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Nitzavim - Rosh Hashanah | Gateway to the New Year





## MESILOT Pathways to the Soul

Illuminating teachings and insights on the weekly Parsha of Rabbi Yoram Michael Abargel Zt"l

From the weekly lessons of his son Rabbi Yisrael Abargel Shlita

פרשת נצבים - ראש השנה | אנגלית

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Parshat Nitzavim - The Book of Life is Wide Open



#### The Book of Life is Wide Open

In our generation's lowly spiritual state, we are normally not privy to what transpires in the heavens above.

Yet there are exalted Jews who have merited to tune their emotional selves to the Divine will and who have studied Torah in purity, holiness, and self-sacrifice — until, over the course of years, every organ and limb of their bodies has become utterly refined.

Such individuals are privileged that the Holy One, blessed be He, reveals to them the truth of His existence: with their very ears they hear the proclamations of the supernal realms (as King David said of himself, "Ears You have fashioned me" (Psalms 40:7)), and with their eyes they are allowed to gaze into the chambers of the Celestial Chariot (the Torah is replete with such accounts).

One such holy Jew was the saintly Talmudic sage, Rabbi

Abbahu, who shared with us what he heard in the higher worlds (Rosh HaShanah 32b):

"Rabbi Abbahu said: The ministering angels said before the Holy One, blessed be He, 'Master of the Universe, why do the Jewish people not recite Hallel (songs of praise) before You on Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur?'

G-d answered them, 'Is it possible that when the King is seated upon the Throne of Judgment, and the Books of Life and Death are open before Him — that the Jewish people shall sing ?"'

Meaning, the ministering angels asked the Creator why Rosh HaShanah is any different than all the other festivals when the Jewish people recite Hallel.

To which He replied, explaining to them that Rosh HaShanah is the Day of Judgment.

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On this day, each and every person is judged with regard to their fate in the coming year: if they are found worthy, they are inscribed in the Book of Life; if, Heaven forbid, they are found liable, they are written in the Book of Death.

How, then, can the Jewish people sing when the Books of Life and Death lie open? Rosh HaShanah is a time for the humbling of the heart and contriteness, not for song or praise.

Indeed, one must be aware that one's entire future year depends on these days. As Rashi writes (ibid. 8a):

"The Holy One, blessed be He, judges all the inhabitants of the world in the month of Tishrei concerning everything that will befall them throughout the year until the next Tishrei."

As the liturgical prayer we recite on this day—'Unetanneh Tokef'—solemnly declares:

"Let us proclaim the sacred power of this day, for it is awe-inspiring and fearsome, and on it Your kingship is exalted; Your throne is established with lovingkindness and You sit upon it with truth.

Truly, You are the judge and arbiter, all-knowing and all-witnessing; You write and You seal, You remember all that has been forgotten; You open the Book of Chronicles — it reads by itself — and the seal of all mankind is there.

A great shofar is sounded and a still, thin voice is heard; angels are alarmed, trembling and terror seize them, and they say: 'Behold, the Day of Judgment,' to muster judgement upon the hosts of heaven — for even they are not guiltless in Your eyes — and all the earthly beings pass before You like sheep.

As a shepherd examines his flock, passing his sheep under his staff, so too do You pass, count, number, and attend to every living soul, fixing the span of every creature and writing down their verdict.

On Rosh HaShanah it is all written and on the fast of Yom Kippur it is sealed: how many will

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pass away and how many will be born; who will live and who will die; who in his appointed time and who before his time; who by water and who by fire; who by sword and who by beast; who by hunger and who by thirst; who by earthquake and who by plague; who by strangulation and who by stoning; who will rest and who will wander; who will be tranquil and who will be tormented; who will be poor and who will be rich; who will be humbled and who will be exalted."

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### **1.** Rabbi Elimelech Biderman related the following:

A pious man of bygone generations who lived in the Holy City of Jerusalem was named Rabbi Yosef Weinberg.

Together with his fear of Heaven, Reb Yosef was also a man of considerable wealth.

During one business season, the local economy took a drastic downturn, and the world of commerce came crashing down.

All of the local merchants of Jerusalem went about anxious, agitated, and bewildered; their entire financial future hung in the balance — everything depended on how the crisis would end. Everyone that is, except for Reb Yosef: the constant serenity that personified his soul was undisturbed in the slightest.

One day, the saintly Rabbi Avraham Dov Auerbach, known as the "Birkat Avraham," who lived in Tiberias, encountered him — Reb Yosef had come up to Tiberias, his hometown — and asked him:

"How do you find the inner strength to leave your home and your business at such

a time — when everything is at stake — and travel to Tiberias to spend time in prayer?"

Reb Yosef answered:

"My bazaar takes place on Rosh HaShanah."

That is: Rosh HaShanah is the time when a person's financial allotment can still be changed; throughout the year, we merely reveal and draw down from on high that which has been fixed for us during the prior Rosh HaShanah; thus, matters are truly no longer in our hands.

The Berachot Avraham would thereafter often repeat those words: "My bazaar takes place on Rosh HaShanah."

In this context, we shall share another incident:

Once, during the month of Shevat, a young married Torah scholar fell ill with pneumonia from the bitter cold and returned his soul to his Maker.

The saintly Rabbi Chaim Shmuelevitz said about the incident:

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Thus, because awe fills all of the hearts on this solemn Day of Judgment, songs of praise are not possible.

When the Rambam codified this Talmudic passage, he added the following:<sup>2</sup>

"Hallel is not recited on Rosh HaShanah or on Yom Kippur, because these are days of service and submission, of fear and dread of G-d, of fleeing and taking refuge in Him, of repentance, supplication, and seeking atonement and forgiveness, and in all such matters levity and rejoicing are unfitting."

In this passage, the phrase "fleeing and taking refuge in Him" calls for further explanation, but first, a few more words of introduction.

#### The Greatest Blessing - Life!

In a discourse delivered by my revered father and teacher, Rabbi Yoram Abergel, he said:3

"Rosh HaShanah is the great Day of Judgment on which every individual is judged, and everything that will happen to him in the coming year — down to the smallest detail — is decreed.

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"Do you think this young man died now, in the cold season, from the oppressively cold winter?

He already 'passed away' when the blazing summer heat was still beating down on everyone, in the midst of the Rosh HaShanah prayers" (He caught a cold already then, when his prayers had been recited without warmth or liveliness, but rather with coldness and aloofness).

These stories must not cast us into despair; quite the opposite — let us

multiply our good deeds and add in our prayers with heartfelt intention.

Then the Holy One, blessed be He, will hear the sound of our cry, and we shall be spared from all troubles and distress, from every plague and illness, and only goodness and kindness shall pursue us all of our days.

- **2.** Rambam's Commentary on the Mishnah (Rosh HaShanah 4:7).
- **3.** 'Imrei Noam' Festivals (Rosh HaShanah, Essay 3).

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As the Mishnah states (Rosh HaShanah 16a): "On Rosh HaShanah all the beings of the world pass before Him like sheep, as it is said: 'He Who forms their hearts together, Who understands all their deeds'" (Psalms 33:15).

The most central matter decided on this day is life itself, and as the Gemara teaches (Rosh HaShanah 16b):

"Three books are opened on Rosh HaShanah: one for the thoroughly wicked, one for the thoroughly righteous, and one for the intermediates.

The thoroughly righteous are immediately inscribed and sealed for life; the thoroughly wicked are immediately inscribed and sealed for death; the intermediates are on suspension from Rosh HaShanah until Yom Kippur — if they merit, they are inscribed for life; if not, they are inscribed for death."

Thus, the primary inscription and sealing concerns matters of life itself.

Similarly, in the special insertions added to the Amidah prayer throughout the Ten Days of Repentance, the focal point that they revolve around, is the plea for life itself: "Remember us for life, King Who delights in life, and inscribe us in the Book of Life for Your sake, living G-d"; "Who is like You, merciful Father, Who remembers His creatures compassionately for life."

True, we later ask regarding the proper quality of life — "Inscribe all the people of Your covenant for a good life," "In the Book of Life — blessing, peace, good livelihood, salvation, consolation, favorable decrees — may we and all of Your people Israel be remembered and inscribed before You for a good life and for peace" — yet all of these requests are secondary; the essence here, is the plea for our very life itself.

In earlier generations, one might have had the assumption that meriting life itself was guaranteed and, in fact, prayed mainly for its quality to be proper and blessed. Today however, as we draw ever closer to the time of

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our redemption and witness its difficult birth-pangs — in fulfillment of our Sages' words (Sotah 49b), "Each day's curse exceeds that of the previous" — our hearts increasingly grasp that we truly have no more to ask for other than life itself; would it only be that we even merit that, and as for the rest we need not plead.

Anyone fortunate enough to receive from G-d the gift of even one more day of life — let alone a week, a month, a year, or G-d-willing, many long healthy years — must be endlessly joyous, even if livelihood is hard, one's health fragile, domestic peace in need of improvement, or child rearing challenging.

One's very life has been spared—he is therefore obligated to thank G-d day and night and certainly not to sadden himself or complain.

As it is written: "What about should a living man complain?" (Lamentations 3:39), as Rashi explains (Kiddushin 80b): "Why should a man protest over the troubles that befall him, after all the kindness I show him by

granting him life over death?"

Rabbi Chaim Shmuelevitz once shared the following (Sichot Mussar, Discourse 29, "The Joy of Life"):

"Following the kindnesses that a person receives from his Creator — life itself — how can he protest over any calamity?

It is like a man who wins the grand lottery and, at that very moment, his watch stops functioning. Does he feel or notice the ever-so-slight grief amid the great joy?

The happiness that has fallen to his lot surely swallows and nullifies every petty point of pain in one's daily life.

So it must be with one who recognizes the kindness of the Holy One, blessed be He, Who grants him life. His joy must be limitless, so that he feels nothing of the troubles that befall him. Even great sufferings, like those of Job, are as nothing compared with the happiness that is the gift of life itself."

Hence, we must direct our prayers that we merit the gift of

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life, and that it be as long and blessed as possible.

As long as a person lives, even amid many hardships, he must rejoice greatly and place his hope in G-d, for the Holy One, blessed be He, can in a single moment transform his entire life into sweetness.

As Rabbi Nachman of Breslov once said ('Hishtapchut HaNefesh, section 76), "There is a power by which everything can be transformed for the good."

Let us pause now from our theoretical discussion and recount tales of these lofty ideas in practice.

#### The Dread of Judgment of Yesteryear

In a talk delivered by Rabbi Shalom Schwadron,<sup>4</sup> he portrayed the dread of judgment that was palpably felt in earlier generations:

"Our fathers have told us — and we ourselves have witnessed — that even the simplest lay-people of the previous generation trembled before the Day of Judgment — how much more so the spiritual elite among the Jewish people.

Even now, my ears still ring with my late mother's cries, which burst from the depths of her heart, saturated with fear of Heaven and awe of judgment, whenever she saw me, as a child, frolicking during the month of Elul. She simply could not comprehend how I was not shaking in anticipation of the Days of Awe.

Her regular charge to me was: "Even the fish in the sea tremble in Elul — how can you foolishly romp about without trembling?"

She would level her demands even at toddlers who could scarcely understand.

I remember seeing the saintly Rabbi Eliyahu Lopian: when he recited the Selichot and said "They creep and quake before

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the day of Your coming," he turned as white as limestone, seized by fear and trembling; and when he said "I am ashamed and confounded, my G-d, to lift my face to You," I saw his visage blush with shame — the pale pallor drained away and his cheeks were rosy red in its place.

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Once, I happened to see my teacher, Rabbi Yehudah Leib Chasman, eating the pre-fast meal on the eve of Yom Kippur.

While we were eating heartily
— anxious about the fast, and
mindful of the mitzvah to 'eat on
the ninth' — Rabbi Chasman
was eating challah and soup, but
tears streamed from his eyes,
drop after drop, disappearing into
the soup.

As he dipped the challah in the soup, it seemed that it was not a bowl of soup with tears before him, but rather a bowl of tears

mixed with soup. The house itself seemed to cry out "Awe!" — as if the stone from the wall would shout and the beam from the wood would answer: 'Awe; Fear; Dread!'

I also recall from my youth — Rabbi Shalom continued — that one of the worshippers in Beit Naitin told me how Rabbi Yitzchak Blazer would ascend bimah Shabbat on Mevarchim of Elul and proclaim: "We hereby accept upon ourselves Your holy month of Elul" — and the people would break out in sobs; not a dry eve could be found in all of the Moreover, svnagogue. there were even those who would faint from the fear and dread of the impending judgment.5

A student of the Mir Yeshivah once told me that he only grasped how great his father's fear of the Judgment Day was when his

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**5.** Rabbi Zelig Reuven Bengis testified that in his European hometown, when the blessing of the new month was recited on Shabbat Mevarchim Elul,

cries for water were heard from the women's gallery to revive those who had fainted ('Siach Yitzchak' — Elul/Tishrei,

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father described to him the terrors of the Russo-Japanese War.

He described the shells that whistled from each and every side; he said there had been moments as terrifying as the dread one feels during the final Ne'ilah prayer of Yom Kippur–that was the most intense fear he knew.

That was the concept he had; such was the feeling among the Jewish people in earlier generations."

#### The Heavenly Shepherd

In a talk delivered by Rabbi Menachem Stein, he said as follows:<sup>6</sup>

"Students of Yeshivat Kfar Chasidim — whose spiritual director was the great Rabbi Eliyahu Lopian — told me that one year they approached him and asked him to give words of inspiration as the High Holidays—the Days of Judgment—approached.

Rabbi Eliyahu replied, "Now is not an apt time for sermons; this is the time of solemn trial, the time of judgment."

The students persisted, and ultimately, Rabbi Eliyahu relented.

When he got up on the dais to

speak to the assembled students, he simply began to chant the solemn prayer of 'Unetanneh Tokef.'

When he reached the words: "As a shepherd examines his flock, passing his sheep under his staff, so too do You pass, count, number, and attend to every living soul, fixing the span of every creature and writing down their verdict."

"I do not understand," Rabbi Eliyahu asked, "why does the author of this prayer liken the Creator to a shepherd reviewing his flock, that just as a shepherd reviews and counts his sheep, so does G-d review and count every living soul.

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What does the parable add to our comprehension of divine judgment? What does this comparison mean to teach us?"

He continued: "Rather, the reference here is not to an ordinary shepherd, but to one who intends to fulfill the mitzvah of ma'aser behemah — animal tithes.

The Torah commands us to set aside a tithe from all animals born during the current year.

The shepherd, therefore, builds a narrow gate through which only one animal can pass at a time and counts them: 'one, two, three.' When the tenth passes, he daubs it with red paint, and thus, whatever animal bears the red mark is part of the tithes.

He then brings that animal to Jerusalem to be offered as a sacrifice; it is slaughtered in the Temple, and its meat is eaten within the city walls.

"Let us observe," Rabbi Eliyahu went on, "what does the animal do once the owner paints it red to single it out? We see it dancing, positively delighted — it senses that it is different from all the rest; it sports a unique ornament, and therefore strides around, prancing and rejoicing.

But what it does not understand is that the red mark means it will be slaughtered in Jerusalem in a few days or weeks.

If it had a bit of sense, what would it do? It would jump into water to wash off the red paint; then the owner could not identify it and would not take it to be slaughtered.

But what can it do? It is an animal; it has no mind. It shows off its red sign, and so, of course, it is recognized and taken to be slaughtered in Jerusalem."

Rabbi Eliyahu paused, and hot tears began to fall from his eyes.

"We, however, are not animals; we have understanding. We should be able to see what is coming.

Let us wash off the red paint of sin and transgression; we are not animals!"

Parshat Nitzavim - Where Has The Awe of The High Holidays Gone?

He then sat down quietly. No one who was present moved or stirred.

For ten minutes all of the students sat riveted to their

places, unable to move — only many minutes later could they rise to recite Ma'ariv prayers.

## Where Has The Awe of The High Holidays Gone?

Rabbi Shalom Schwadron once stood upon his podium and asked the throngs of people who came to hear him speak from afar and from nearby:

"I have always wondered why, in our generation, the fear of the Day of Judgment has substantially weakened.

If we were living serenely, without storms of affliction; if our livelihood was abundant and our health secure, it could be understood why the fear of divine judgment is not so great.

But who among our people has not had their cup filled to the brim with grief and sighing?

Who could suspect anyone today of "experiencing forty days without suffering, thus receiving his world in full," as our Sages say (Arachin 16b)?

How many dire troubles do we hear about over the course of a year?

We all know in our hearts — and repeat with our lips — that all of the year's events and the calamities that occur, all trace their origins to the decrees issued on the Days of Judgment at the year's beginning.

In the very days preceding judgment, we sigh, "Let the year and its curses end," and a whole

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**7.** It is told of the saintly Rabbi Simcha Zissel, the Saba of Kelm:

On the eve of Rosh HaShanah, when the synagogue attendant came to summon him for the evening prayers, great dread seized him, and trembling, he whispered, "Behold, the summons have already arrived from the court to appear for judgment" ('Shabbat U'Moed BeChatzerot Tzaddikim' vol. 1, p. 172).

Parshat Nitzavim - Standing On This Day in Judgement

string of the past year's harsh events races through our minds.

These matters are well-known and engraved upon our hearts; yet the Ten Days of Repentance pass over us in tranquility, and we lie down every night as peacefully and tranquilly as we do during the rest of the year.

Is this not a wonder and a riddle? Why is this so, and how can it be?

We may observe and see many whose loved ones have been struck by the attribute of justice — whose very lives hang in the balance — they know full well that they can change their bitter decree on Rosh HaShanah to a favorable inscription and sealing.

Indeed, when they pray "send a complete healing" in the daily prayers, they weep streams of tears; they know and believe that everything depends on G-d's decree and command.

Yet we do not find anyone trembling during these days leading up to the High Holidays; there is no semblance of the awe and gravity of these days.

Where has the awe of judgment disappeared in our generation?!

#### Standing On This Day in Judgement

This Shabbat we will read Parshat Nitzavim.

In a discourse that my revered father and teacher, Rabbi Yoram Abargel, delivered, he said:

"Parshat Nitzavim is the first four Torah portions of the (Nitzavim, Vayelech, Ha'azinu, and V'Zot Haberachah) that Moses spoke on the day of his passing.

On that day, he gathered the entire Jewish nation before G-d — from the greatest and most distinguished to the very least among them — and addressed them all, as it is written:

"You are standing — today — all of you before L-rd your G-d: your heads, your tribes, your elders, and your officers — all the men

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of Israel, your children, your wives, the stranger in your camp, from your wood-hewer to your water-drawer" (Deuteronomy 29:9–10).

The well-known work 'Pa'aneach Raza' (ibid. 30:19) explains:

On his last day, Moses assembled the Jewish people and taught them the inner meaning of the lofty day of Rosh HaShanah.

Know, then, that on this day the Holy One, blessed be He, sits upon the Throne of Judgment and judges every creature — from the loftiest to the lowliest — and all that will occur during the coming year is decreed on that day.

This is hinted at in the verse: "You are standing today" — the day, the well-known day, namely Rosh HaShanah.

"You are standing today, all of you" — standing where? In

judgment: "Who would not fear the dread Day of Judgment, for to You belong greatness and power."

He further revealed that every deed performed throughout the past year rises and stands before the Al-mighty, Who scrutinises them all; therefore, before Rosh HaShanah, every Jew must repent, so as to enter the Day of Judgment clean and pure.

The Pa'aneach Raza continues: this is why our Sages established that Parshat Nitzavim is always read on the Shabbat immediately preceding Rosh HaShanah.<sup>8</sup> This Torah portion awakens one's heart to repentance and to improving one's deeds before the Day of Judgment, rousing us to return to G-d and to arrive prepared for the heavenly trial.

So, too, the holy Rabbi Yaakov Tzvi of Parysov expounded: "You are standing today — all of you before the

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**8.** As ruled in the Shulchan Aruch (Orach·Chaim 428:4): "Parshat Bamidbar Sinai is always read before

Shavu'ot; Tisha B'Av occurs before Va'etchannan; and 'Atem Nitzavim' before Rosh HaShanah."

Parshat Nitzavim - The Vessel for The Light - Submission

*L-rd*," Atem Nitzavim — the word used here 'Atem' is an acronym for 'the concept of Even Mikir Tizak' ('The stone

cries out from the wall'); for even one who has a heart of stone must cry out to G-d on Rosh HaShanah."9

#### The Vessel for The Light - Submission

Rosh HaShanah — the fearsome Days of Judgment<sup>10</sup> — finds each of us in a condition different from his fellow; each, according to the measure of his faith in the greatness and awe of these days, grasps the idea that during these days, quite literally, G-d judges every being and decrees who shall be remembered for life.

All of the Jewish people stand before G-d — from the wood-hewer to the water-drawer — in complete submission; none can lift his head and say, "I have not sinned." In that respect, all are equal.

But as to guilt or exoneration, He Who knows secrets, with His pure knowledge and will, knows whom to acquit and whom to convict and condemn. Thus, although the divine gaze encompasses everyone in a single instant, the personal accounting of each and every soul is entirely unique.

Who can depict or gauge the dread of judgment when a person truly and inwardly comprehends this matter?

Even a hint of what unfolds in the upper worlds during the forty-eight sacred hours of Rosh HaShanah has the power to subdue the heart entirely and draw it close to the footstool of the divine King who sits upon the throne of mercy and forgives His people's sins.

When a slave's master knows all of his hidden deeds, what

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**9.** Quoted in 'Nitzotzei HaTorah' (Devarim, p. 296) by Rabbi Aharon Perloy.

**10.** The following is an excerpt from 'Bitaon Sheerit Yaakov (Nadvoma), issue 165, Nitzavim 5775.

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remedy does that slave have? Can one hide from the light of the living King when He comes to shake the earth and inspect it? Only one thing remains for one to possibly do — to stand obediently.

The humble stance before the splendour of His might, in these holy and awesome prayers, sweetens harsh decrees and overcomes and has the power to subdue the myriad hosts of accusatory forces eager to awaken judgment against G-d's people.

Nothing equals the humility and lowliness of all of the Jewish people standing as one, "from your wood-hewer to your water-drawer," with one heart before G-d, eager to fulfil His will, thereby silencing the accuser and nullifying every harsh decree.

It is no easy matter to attain an inner sense of fear of Heaven, the dread of judgment, the state in which "my flesh bristles from fear of You and I stand in awe of Your rulings" (Psalms 119:120).

Sadly, we live within the shameful concealment of this

world: divine awareness is distant, and what kind of reverence can one achieve when a person does not tangibly feel the reality of the King of the universe? How will he fear and tremble before one he neither recognises nor sees?

Therefore, the first step — before approaching the divine service of awe — is to fortify the soul's faith, to cultivate a genuine sense and awareness that G-d is watching over him, probing all hearts on the Day of Judgment; on this holy day all our deeds are laid bare before His glory, and they testify concerning us and our deeds.

The sacred task of instilling faith deep in the heart is achieved through the divine service that is expressed in the prayers of Musaf Rosh Hashanah, when we recite the tripartite blessings of Malchuyot,

Zichronot, and Shofarot.

The Supreme Will of G-d, as it were, asks of us, the people of Israel: "Crown Me over you." Extend my kingship and raise it to its ultimate perfection, so that

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no limb remains unsubdued before our Father in heaven.

This is the simple reverence that opens the gate "through which the righteous shall enter": once a person begins to feel G-d's presence, he will awaken to an utmost degree of devotion before his Father in heaven, so as not to obscure from the soul the great light of G-d's reality.

It is thus no mistake to say that this is the required labor of proclaiming G-d's kingship on Rosh HaShanah: that all beings shall pass before Him like sheep, and be required to sense the grand and ultimate truth that there is truly none besides Him.

Let us add one more vital point.

#### The Last Night – 'Leil Zechor Brit'

We have explained that on Rosh HaShanah, all creatures are judged; and that accordingly, we must prepare ourselves, and that preparation includes the last day of the year.

The final day of the year has great significance: anything done on it carries weight. Thus, if one repents on that day, prays with extra fervor, and performs mitzvot properly, he can rectify the entirety of the past year.

This year, the last day begins on Sunday night. When one

comes to pray the evening prayers, he should be aware that this is the final evening service of the year and approach it with the fitting seriousness and gravity.

Following the prayers of Ma'ariv, the divine service on this last night of the year takes place, and is called 'Leil Zechor Brit' ("Night of Remembering the Covenant") in the Ashkenazi order of Selichot.

Rabbi Moshe Teitelbaum wrote as follows:<sup>11</sup>

"During this remaining night, let a person examine his deeds, set

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upon his heart the magnitude of his rebellion against G-d, and regret his misdeeds with great remorse.

Let him fall and prostrate upon the ground, alone before his Creator, and cry bitterly: Woe is me — what have I done? Such-and-such I have committed; I now repent with utmost, absolute remorse, in truth and with a whole heart.

Let him then resolve with all of his heart to never again revert to his follies; let him confess with great weeping and seek pardon and forgiveness from the King Who pardons and forgives.

Whatever needs mending — let him mend, as directed by a spiritual guide, a healer of souls, and the same for transgressions between man and fellow-man.

Thus, he will acquire his spiritual world in a single hour and attain his goal with the little time left in the year."

Many righteous men followed this practice: on the last night of the year, they remained awake all night — or at least from midnight until dawn — secluding themselves, speaking with G-d, begging Him to enlighten their eyes and grant them insight into what they must correct and how they must improve.

Even one still far from such a lofty level — spending an entire night in introspection and self-accounting — must not neglect this divine service entirely.

At the very least, one should set aside a few minutes, alone — with no phone or any other distractions — and reflect upon the passing year, and if he recalls any of his errors, he should make every effort to make things right.

One of the things that helps a person gain acquittal on the Day of Judgment is when a person walks into the Day of Judgment with gravity and a humbled heart, even if he has committed many wrongs, G-d nonetheless forgives him.

Now we return to the Rambam's words: "fleeing and taking refuge in G-d."

Parshat Nitzavim - Taking 'Refuge in G-d'

#### Taking 'Refuge in G-d'

One of the great Torah luminaries of the later generations was the Brisker Rav, Rabbi Yitzchak Ze'ev HaLevi Soloveitchik.

About his great persona and influence, Rabbi Shimon Yosef Meller wrote:12

Whose heart does not tremble at the sound of the words, 'The Brisker Ray'?

Even during his lifetime, an aura of awe and reverence overcame all who stood in his presence:

Before his prodigious mind, no mystery of Torah was hidden — all of the Torah's laws, minutiae, and details, and every iota within them were revealed before him.

Together with the loftiness of his knowledge and the sanctity of his heart, he never ceased — not even for a moment — to fear the Creator Who stands, watches, and supervises every deed of man.

For seventy-two years, the world benefited from his holiness and the light of his Torah, until the 9<sup>th</sup> of Tishrei 5720 (1959), when he passed away and ascended to the heavenly spheres.

Following his passing, one of the Roshei Yeshiva delivered a eulogy and said:<sup>13</sup>

"A few weeks before his departure, the Rav of Brisk began recounting to several of his sons and household members the events of his life, beginning from when he was but five years of age.

He traced his memories back nearly seventy years, lingering over small details as well as larger ones, and had sought their opinion: "Did I act properly with regard to this matter? Could I not have done a particular deed better?"

At first, this behavior worried the family, who feared that the harsh illness and his great

Parshat Nitzavim - Taking 'Refuge in G-d'

suffering were affecting his cognitive abilities.

But then they realized that in truth the Rav of Brisk was making a meticulous soul-accounting of all his actions, sifting them repeatedly to know whether he had behaved in each and every instance in the most fitting and perfect way before his soul would return to its Maker and face the true reckoning for its deeds here in this world.

During those weeks before his passing, one could see on his face the dread of judgment and his concern — since the Days of Awe and Judgment were approaching while he lay in mortal danger and in a state of health that hovered between life and death, and also because of the impending judgment before the Heavenly Court.

This is—as Rabbeinu Yonah writes in Sha'arei Teshuvah (Gate 2, section 9)--like the righteous whose hearts are forever "roaring like lions and moaning" over their shortcomings in the service of G-d.<sup>14</sup>

One day, the Rosh Yeshivah continued, I went in to visit him. When he saw me, he turned in apprehension and asked, "What will be?"

I tried to comfort him and said: "Dear Ray, in Parshat Va'Etchannan it is written: 'For which nation is great and has a G-d so close to it as the L-rd our G-d, whenever we call to Him?' (Deuteronomy 4: 7–8). The Jerusalem Talmud explains (Rosh HaShanah 1:3):

'What nation is like this nation that knows the character of its G-d?

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13. 'HaRav M'Brisk,' vol. 4, p. 603.

**14.** We similarly find with Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai (Berachot 28b):

When he fell deathly ill, his disciples found him weeping.

They asked him, "'Great Lamp of Israel,' why do you weep?"

He replied that if he were being led before a mortal king, he would weep — how much more now, when he is being led before the King of kings, the Holy One, blessed be He.

Parshat Nitzavim - Taking 'Refuge in G-d'

Normally, when a person knows that he has a day in court, he dresses in dark clothing and lets his hair grow, for he does not know how his case will end, whether good or bad.

But the Jewish people are not so: in honor of Rosh HaShanah, they dress in fine white clothing, trim their hair, eat, drink, and rejoice, for they know that G-d will perform miracles for them.'

"So too, I said that the Rav should be confident that G-d will perform a miracle for him."

The Rav of Brisk, however, would not be consoled and replied to me: "Upon what may one rely?"

He explained the passage that I quoted from the Yerushalmi and conditioned its message:

"In Ibn Gabirol's hymn 'Keter Malchut', we recite: 'My G-d, if my sin is too great to bear, what will You do for Your great Name? And if I cannot hope for Your mercy, who will pity me but You? Therefore, if You slay me, to You I will hope; and if You seek my sin, I will flee from You and seek You, and I will hide from Your wrath in Your own shadow.'

"We must wonder," the Rav said, "what is meant by 'I will flee from You and seek You,' don't the two terms contradict each other?

Maimonides, too, writes (in his Commentary on the Mishnah): "These are days of service and submission, of fear and dread of G-d, of fleeing and taking refuge in Him." 15

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**15.** Rabbi Moshe Yosef Sheinerman relates (Ohel Moshe, Devarim I, p. 199):

In the Kelm yeshivah, no Mussar talks were delivered during the Yamim Nora'im, the High Holidays.

For this reason, the mashgiach Rabbi Yechezkel Levenstein, a former disciple

of the Yeshivah in Kelm, likewise refrained from doing so in the Yeshivah of Ponevezh; the same was true for the famed mashgiach Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler.

Rabbi Eliyahu Lopian, however, although he also came from Kelm, did speak during this period of the year.

Parshat Nitzavim - Taking 'Refuge in G-d'

Rather, the point we must understand is this: true trust in G-d applies to someone who finds himself in great distress, and despite the great pain of his plight, he relies and puts his trust solely on G-d. Such a person is rightly called a 'ba'al bitahon,' 'one who trusts G-d' — for he exemplifies that despite all his troubles, he trusts G-d.

That is the meaning of 'I will flee from You to You': a person

who is terrified of the severity and seriousness of divine judgment that he seeks to flee from it, therefore employs a trust in G-d, and in essence it leads him to flee to You.'

However, if one does not feel fear and awe of G-d and is therefore calm and serene, aloof from the impending judgement and divine reckoning — this is not to be considered trust in G-d at all.

#### 

Once, during these days of the year, he visited Ponevezh, and Rabbi Yechezkel asked him to address the students, which he agreed to — but, knowing that Rabbi Yechezkel himself did not give sermons at this time, he resolved to speak briefly.

He told the assembled students of the Yeshivah a story that had happened in Czarist Russia:

A man had been sentenced to death, but on appeal, the judges were inclined toward acquitting him and setting him free.

Then, suddenly, they noticed that in the midst of the retrial, the defendant had taken out a mirror and comb and was grooming his hair.

Furious, the judge declared: "We were disposed to free you, but your brazenness shows that you hold this court in contempt; therefore, your earlier sentence shall stand," and he was, in fact, executed.

Rabbi Eliyahu concluded: "So too is the case with us. Even if one carries many spiritual advocates in his satchel who will secure him an inscription in The Book of Life, if however, when the time of judgment arrives one sits calm and unconcerned, living as if all were fine and per routine — such conduct alone can turn to one's detriment, and Heaven forfend he will not be written for life."

He then rose and cried out: "We must all remember — there is judgment that is taking place right now!" — and he stepped down from the podium.

It was said that the awe of judgment that settled over the yeshivah during the High Holidays that year was unmatched in any other year beforehand or afterward.

Parshat Nitzavim - Repentance — In the Blink of an Eye

This also qualifies the passage from the Yerushalmi: while the Jewish people indeed 'know that G-d performs miracles for them,' yet the Day of Judgment is such that 'angels are alarmed, and trembling and terror seize them.'

Thus, it is only when one is afraid and shaken from this great day, can a confidence and joy and

dressing in white be displayed and expressed, exemplifying the Jewish people's special trust in G-d; but if one approaches the day devoid of dread and awe, there is no place for this 'trust' whatsoever."

The Ray of Brisk concluded. in his humility and burning fear of Heaven: "Being that matters are such, upon what may I rely?"

#### Repentance — In the Blink of an Eye

Every Jew is truly close to G-d and longs to belong to Him and do His will

In truth, he does belong: whatever his spiritual state, within every Jew resides a spark of the Divine that sustains him; by virtue of that spark, he is bound, attached, and clasped to G-d. Though at times, thick concealment keeps one from sensing this bond, it nonetheless exists in full, and nothing can mar it.

Therefore, any Jew can repent, instantly drawing near to G-d.

There is no room for despair; he need only reflect with thoughts of repentance and

the confess. and merciful Father's hand is outstretched to receive those who return.

Even for those whose sins are measureless — even if he has sinned outrageously — G-d awaits his repentance.

A famous tale illustrates this:

Among the greatest early sages was Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman, the Ramban.

He once had a pupil named Avner who later abandoned the Jewish faith. converted to another religion, and — his fortunes rising precisely after his apostasy — became a high minister in the Spanish crown.

Parshat Nitzavim - Repentance — In the Blink of an Eye

It was Yom Kippur. The air was fragrant with the day's sanctity; all Jewish hearts thirsted for the revelation of G-dliness.

Suddenly, mounted guards burst into the synagogue, shackled the Ramban, and commanded: "Come with us!" "Where to?" he asked. "To Minister Avner," they replied.

In his palace, seated on a splendid throne of gold and ivory, Avner awaited.

When the guards brought in his former teacher, Avner rose, seized a pig, slaughtered it, carved it, cooked it, and ate it — before the Ramban's frightened and appalled eyes.

Finishing, he wiped his mouth of the sauce and mockingly asked: "How many kares — excision — offenses have I just committed?" For kares is the gravest penalty in the Torah.

The Ramban, silent until then, answered: "Four." But Avner,

once his prized disciple, retorted: "You are mistaken — I have transgressed five," eager to boast yet further of his great knowledge.

This angered the Ramban–his student discussing Torah with him in such a state of apostasy. A sharp, rebuking gaze from the Ramban quickly silenced Avner.

The Ramban then asked: "What drove you to apostasy? How did you descend this far?"

Avner replied: "I heard you teach that the Song of Ha'azinu contains all of the Torah's commandments and all the world's history — its entire span — as well as every human being, each one's deeds and fate.

To me, this was utterly impossible: that all of history and the whole Torah could be concentrated in a few verses. That conviction led me to begin to cast everything aside."

The Ramban responded: "What I said is true. Ha'azinu

Parshat Nitzavim - Repentance — In the Blink of an Eye

does indeed hold everything — and if you wish, please ask me a question."<sup>16</sup>

"Very well," said Avner, "so then, where am I, with all of my story, mentioned in Ha'azinu?"

The Ramban's holy face blazed; a film of fervor veiled his eyes; and light shone forth as he answered:

"In Ha'azinu it is written: 'I said I would scatter them; I would make their memory cease from mankind' (Deuteronomy 32:26).

Take the third letter of each successive word, and you obtain: Reish, Alef, Bet, Nun, Resh —

'Rav Avner.' There you are alluded to — together with your sad fate that awaits you."

Avner's face turned ashen. Memories of his life arose: his upbringing, the sudden break and abandonment of it all, the new persona, the falling into the grip of evil. Regret and thoughts of repentance flooded his being.

The merit of the sacred day, Yom Kippur, and the Torah he had learned from his holy master, the Ramban, stood him in good stead.<sup>17</sup>

His penitential stirrings cracked the coarse shell that impurity had cast over his soul; a point of light emerged, at first

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**16.** To quote the Ramban (Deuteronomy 32:40):

"Great is this Song: it contains the present, the past, and the future; it refers to this world and to the World-to-Come.

The Torah hints at this when it says: 'Moses came and spoke all the words of this Song in the ears of the people' (ibid. 32:44) — it specifies 'all the words of this song,' to teach us that this Song includes details of all of their future history.

Though brief in speech, Moses expounded many themes in it in full."

**17.** Rabbi Hillel of Paritch explains ('Pelach HaRimon,' Parshat Acharei):

"On Yom Kippur, the Divine Attribute of 'Mimei Kedem' shines forth; it awakens the divine wellspring of mercy to flow toward the souls of the Jewish people and arouse them in repentance."

Similarly, Rabbi Moshe Cordovero elaborates (Tomer Devorah, chap. 1) upon this

Parshat Nitzavim - Repentance — In the Blink of an Eye

faint, but steadily growing; the darkness ebbed and waned.

Avner pleaded: "Is there a remedy for my wound?"

The Ramban replied: "You have heard the verse; it is the Torah's prophecy that cannot be changed."

The next day, Avner — still a great minister in the Spanish government — took a ship with neither sailor nor oar, sailed out to sea, and vanished; his

memory was indeed erased from mankind.<sup>18</sup>

Many centuries later, when the Lubavitcher Rebbe recounted this story before thousands of chasidim, he concluded:<sup>19</sup>

"Heaven accepted Avner's repentance; the proof is that those letters in the verse spell 'Reb Avner.'

The Torah, which is a Torah of truth, calls him by the honorific title of Rabbi Avner!"



#### 

Thirteenth Attribute of Mercy — "Mimei Kedem," and describes how, when the merits of the Patriarchs seem to have been exhausted, G-d recalls the pristine love of the Jewish people in days that have gone by; He gathers every mitzvah or virtue they have ever shown, fashioning them into a special treasure

and consequently showers them with compassion.

**18.** 'Seder HaDorot' (Year 4954, under the entry of "Ramban").

See also 'Shiurim V'Hitva'aduyot' by Rabbi Yitzchak Ginsburgh (5773 vol. 1, p. 392).

19. Torat Menachem (5782, vol. 1, p. 109).

Parshat Nitzavim - Summary and Practical Conclusions

#### **Summary and Practical Conclusions**

1. Rosh HaShanah is the Great Day of Judgment when every individual is brought to judgment, and everything that will befall him in every area of life during the coming year is decreed to the smallest detail.

As the Mishnah teaches: "On Rosh HaShanah all the inhabitants of the world pass before Him like sheep, as it is said, 'He Who fashions their hearts together, Who understands all their deeds.""

2. The primary verdict on this day concerns life itself.

Our Sages have said: "Three books are opened on Rosh HaShanah — one for the wholly wicked, one for the wholly righteous, and one for the intermediates.

The wholly righteous are immediately written and sealed for life; the wholly wicked are immediately written and sealed for death; the intermediates are on suspension from Rosh HaShanah until Yom Kippur — if they merit, they are written for life; if not, they are written for death."

Thus, the essence of the inscription and sealing that our sages mention is regarding life itself.

3. Rosh Hashanah is a time for submission before G-d, not for singing songs of praise.

This is why we do not recite Hallel on Rosh HaShanah.

It is the Day of Judgment: if one is found worthy, he is inscribed in the Book of Life; if, Heaven forbid, he is found liable, he is inscribed in the Book of Death.

How, then, can the Jewish people sing when the Books of Life and Death lie open before the Heavenly King?

4. The dread of judgment of this day is beyond imagination.

When a person truly and inwardly absorbs this awareness, he may begin to sense, however faintly, what transpires in the upper worlds during these sacred hours.

This awareness wholly humbles the heart and draws it close to the Throne of Glory — the Throne of Mercy.

5. Our prayers must be focused on requesting the gift of life.

We beg that G-d grant us life — and as long as a person lives, even amidst many hardships, he must rejoice greatly and place his hope in G-d, for in a single instant G-d can turn all bitterness to sweetness.

As Rabbi Nachman of Breslov once said: "There is a power by which everything can be transformed for the good."

#### Parshat Nitzavim - Summary and Practical Conclusions

6. The last day of the year is critical. Whatever is done on that day carries special weight.

Repenting, praying, and performing mitzvot at this time have the power to rectify the entire past year.

When one prays the evening prayers on the eve of Rosh Hashanah, one should remember that it is the year's final evening prayer and approach it with appropriate gravity.

After these prayers begins the spiritual service of the year's last night — called 'Leil Zechor Brit' — when

every Jew must examine his deeds, recognize the severity of his rebellion against G-d, regret them profoundly, and prostrate himself before the Creator, and cry out: "Alas, what have I done!" with wholehearted remorse.

7. One who approaches Rosh HaShanah, having committed repentance with a humble heart, is written in the Book of Life; even if he has committed many wrongdoings, G-d forgives him.

May we all be inscribed and sealed, together with the whole House of Israel, for a good and blessed year!

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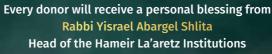
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	Candle	Shabbat	Rabbeint	
City	Lighting	Ends	Tam	
New York	6:40 pm	7:36 pm	8:08 pm	
Miami	7:02 pm	7:53 pm	8:31 pm	
Los Angeles	6:36 pm	7:30 pm	8:04 pm	
Montreal	6:39 pm	7:39 pm	8:07 pm	
Toronto	7:02 pm	8:00 pm	8:30 pm	
London	6:47 pm	7:53 pm	8:15 pm	
Jerusalem	6:24 pm	7:13 pm	7:57 pm	
Tel Aviv	6:21 pm	7:11 pm	7:54 pm	
Haifa	6:20 pm	7:13 pm	7:56 pm	
Be'er Sheva	6:21 pm	7:13 pm	7:56 pm	

#### Pathways to the Heart

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The Baal HaTanya teaches that without
studying Tanach one cannot attain
genuine understanding; the very
channels of divine light flow specifically
through these chapters.

The Talmud expounds on the verse 'You shall teach them to your children,' reading not v'-shinantam ('you shall teach') but v'-shilashtam ('you shall divide into thirds'): a Jew must allocate a lifetime of Torah study into three equal parts—one-third Scripture, one-third Mishnah, and one-third Talmud.

The same passage explains that this tripartite division governs one's daily schedule: every day must include study of Scripture, Mishnah, and Talmud, with the Tanach segment—mentioned above—serving as the primary conduit for abundant illumination.



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New York	6:34 рм	7:31 рм	8:03 pm	7:30 рм	8:01 pm
Miami	6:59 рм	7:50 рм	8:28 pm	7:49 рм	8:27 pm
Los Angeles	6:32 рм	7:25 рм	8:00 pm	7:24 рм	8:27 pm
Montreal	6:33 рм	7:33 рм	8:01 pm	7:31 рм	7:59 pm
Toronto	6:56 рм	7:55 рм	8:24 pm	7:53 рм	8:23 pm



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