



**Parashat Nitzavim**

**Nitzavim: A Memory (Reprint from 2007)**

by John E. Hirsch on Friday September 11, 2009

22 Elul 5769

Deuteronomy 29:9 - 30:20

I write this drash in honor of (or is it in memory of) the fiftieth anniversary of my *bar mitzvah* on 21 September 1957 at Temple Beth Israel in Macon, Georgia. At not quite 13 – my birthday was the next day, the 22nd – it was, for so many reasons, one of the great defining moments of my life. *Bar mitzvahs* were relatively new at our very old classical Reform congregation – founded by German Jews in 1859. That Shabbat morning, Temple Beth Israel had both a new Rabbi and its first air conditioning system. It was only the third such *bar mitzvah* (and rabbi) in anyone's memory; I wore neither a *kippah* nor *tallit* with my new charcoal grey suit, a white shirt with French cuffs, monogrammed handkerchief in my breast pocket and a grey and green tie. I was tiny in that very grown-up looking outfit; but on that day I felt very, very grown-up, dapper, formal, elegant – and, for the first time in my life – tall. I stood tall in the pulpit. For someone who never got much past five feet in stature, this was truly important. I had a message to deliver!

My *bar mitzvah* was scheduled a week earlier than it should have been because the holidays would have prevented our out-of-town relatives from attending; so, that year, Nitzavim was read twice. Even Moses delivered this sermon (a charge to the people Israel) but once. For a really short person, these were very big sandals to fill. In many ways, I would have preferred stilettos.

I had been trained on Saturday mornings by Rabbi Milton Friedman who had replaced Dr. Marcuson about 1953. Dr. Marcuson had been the spiritual leader of the congregation for more than 50 years and brother-in-law to Dr. Julian Morgenstern, president of Hebrew Union College. At that point, one could already see a pattern change in Classical Reform Judaism and Temple Beth Israel, one of its bastions. Rabbi Harold Gelfman arrived less than three months before my *bar mitzvah* and completed my training. All summer I had studied this portion printed as part of the *Yom Kippur Morning Service* in the Union Prayer Book II, learning to pronounce every word in perfect Ashkenaz Hebrew followed by perfect seventeenth century English (King James) clearly and distinctly. As devoted Jews as my parents were, no one could help me study or practice because neither knew any helpful Hebrew, and I could cover the archaic English myself.



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As his first official act at Beth Israel, Rabbi Gelfman stepped back and let me shine; it was MY pulpit. It was at that moment that I first thought of becoming a rabbi. It was at that moment that I gave Moses' charge to the people.

Ye 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 thy stranger that is in the midst of thy camp, from the hewer of thy wood unto the drawer of thy water; that thou shouldest enter into the covenant of the lord thy God– and into His oath– which the Lord thy God maketh with thee this day that He may establish thee this day unto Himself for a people, and that He may be unto thee a God, as He spoke unto thee, and as He swore unto thy fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

The standard canard of the day in the 1950s was today I am a man. Although I may have looked like a miniature man; I didn't feel like one. I had never felt particularly male; always something other. I did not know who or what I was; I was never comfortable in my skin; never liked "boy" things. I had been more involved and engaged by the re-decoration of our home (picking fabric colors, choosing lamps and the like) and the party planning – flowers for the pulpit (our glatt Reform congregation had no *bimah*) than in any other aspect of the summer or the *bar mitzvah*. The Torah Portion had come easily; so had the preparation of the speech. In those days, one did not give what we call today a *D'var Torah*, so, fifty years later, here I am. Today I am a man; a queer one, but a man nevertheless.

Ye are standing this day all of you before the Lord your God," resonated then, as now, for me as the most inclusive statement in Torah. No matter whom I was – man-child, queer-in-training, untested gender – Moses had included ME in his charge to enter into the covenant on that day. I know that I never before felt so included in anything until that morning; I am not sure that I have ever felt quite that included since. No matter what or who I was – I was a Jew, first class, legitimate, honored to be there.

For this commandment which I command thee this day, it is not too hard for thee, neither is it far off. It is not in the heaven, that thou should say: "Who shall go up for us to heaven, and bring it unto us, and make us to hear it, that we may do it?" Neither is it beyond the sea, that thou shouldest say "Who shall go over the sea for us, and bring it unto us, and make us to hear it, that we may do it?" But the word is very nigh unto thee, in thou mouth, and in thy heart, that thou mayest do it.

Empowering! This gave me the first empowering moment of my life. I could take charge; despite the super conventionality of the time (the 1950s) and the place (Macon, Georgia) and



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the family (very conventional parents, lawyer father, stay-at-home mother), I could one day be ME. God and Moses were empowering little queer Johnny Hirsch. In those days “queer” had no positive connotation. It was an ugly, demeaning, vituperative word; a word whose meaning I did not yet know nor could have understood.

Finally I recited:

See, I have set before thee this day life and good, and death and evil, in that I command thee this day to love the Lord thy God, to walk in his ways, and to keep his commandments and His statutes and His ordinances; then thou shalt live and multiply, and the Lord thy God shalt bless thee in the land whither thou goest to possess it. But if thy heart turn away, and thou wilt not hear, but shalt be drawn away, and worship other gods, and serve them; I declare unto you this day, that ye shall surely perish; ye shall not prolong your days upon the land, whither thou passest over the Jordan to go in to possess it. I call upon heaven and earth to witness against you this day, that I have set before thee life and death, the blessing and the curse, therefore choose life, that thou mayest live, thou and thy seed; to love the Lord thy God, to hearken to His voice, and cleave unto Him; for that is thy life, and the length of thy days; that thou mayest dwell in the land which the Lord swore unto the fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give them.

Although I knew that this was the *Parasha* read at *Yom Kippur*, I could not have at 13 fully appreciated the beauty of this passage, its personal meaningfulness for me and its importance in the entire body of Torah.

I had no way of knowing of the truly dark days ahead for me. Of learning what being queer really meant; of discovering the ostracism and the hate – of facing disapproving parents upon its revelation. Of gay bashing. Of choosing a way that everyone would perceive at least as unconventional, at worst lost. But never did those words of Torah leave me because I was included; I could choose life – maybe not the life everyone else chose for me – but an ultimately authentic Jewish life. So, in the early 1960s I did not choose to become a Rabbi, to live hidden like a Marano<sup>1</sup>. This was not choosing Life.

Who could have guessed that 10 years after this monumental day in my life that “choosing Life” – my life – would lead me to a 40-year relationship – holy and sanctified – because my partner and I were included by Moses in the people of Israel. We chose life. It took us an additional 33 years to stand under the *chuppah*, fulfilling the *Mitzvah* of the Morning Prayers to the rejoicing of the angels.



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The land spoken of in the Portion was ancient; the State of Israel was oh so new. In 1988 we traveled to the Land to give thanks to God and to Moses at the *Kotel* for having chosen life, for the *Mitzvot* – and for including us in the People of Israel.

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<sup>1</sup> Sephardic Jews (Jews from the Iberian peninsula) who were forced to adopt the identity of Christians, either through coercion as a consequence of the persecution of Jews by the Spanish Inquisition and Portuguese Inquisition, or who, for form's sake, became Roman Catholic converts. Many maintained secret lives, hiding their observance of Jewish rituals and customs from authorities.



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