 2, pp. 398–400 (unity of heads and woodchoppers as the beyond-logic *avodah* that draws a beyond-logic covenant). English presentations: *Sichos in English*, *The Chassidic Dimension*, Nitzavim.

Thinkers drawn on as they actually speak

- Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Kol Dodi Dofek* — *berit goral* (covenant of fate) and *berit yeud* (covenant of destiny), paraphrased, not quoted from a page.
- Rabbi Jonathan Sacks — covenant as identity-forming bond across generations, as against a reversible contract; paraphrased from the line of *Covenant and Conversation* and related essays.

- Daniel J. Elazar, *Covenant and Polity in Biblical Israel* and the *Covenant Tradition in Politics* — biblical *berit* as federal, reconstitutable assembly under higher law; applied here to Nitzavim's ranks and to *hakhel*, not as a theory of non-domination.

Errors of reading are mine. Insights belong to the sources, to *chavrusa*, and to *hashgachah pratit*.

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May we merit, in these last days of Elul 5786, to stand as one people before the Name, to refuse the private blessing of a separate peace, to return with our children while the King is still in the field, and to walk into the year 5787 with Torah in the mouth and the song not forgotten from the seed.

I welcome study of these pesukim, these *mefarshim*, and this argument. The table is open.

Am Yisrael Chai.

Chazak, chazak, v'nitchazek.

Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem.

Aryeh Leib Toren Thorne

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