

The Song as Witness: Transmission, Free Will, and Return

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Friday, 4 September 2026 · כ"ב אלול תשפ"ו

Erev Shabbat Parashat Nitzavim–Vayeilech · Seven days before Erev Rosh Hashanah 5787

Leil Selichot begins Motzei Shabbat (23 Elul)

Today's Daily Learning Portions Chumash — Parashat Nitzavim–Vayeilech, sixth aliyah: Devarim 31:14–19

Tehillim — Chapters 106–107 (the original Hayom Yom calendar also notes 64–66)

Tanya — Iggeret HaKodesh, beginning of Epistle 16

Hayom Yom — Elul 22: before tochecha, pare one's own "fingernails"; then netilat yadayim — drawing mochin into middot

Seasonal frame — Weekday shofar of Elul (not sounded today, erev Shabbat); cheshbon hanefesh; checking tefillin and mezuzot; Selichot tomorrow night; Yamim Nora'im in one week

I. The Sixth Aliyah in the Field of Elul The sixth portion of Nitzavim–Vayeilech is brief and severe. Hashem tells Moshe that his days to die have drawn near. Joshua is summoned. They stand together in the Ohel Moed. The cloud appears at the entrance. Then the word no leader wants at the hour of succession:

Behold, you will lie with your fathers, and this people will rise up and go astray after the gods of the foreigners of the land... They will forsake Me and break My covenant which I made with them. Then My anger will be kindled... and I will hide My face from them... And they will say on that day: Is it not because our G-d is not in my midst that these evils have found me?

And now, write for yourselves this song, and teach it to the children of Israel; place it in their mouths, so that this song shall be for Me a witness against the children of Israel. (Devarim 31:16–19)

Rashi identifies "this song" as Ha'azinu. The command is not merely literary. It is covenantal-legal and pedagogical. The people themselves must carry the charge — and the hope — in their own mouths. Chabad

Read in Elul, the passage is not only about Moshe's death. It is about covenantal life when the great intermediary no longer stands in the breach. Leadership is transmitted. The people remain free. Apostasy is foreseen without being decreed as fate. Hester panim follows abandonment, not the reverse. A text is placed in the mouth so that no generation can claim it was never warned — or never offered a way back.

The Alter Rebbe's mashal of Elul is the King in the Field. The King is accessible. He receives all who come with a smiling countenance. Accessibility is not license. The field is still the King's field. The sixth aliyah names the price of treating accessibility as absence: hester panim, the felt

withdrawal that the people themselves will later diagnose — “because our G-d is not in my midst.” Elul’s mercy is that this diagnosis can be spoken before the decree is sealed. The Song is already in the mouth. The witness is already internal.

II. Bechirah, Not Fate: “This People Will Rise Up” The verb vekam — “this people will rise up” — is the grammar of free will. Hashem does not say the people must stray. He tells Moshe what they will do if the covenant is treated as inheritance without consent. The Torah here refuses two opposite errors.

The first error is determinism: that exile, failure, and hester panim are written so tightly that teshuvah is theater. The second is sentimental autonomy: that the covenant is optional ornament on an otherwise self-authored life. Devarim 31 holds both poles. The people can rise and stray. The Song will testify. The same mouths that can violate can also return, because the witness was placed in their mouths, not only in Heaven’s archive.

This is why Nitzavim, read this Shabbat, opens with “You are standing today, all of you” and proceeds to the choice of life and good, death and evil. Vayeilech is Moshe’s walking-away and Joshua’s walking-forward. The sixth aliyah is the hinge: death of the first leader, charge to the second, forecast of national failure, and a permanent witness that makes return possible.

Classical mefarshim emphasize different faces of the same structure. Rashi stresses the Song as Ha’azinu and the hidden face as “as though I do not see their distress.” Ibn Ezra and Ramban read the prediction as conditional warning woven into history, not as cancellation of bechirah. The Sforino hears in “they will say on that day” the beginning of recognition — the first movement of teshuvah, even when still mixed with complaint. Chassidus presses further: hester panim is itself a form of address. The hiddenness that follows betrayal is not Divine indifference; it is the space in which the soul must choose to seek.

In Elul that seeking is made easier, not cheaper. The King is in the field. The gates of teshuvah are open. Cheshbon hanefesh is not self-laceration for its own sake; it is the honest reading of the Song already in the mouth.

III. Limited Kingship and Lawful Succession Moshe does not appoint Joshua by private charisma. Hashem commands: call him, stand together, I will charge him. The cloud stands at the entrance. Transmission occurs in public sacred space, under revealed Presence, according to command.

This is Torah’s doctrine of limited authority. Even Moshe Rabbeinu reaches a boundary marked by death. The office continues. The person does not. Joshua receives a charge, not an unbounded inheritance. Later the Torah insists that the king write a sefer Torah and read it all his days, “that his heart not be lifted above his brothers” (Devarim 17:18–20). The sixth aliyah is the narrative sister of that law: no leader is the covenant. The covenant judges the leader and the people together.

Covenantal-republican language is not imported here; it is already in the peshat. Authority is derivative. Succession is lawful. The people are not a herd to be managed but a party to a brit who can stray and who can return. Non-domination is the refusal of any human power — including Moshe’s — to stand in the place of Hashem. The Song is a witness against Israel, which means Israel is a subject of law, not an object of raw will.

For Elul, the chinuch is immediate. Parents and teachers are not Moshe. They transmit; they do not own. Rebuke that forgets this becomes domination. Rebuke that remembers it becomes avodah.

IV. Hayom Yom: Pare the Nails Before You Reprove The Hayom Yom for 22 Elul is exacting:

Chassidic doctrine demands that before reproving another, one must pare his own “fingernails,” in order not to gash the other. “They (the forces of evil) seize by the fingernails”; every stab is kelipah and sitra achara. After the nails are pared there must be netilat yadayim — as explained in Chassidus: drawing intellect into the emotions. Chabad

Tochecha is a mitzvah. Elul multiplies the temptation to perform it on spouses, children, students, and the public square. The teaching places a prior duty: self-refinement so that the word does not become a claw.

Kelipah clings to the nails — the leftover, the unused edge, the part of the self that is hard and slightly dead. Unexamined sharpness in moral speech is not gevurah; it is residue. Netilat yadayim after the cutting is not hygiene only. In Chassidus it is the drawing of mochin into middot: thought washing feeling so that the emotion that moves toward another person is already governed.

Read against Devarim 31, the Hayom Yom is the personal analogue of lawful succession. Moshe does not lash the people in this aliyah. Hashem discloses the future and commands a song. The witness will do the work that a dying man’s anger cannot do cleanly. Likewise, the parent in Elul who has not done cheshbon on his own year has no right to use the Yamim Nora’im as a weapon against his household. First the nails. Then the water. Then, if needed, the word.

This is also the inner meaning of “the King in the Field.” The King receives with a smiling countenance. Those who represent Him must not arrive with unpared edges. Accessibility without refinement is not kindness; it is injury dressed as truth.

V. Tehillim 106–107: Confession, Then the Four Deliverances Psalm 106 is national vidui in liturgical form. It remembers the kindnesses and then the rebellions: at the Sea, in the wilderness, with the calf, at Meribah, with Baal Peor, in the land. The refrain is not despair. It is “Save us, Hashem our G-d, and gather us from the nations, to give thanks to Your holy name.” The psalm refuses both amnesia and self-exoneration. Memory of sin is placed inside memory of chesed.

Psalm 107 answers with four portraits of those who cried out and were redeemed: wanderers in the wilderness, prisoners in darkness, the sick who drew near the gates of death, seafarers at their wits’ end. Each stanza follows the same architecture — trouble, cry, rescue, thanksgiving. Chabad

In Elul the pairing is almost too clear. Chapter 106 is cheshbon hanefesh of a people. Chapter 107 is the possibility that the cry is heard while one is still in the field, not only after the palace gates close. The King in the Field is the seasonal form of “they cried to Hashem in their trouble, and He saved them from their distress.”

For chinuch: children can be taught the four portraits without terror. Everyone is, at times, the wanderer, the constrained, the weakened, the storm-tossed. The avodah is to cry out before the story hardens, and to give thanks when the wave falls. Thanksgiving is not the opposite of teshuvah. In Tehillim it is teshuvah's public face.

VI. Tanya, Epistle 16: "Your Brother Shall Live With You" The daily Tanya opens Iggeret HaKodesh 16. The Alter Rebbe writes to a community whose livelihood has collapsed. People are borrowing in order to eat. Yet word has reached him that hands once open to the needy of Eretz Yisrael have closed.

He does not deny the hardship. He refuses the conclusion. "And your brother shall live with you" (Vayikra 25:36) is not suspended by recession. The rule that "your life takes precedence" applies to a true zero-sum of survival — the jug of water in the desert — not to the difference between another's bread and one's own extras, feasts, and fine garments. The destitute whose eyes are lifted toward us are not a discretionary line item. Chabad

Elul hears this letter as tzedakah that is itself teshuvah. A people that can "rise up and stray" can also close the hand. Hester panim in the Chumash follows forsaking the covenant. In the Iggeret, closing the hand against the brother who must live with you is a small hester we practice on one another. Opening it in a hard year is a small giluy panim we practice first.

Practical avodah follows without rhetoric. Review the year's giving. Ask what was luxury and what was life. If the family will sit at a Rosh Hashanah table, ask who will not. Elul tzedakah is not a tax on guilt. It is the Song placed in the hand as well as the mouth.

VII. Traditional Approaches, Held Together Several classical paths meet in this day's learning.

One path, more legal-historical, reads Devarim 31 as constitution: succession, warning, documentary witness. The Song is Torah's way of making the people their own accusers and, therefore, their own candidates for return.

A second path, more mussar-oriented, hears the Hayom Yom as the day's primary demand: do not enter the season of judgment as a critic of others. Pare what is sharp in yourself.

A third path, Chassidic, reads the hidden face and the King in the Field as one motion. The same King who will sit in judgment walks now among the rows. The hiding that follows betrayal is already being anticipated so that it need not be finalized.

A fourth path, liturgical, lets Tehillim 106–107 set the emotional sequence: remember failure without lying; cry out; give thanks.

The synthesis is sequential avodah. First, accept that you are a party to a brit that will outlive you and will testify against you if needed (Chumash). Second, refuse to use that brit as a blade against your household until your own edges are cut and washed (Hayom Yom). Third, speak the confession and the cry (Tehillim). Fourth, open the hand so that a brother lives with you (Tanya). The King is in the field for all four acts.

VIII. Chinuch and Household Avodah for the Coming Week This Friday is erev Shabbat of Nitzavim–Vayeilech. Selichot begins on Motzei Shabbat, 5 September 2026, in the common Ashkenaz and Chabad practice for this calendar. Erev Rosh Hashanah falls on Friday, 11 September 2026. The household does not need a new ideology. It needs a few practices that match the texts.

Place the Song in their mouths. On Shabbat, read the sixth aliyah slowly with children who can hear it. One question: What does it mean that a song can be a witness? Let the seriousness stand, then add that a witness also remembers the possibility of return. Pare before you correct. Choose one pattern of speech from the past year — sarcasm, public shaming, comparison among siblings — and cut it before Rosh Hashanah. That is the “fingernail.” The washing is a deliberate kind word in the place where the old edge used to strike. Four thanksgivings. Use Psalm 107 at the table once this week. Let each person name, without theater, a distress from which they were brought out this year. The open hand. Decide a specific Elul gift — not leftover coins — toward someone whose eyes are lifted toward you, including support connected to Torah in Eretz Yisrael if that is the family’s custom. Do it before the Yamim Nora’im. Objects of covenant. Have tefillin and mezuzot checked if not yet done this Elul. The demand to write and place the Song has a physical cousin in the parchments on arm, head, and doorpost. Shofar and stillness. The weekday shofar of Elul is not sounded today. Use the silence of erev Shabbat as a different wake-up: the week’s last chance to stand, like Moshe and Joshua, in the tent before the next stage begins. IX. National and Personal Return The sixth aliyah speaks in the plural. “This people will rise up.” The Song is a witness against the children of Israel. Elul therefore cannot be reduced to private self-help. There is a national cheshbon: how a people uses freedom after it has been led, how it treats covenant as souvenir rather than bond, how it explains its troubles as G-d’s absence rather than as the consequence of walking away.

At the same time, the Hayom Yom and the Tanya refuse to let the national swallow the personal. You cannot “return the people” with unpared nails and a closed hand. The King in the Field meets one person at a time, even while the Song addresses the whole camp.

The approaching Days of Awe will ask both questions at once. Who are we as a people under law higher than any cabinet, army, or mood? And who am I, this year, when the same choice returns?

Devarim 31 does not flatter. It also does not close the file. The Song remains in the mouth. That is already mercy. Elul is the season in which we decide whether the witness will find us still straying, or already turning in the field where the King is waiting with a smiling countenance — provided we come, and provided we come without claws.

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