

*Parashat Nitzavim-Vayeilekh (Deuteronomy 29:9-31:30)*

We read two *parashot* (portions) this week because of how the Jewish calendar is calculated. The moon's cycle determines the months, but the sun's cycle determines the year. Therefore, a Jewish year (including leap years, which add an entire month) can have from 50 to 55 weeks. Since the number of *parashot* doesn't change, some years require certain *parashot* to "double up" on a given Shabbat.

*Parashat Nitzavim* opens with three assertions: The national mission of the Israelites is to enter into a *brit* (covenant) with God (Deut. 29:11); the *brit* is binding upon all generations, past, present, and future (Deut. 29:13, 14); and this mission requires the engagement of every member of the community (Deut. 29:9,10). This last declaration testifies to the importance of diversity within the Jewish community and is a proof-text for Jewish pluralism.

*Nitzavim* describes the entirety of the people: the highest officials and the lowliest laborers; men, women, and children. Its specific identification of woodchoppers and water carriers is puzzling; why them (as opposed to shepherds or weavers or potters)? Rabbi David Nelson (campus rabbi and faculty member in religion at Bard College) offers one explanation: The Torah is often likened to a tree (of life) or to water (a source of life). A water carrier, then, is a believer who brings Torah to others. A woodchopper, though, is a skeptic who "cuts down" the Torah's arguments. Suddenly, *Nitzavim's* call to action becomes a powerful commentary on inclusion. A community's strength isn't measured by the amount of agreement. It is measured by the room it makes for disagreement.

The Talmud acts out *Nitzavim's* imperative by scrupulously documenting and preserving the disagreements between the different rabbinic schools of thought. Opposing perspectives aren't merely tolerated, they are honored. Sincere engagement with divergent opinions brings us together as a people. *Nitzavim* is a useful reminder: Disagreement doesn't have to divide us. In fact, it can make us whole.

Gut Shabbos/Gut Yohr/Shabbat Shalom/Shanah Tovah

