



## NITZAVIM-VAYELECH

### KOWTOWED INTO SUBMISSION?

*Judaism Doesn't Believe That G-d Is Waving a Pitchfork over Your Head*

# PARSHAH OVERVIEW

## *Nitzavim*

The *parshah* of Nitzavim includes some of the most fundamental principles of the Jewish faith:

The unity of Israel: “You stand today, all of you, before the L-rd your G-d: your heads, your tribes, your elders, your officers, and every Israelite man; your young ones, your wives, the stranger in your gate; from your wood-hewer to your water-drawer.”

The future Redemption: Moses warns of the exile and desolation of the Land that will result if Israel abandons G-d’s laws, but then he prophesies that in

the end, “You will return to the L-rd your G-d. . . . If your outcasts shall be at the ends of the heavens, from there will the L-rd your G-d gather you . . . and bring you into the Land that your fathers have possessed.”

The practicality of the Torah: “For the mitzvah that I command you this day, it is not beyond you, nor is it remote from you. It is not in Heaven. . . . It is not across the sea. . . . Rather, it is very close to you, in your mouth, in your heart, that you may do it.”

Freedom of choice: “I have set before you life and

goodness, and death and evil, in that I command you this day to love G-d, to walk in His ways, and to keep His commandments. . . . Life and death I have set before you, blessing and curse. And you shall choose life.”

# PARSHAH OVERVIEW

## *Vayelech*

The *parshah* of Vayelech (“and he went”) recounts the events of Moses’s last day of earthly life. “I am 120 years old today,” he says to the people, “and I can no longer go forth and come in.” He transfers the leadership to Joshua, and writes (or concludes writing) the Torah in a scroll that he entrusts to the Levites for safekeeping in the Ark of the Covenant.

The mitzvah of *Hakhel* (“gather”) is given: every seven years, during the festival of Sukkot of the first year of the *shemittah* cycle, the entire people of Israel—men, women, and

children—should gather at the Holy Temple in Jerusalem, where the king should read to them from the Torah.

Vayelech concludes with the prediction that the people of Israel will turn away from their covenant with G-d, causing Him to hide His face from them, but also with the promise that the words of the Torah “shall not be forgotten from the mouths of their descendants.”

# TEXT 1

*Talmud, Berachot 13a*

אמר רבי יהושע בן קורח: למה קדמה פראשת  
"שמע" ל"והיה אם שמוע"? כדי שיקבל עליו עול  
מלכות שמים תחלה, ואחר כך מקבל עליו עול  
מצות. "והיה אם שמוע" ל"ויאמר"? ש"והיה אם  
שמוע" נוהג בין ביום ובין בלילה, "ויאמר" אינו  
נוהג אלא ביום בלבד.

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Korchah said, "Why, when reciting Shema, does the portion of Shema precede that of *vehayah im shamo*a? The reason is so that one first accepts upon themselves the authority of the kingdom of Heaven, and only then accepts upon themselves the authority of the *mitzvot*, which appear in the paragraph of *vehayah im shamo*a."

First you accept G-d's  
authority, and only  
thereafter do you  
follow His commands.



# TEXT 2

*Rabbi Shneur Zalman of  
Liadi, Tanya, Likutei  
Amarim, ch. 41*

בְּרַם צָרִיךְ לִהְיוֹת לְזִכְרוֹן תָּמִיד רֵאשִׁית הָעֲבוּדָה  
וְעִיקָרָה וְשָׂרָשָׁה. וְהוּא, כִּי אִף שֶׁהִירָאָה הִיא שְׂרֵשׁ  
לְסוּר מֵרַע וְהֶאֱהָבָה לְנוֹעֲשֵׂה טוֹב, אִף עַל פִּי כֹן, לֹא  
דִּי לְעוֹרֵר הֶאֱהָבָה לְבִדָּה לְנוֹעֲשֵׂה טוֹב, וּלְפָחוֹת צָרִיךְ  
לְעוֹרֵר תַּחֲלָה הִירָאָה הַטְּבָעִית הַמְּסֻתֶּרֶת בְּלֵב כָּל  
יִשְׂרָאֵל שְׂלֹא לְמַד בְּמֶלֶךְ מַלְכֵי הַמַּלְכִּים הַקְּדוֹשׁ  
בְּרוּךְ הוּא, כַּנִּזְכָּר לְעֵיל, שֶׁתִּהְיֶה בְּהִתְגַּלּוּת לְבוֹ אוֹ  
מִחוּ . . . וְהוּא גַם הוּא מְקַבֵּל עָלָיו מְלָכוּתוֹ לִהְיוֹת  
מֶלֶךְ עָלָיו, וּלְעַבְדּוֹ וּלְעֲשׂוֹת רְצוֹנוֹ בְּכָל מִינֵי עֲבוּדַת  
עֶבֶד.

One must constantly bear in mind the first step of religious service and what lies at its very core. Now, conventionally, fear is the primary driver behind abstaining from prohibited behaviors, whereas love is the primary driver motivating positive behavior. However, love alone is really not enough to drive good behavior. Rather, at the very least, it's critical to draw upon the natural fear every Jew has deep in their heart not to rebel against G-d. Work must be done to bring this natural fear into full expression in the heart or mind. . . . A Jew must accept upon themselves G-d's authority and sovereignty so that they serve Him in every way.

# TEXT 3

*Deuteronomy 31:10–13*

י. וַיִּצַּו מֹשֶׁה אוֹתָם לֵאמֹר, מִקֵּץ שִׁבְעַ שָׁנִים בְּמַעַד  
שָׁנַת הַשְּׁמִטָּה בְּחַג הַסִּכּוֹת.

יא. בָּבוֹא כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל לִרְאוֹת אֶת פָּנֵי ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ  
בַּמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר יִבְחָר, תִּקְרָא אֶת הַתּוֹרָה הַזֹּאת נֶגֶד כָּל  
יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּאַזְנוֹתָם.

יב. הִקְהֵל אֶת הָעָם הָאֲנָשִׁים וְהַנְּשִׁים וְהַטָּף וְגֵרְךָ  
אֲשֶׁר בְּשַׁעְרֶיךָ, לְמַעַן יִשְׁמְעוּ וְלִמְעַן יִלְמְדוּ וַיִּרְאוּ אֶת  
ה' אֱלֹהֶיכֶם וְשָׁמְרוּ לַעֲשׂוֹת אֶת כָּל דְּבַרֵּי הַתּוֹרָה  
הַזֹּאת.

יג. וּבְנֵיהֶם אֲשֶׁר לֹא יָדְעוּ יִשְׁמְעוּ וְלִמְדוּ לִירְאָה אֶת  
ה' אֱלֹהֶיכֶם, כָּל הַיָּמִים אֲשֶׁר אַתֶּם חַיִּים עַל הָאָדָמָה,  
אֲשֶׁר אַתֶּם עֹבְרִים אֶת הַיַּרְדֵּן שָׁמָּה לְרִשְׁתָּהּ.

10. Then, Moses commanded them, saying,  
“At the end of [every] seven years, at an  
appointed time, during the Festival of  
Sukkot, [after] the year of release.

11. “When all Israel comes to appear  
before G-d, in the place He will choose,  
you shall read this Torah before all Israel,  
in their ears.

12. “Assemble the people: the men, the  
women, and the children, and your  
stranger in your cities, in order that they  
hear, and in order that they learn and fear  
G-d, and they will observe to do all the  
words of this Torah.

13. “And their children, who did not know,  
will hear and learn to fear G-d, all the  
days that you live on the Land that you  
are crossing the Jordan to possess.”





A massive assembly  
of every single  
Jewish person with  
a grand ceremony—  
all of it to instill fear.



# TEXT 4

*Rabbi Shneur Zalman of  
Liadi, Torah Or, p. 91b*

כי אם לא יהיה בבחינת הגבהה כלל לא יערב לבו  
לגשת אל העבודה, באמרו: מי אנכי ומה עבודתי?

If a person doesn't feel uplifted whatsoever, how will they ever be able to step up to the plate in their religious life? They'll give up, saying, "Who am I and what can I accomplish?"

At *Hakhel*, we are supposed to imagine ourselves receiving the Torah once again.



# TEXT 5

*Maimonides, Mishneh  
Torah, Laws of Chagigah  
3:1, 6*

מצות עשה להקהיל כל ישראל אנשים ונשים וטף  
בכל מוצאי שמיטה בעלותם לרגל, ולקרות  
באזניהם מן התורה פרשיות שהן מזרזות אותן  
במצות ומחזקות ידיהם בדת האמת . . .

שלא קבעה הכתוב אלא לחזק דת האמת, ויראה  
עצמו כאילו עתה נצטוו בה ומפי הגבורה שומעה.  
שהמלך שליח הוא להשמיע דברי הקל.

It is a positive commandment to gather together the entire Jewish people—men, women, and children—after every sabbatical year, when they ascend for the pilgrimage holiday of Sukkot. The king reads passages from the Torah there that encourage them to perform *mitzvot* and strengthen them in the true faith. . . .

Scripture established *Hakhel* exclusively for the purpose of strengthening true faith. A person should see themselves as if they were just now commanded regarding the Torah and heard it from G-d, for the king is an agent to deliver G-d's word.



Sinai took the people's faith from abstract to alive, from cognitive to visceral. And that's what Hakhel was designed to replicate.

# TEXT 6A

*The Rebbe, Rabbi  
Menachem Mendel  
Schneerson, Likutei Sichot  
34, p. 192*

עיקר החידוש דמעמד הר סיני ומתן תורה היה לא בלימוד התורה ושמיעת מצוות ה', ובפרט שזה היה גם קודם מתן תורה אצל האבות כו'. אלא החידוש הוא שאז היה זה באופן של ראייה, כמו שכתוב "וכל העם רואים את הקולות גו' אתם ראיתם גו'", "הראנו ה' אלוקינו את כבודו גו'", וזה היה "בעבור (שעל ידי זה דוקא באים להשלימות אשר) תהיה יראתו על פניכם לבלתי תחטאו".

וכידוע דאינה דומה שמיעה לראיה, דשמיעה היא מרחוק (ולכן ביכולתה לתפוס רק דבר רוחני כמו קול וכהאי גוונא, ונתפס רק בשמיעה — הבנה והשגה, רוחניות האדם), מה שאין כן ראייה היא מקרוב (ולכן ראייה תופסת בדבר גשמי, וגם פועלת על גשמיות גופו עד שהדבר הנראה מתאמת אצל הרואה). וכן היה במתן תורה, ש"כל העם רואים את הקולות" — רואים את הנשמע, ולכן נתאמת אצל כל אחד ואחד מישראל ש"אנכי ה' אלוקיך" וכו'.

The sea change that occurred at Sinai is not so much that the Jews learned Torah or heard the *mitzvot* from G-d. After all, those things happened before Sinai with the patriarchs as well. Rather, the major change was that then, the Jews were able to actually see it, as stated in many verses.

As is well-known, seeing something is incomparable to hearing about it. Hearing is from a distance, which is why abstract things can only be heard through cognitive processes—but not seen. Visuals, by definition, are up close, which is why only tangible items can be seen, and why seeing something makes it so real. This is what happened at Sinai when the “nation saw the thunder” (Exodus 2:14)—as our sages say, “They saw what is usually only heard” (Rashi, *ad loc.*) In other words, the notion of “I am your G-d” became as real and true as something that can be physically seen.

# TEXT 6B

*The Rebbe, Rabbi  
Menachem Mendel  
Schneerson, ibid*

ויש לומר שזהו הטעם שבכדי שהדור שלאחרי דור  
מתן תורה והדורות הבאים "יראו את ה' אלוקיכם  
ושמרו לעשות את כל דברי התורה הזאת" — אינה  
מספיקה זכירת מעמד הר סיני — שזוכר דבר שהיה  
בעבר, שאז האדם הוא בריחוק מהדבר; אלא צריך  
להיות ענין מיוחד, מצות הקהל, שכל ישראל, אנשים  
נשים וטף, נקהלים יחד כמו במעמד הר סיני "וראה  
עצמו כאילו עתה נצטווה בה ומפי הגבורה שומעה  
שהמלך שליח הוא להשמיע דברי הקל".

How would the people for all time, after the events at Sinai, be able to experience the feeling of seeing G-d? Simply memorializing the events as Sinai wouldn't be enough, for a memory is from the past, when the person stands at a distance. There must be a special event, which is what *Hakhel* was: every Jew—man, woman, and child—gathered together as they did at Sinai and envisioned themselves as if they were now directly hearing the word of G-d through the king's delivery.





Fear is specifically designed to inspire and empower, not to evoke dread and retreat.

# TEXT 7A

*Maimonides, Mishneh  
Torah, Laws of Kings and  
Conquests 2:1; 3:8*

כבוד גדול נוהגין במלך, ומשימין לו אימה ויראה בלב  
כל אדם, שנאמר: "שום תשים", שתהא אימתו עליך.

אין רוכבין על סוסו, ואין יושבין על כסאו, ואין  
משתמשים בשרביטו, ולא בכתרו, ולא באחד מכל כלי  
תשמישיו. וכשהוא מת כולן נשרפין לפניו.

וכן לא ישתמש בעבדיו ושפחותיו ושמשיהו אלא מלך  
אחר . . .

כל המורד במלך ישראל יש למלך רשות להרגו.

אפילו גזר על אחד משאר העם שילך למקום פלוני  
ולא הלך, או שלא יצא מביתו ויצא, חייב מיתה, ואם  
רצה להורגו יהרג, שנאמר: "כל איש אשר ימרה את  
פיך".

וכן כל המבזה את המלך או המחרפו, יש למלך רשות  
להרגו.

The king must be treated with great honor. We must implant awe and fear of him in the hearts of all men, as the verse states, "Appoint a king" (Deuteronomy 17:15), which implies the obligation to be in awe of him.

We may not ride on his horse, nor sit on his throne, use his scepter, wear his crown, or use any of his utensils. When he dies, they should all be burned before his bier.

Similarly, only another king is allowed to make use of his servants, maids, and attendants. . . .

Anyone who rebels against a king of Israel may be executed by the king.

Even if the king orders one of the people to go to a particular place and the latter refuses, or he orders him not to leave his house and he goes out, the offender is liable to be put to death. The king may execute him if he desires, as the verse states, "Whoever rebels against your command . . . shall be put to death" (Joshua 1:18).

Similarly, anyone who embarrasses or shames the king may be executed by the king.

# TEXT 7B

*Maimonides, ibid., 2:6*

כדרך שחלק לו הכתוב הכבוד הגדול וחייב הכל  
בכבודו, כך צוהו להיות לבו בקרבו שפל וחלל,  
שנאמר: "ולבי חלל בקרבי". ולא ינהג גסות לב  
בישראל יתר מדאי, שנאמר: "לבלתי רום לבבו  
מאחיו".

ויהיה חונן ומרחם לקטנים וגדולים, ויצא ויבוא  
בחפציהם ובטובתם ויחוס על כבוד קטן שבקטנים.

וכשמדבר אל כל הקהל בלשון רבים ידבר רכות,  
שנאמר: "שמעוני אחי ועמי", ואומר: "אם היום תהיה  
עבד לעם הזה וגו'".

לעולם יתנהג בענוה יתירה.

Just as the Torah grants the king great honor and obligates everyone to revere him, so, too, the Torah commands the king to be lowly and empty at heart, as the verse states, "My heart is a void within me" (Psalms 109:22). Nor should he treat the people with overbearing haughtiness. For the verse describes how "the king should not lift up his heart above his brothers" (Deuteronomy 17:20).

The king should be gracious and merciful to the small and the great, involving himself in their good and welfare. He should protect the honor of even the humblest of men.

When he speaks to the people as a community, he should speak gently, as the verse states, "Listen my brothers and my people . . ." (I Chronicles 28:2). Similarly, the verse states, "If today, you will be a servant to these people . . ." (I Kings 12:7).

The king should always conduct himself with great humility.

The king was  
simultaneously feared and  
revered, yet he himself was  
supposed to completely  
surrender to G-d.



# TEXT 8

*Rabbi Menachem Mendel  
of Lubavitch, Derech  
Mitzvotcha, p. 108a*

והנה המלך בעצמו בטל לאלוקות . . . דהיינו שנגע  
הביטול לה' כל כך בלבבו עד שגם בגשמיות לא  
היה יכול להרים עיניו ולהגביה לבו בבחינת יש  
ודבר מה, אלא היה כמו בחינת דומם שאין לו  
תנועה . . .

הנה שרש ענין המכוון במינוי המלך הוא שבו ועל  
ידו יהיו הישראל בטילים לה', כי כל ישראל  
צריכים להיות בטילים למלך וסרים למשמעתו בכל  
אשר יגזור, כמו שאמר שמואל: "וזה יהי משפט  
המלך וגו'" (שמואל א ח, יא) . . . ומאחר שהמלך  
הוא בטל למלכות שמים וישראל בטילים למלך,  
הרי נמצא בו ועל ידו הישראל בטלים לאלקותו  
יתברך. וזאת היא עבודת המלך תמיד, להיות בו  
ועל ידו הנבראים בטלים לה', על ידי שהוא בטל  
והם בטלים אצלו.

In his own personal life, the king was supposed to be entirely surrendered to G-d. . . . In other words, the level of surrender was supposed to be so deeply seared into his heart that it would be physically impossible to feel arrogant, or to harbor any sense of ego. Rather, the king was supposed to be before G-d as an inanimate stone lacking any movement.

The purpose of appointing a Jewish king is that through him, the Jews can surrender to G-d. Every Jew must surrender to the king and follow his command. . . . Now, inasmuch as the king totally surrenders to G-d and the Jews surrender to him, it emerges that through him, the Jews surrender themselves before G-d. This, then, is the king's job: to connect and submit the Jewish people to G-d by way of his own surrender.

# TEXT 9

*Talmud, Sotah 41a*

פרשת המלך כיצד?

מוצאי יום טוב הראשון של חג, בשמיני במוצאי  
שביעית, עושין לו בימה של עץ בעזרה והוא יושב  
עליה.

How is the portion of the Torah read by  
the king?

At the conclusion of the first day of the  
Festival of Sukkot, on the eighth year,  
after the conclusion of the Sabbatical  
year, they make a wooden platform for the  
king in the Temple courtyard, and he sits  
on it.



You are fortunate  
to be one of His  
servants, an  
attaché to the  
greatest  
King of all Kings!



# TEXT 10

*Rabbi Yosef Caro,  
Shulchan Aruch, Orach  
Chayim 1:1*

יתגבר כארי לעמוד בבוקר לעבודת בוראו.

A person should awake in the morning as strong as a lion to serve their Creator.

# TEXT 11

*Talmud, Chagigah 13b*

מלך שבהיות — ארי.

The lion is the king of all animals.



We're supposed  
to wake up to  
serve G-d with  
a sense of pride,  
like a lion.

# TEXT 12A

*Talmud, Berachot 5a*

אָמַר רַבִּי לֵוִי בַר חַמָּא, אָמַר רַבִּי שִׁמְעוֹן בֶּן לָקִישׁ:  
לְעוֹלָם יִרְגִּיז אָדָם יֵצֶר טוֹב עַל יֵצֶר הָרָע, שְׁנֵאָמַר:  
"רַגְזוּ וְאַל תִּחַטְּאוּ".

Rabbi Levi bar Chama said in the name of Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish, “One should always incite his good inclination against his evil inclination, as the verse states, ‘Tremble, and do not sin’ (Psalms 4:5).”

# TEXT 12B

*Rabbi Shneur Zalman of  
Liadi, Likutei Torah,  
Bamidbar 15c*

"לעולם ירגיז אדם יצר טוב על יצר הרע", ורוגז זה  
הוא גם כן הגבהה והתנשאות על היצר הרע.

The Talmud states, "One should always incite his good inclination against his evil inclination." This includes behaving in a condescending, dismissive manner to our inner temptations.



You should feel  
edified as G-d's  
ambassador on  
earth and thus  
unable to stoop  
so low as to give  
in to your  
baser urges.



# TEXT 13

*The Rebbe, Rabbi  
Menachem Mendel  
Schneerson, Likutei Sichot  
19, p. 328*

צו דעם קומט דער המשך, אז די קבלת עול ויראה  
דארף זיין באופן של "בימה". אויב דאס איז מצד  
דער קבלת עול ויראה אליין קען עס פועל'ן אויף  
אים א תנועה פון ביטול כאסקופה הנדרסת און ער  
וועט ניט קענען טאן די עבודה כראוי. דארף דאס  
דעריבער זיין באופן של "בימה", א תנועה פון  
תוקף, יתגבר כארי, אויך מצד דעם קען בא אים  
זיין די הגבהה והתנשאות אויפן יצר הרע, דער  
"ירגיז אדם יצר טוב על יצר הרע".

Accepting G-d's authority and fearing Him must be in a manner that evokes a "platform." If it's exclusively fear and submission, it can create feelings of deficiency and low self-worth. This would be counterproductive to anyone's religious duties. And so, we evoke the "platform" to incorporate feelings of assertiveness, as the law states, "Awake in the morning strong as a lion." This also empowers us to overpower our negative temptations.

# TEXT 14

*“THE BAAL SHEM TOV’S  
SIXTEENTH BIRTHDAY,”  
FROM THE TEACHINGS  
OF RABBI YOSEF  
YITZCHAK  
SCHNEERSOHN,  
ADAPTED BY RABBI  
YANKI TAUBER (TRANS.),  
WWW.CHABAD.ORG/2529*

When I was five years old I was orphaned from both my father and mother. The last words spoken to me by my holy father before his passing were, “Yisrolik, fear nothing but G-d alone.”

Consonant with my father’s words I was drawn to walk the fields and the great, deep forest near our village. From *cheder* I would make my way to the fields, where I would review by heart what I had learned in *cheder*. Often I would sleep over the night in the field or the forest.

My guardians, who looked after me and several other orphan boys and girls, did not tolerate this behavior of mine to wander in the fields and the forest, and dealt severely with me.

So passed two years. One morning, I heard in the forest the sound of a human voice. I followed the direction of the voice and came upon the figure of a Jew enveloped in *tallit* and *tefillin*, praying with a fervor such as I had never before witnessed.

I hid myself behind the trees and derived great pleasure listening to the man’s praying. I was enthralled by the extraordinary sight, and thought to myself that this holy man must be one of the thirty-six hidden *tzaddikim* (righteous and saintly people) that are in the world. The *tzaddik* concluded his prayers, removed his *tallit* and *tefillin*, and began to read from the Book of Psalms in a melodious voice.

# TEXT 14

*“THE BAAL SHEM TOV’S  
SIXTEENTH BIRTHDAY,”  
FROM THE TEACHINGS  
OF RABBI YOSEF  
YITZCHAK  
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Following his recital of Psalms, the man spent some time in ecstatic Torah study. He then gathered his books and his *tallit* and *tefillin* and placed them in a sack, lifted the sack unto his shoulders, and set off on his way. At this point I stepped out from my hiding place and walked towards him.

When the man saw me he asked, “What is a small child doing all alone in the forest? Are you not afraid to be in the forest all by yourself?”

I answered him, “I like the field and the forest, because there are no people—the great majority of whom are arrogant and dishonest. I am not afraid of anything. I am an orphan without father or mother. My father, peace be [upon] him, said to me before his passing, ‘Yisrolik, fear nothing but G-d alone.’ So I’m not afraid of anything.”

# TEXT 15

*Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak  
Schneersohn, Igrot Kodesh  
Admur HaRayatz 6, p. 272*

קבלת עול מלכות שמים און תמימות פון יראת  
שמים זיינען שליסלען וועלכע קומען צו צו אלע  
שלעסער פון די טירען אין היכלות שלמעלה.

Accepting G-d's authority and the sincere  
fear of Heaven are the keys that open the  
lock to every one of the Heavenly  
chambers.

## KEY POINTS

1. Judaism greatly advocates accepting G-d's authority and fearing Him as well.
2. The mitzvah of *Hakhel* is designed to increase fear of Heaven.
3. Accepting G-d's authority and fearing Him are oftentimes juxtaposed with inspiration and increased observance.
4. The Jewish king, who read the Torah during *Hakhel*, is one example of this juxtaposition: he was revered, even given the license to kill, and yet, he was expected to be exceedingly humble.
5. The explanation as to how fear and authority are juxtaposed with inspiration and humility is that they are predicated on the realization that each of us is G-d's ambassador on earth—which is profoundly edifying.
6. What's more, true fear of G-d gives one the freedom to fear nothing else—an exceedingly healthy approach to life.



