



From Chopping Down to Raising Up

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Parashat Nitzavim opens with a statement of inclusion¹—every Jew is a part of the covenant and no one is above it or beneath it:

דברים כט:ט-יא

אתם נצבים היום כלכם לפני ה' אלהיכם ראשיכם שבטיכם זקניכם ושטריכם כל איש ישראל: טפכם נשיכם וגרך אשר בקרב מחניך מחטב עציך עד שאב מימך: לעברך בברית ה' אלהיך ובאלתו אשר ה' אלהיך כרת עמך היום:

Devarim 29:9-11

All of you are standing today before HaShem your God—your heads, your tribal leaders, your elders, and your enforcers—all men of Israel. Your children, your women, and the convert² who is in the midst of your camp, from the chopper of your trees to the drawer of your water. To commit you³ to the covenant of HaShem your God and to the oath that HaShem your God establishes with you today.

¹ Though this is a statement of inclusion, it is arranged hierarchically from those most powerful and integrated in society to the least. In the first verse, Moshe begins with the national leaders, moves to the tribal leaders, the elders who have a smaller scope of power, the enforcers have no power of their own, and then “all men of Israel.” Only after listing the men of Israelite stock does Moshe include the children, the women, and the converts. This is, presumably, a rhetorical strategy on Moshe’s part: “And not only these men, but even these children! And not only these children, but even these women! And not only those born to Israelite parents, but even those of you who came as residents and converts!” See footnote 6 below.

² According to the *peshat* explanation, this could refer to any person of non-Israelite pedigree who joined Israelite society. It does not necessarily mean a religious convert.

³ Lit. “cause you to pass.” The choice of this verb is rooted in ceremonial “passing” that would cement this agreement, like the covenant God made with Avraham in Bereishit 15.



Oddly, at the very end of this list appear two specific characters: the wood-chopper and the water-drawer. Who are these people? Why are they excluded from the first list of “all men of Israel” and why are they singled out for special notice? What can we learn from these particular people about our own place in the covenant and our own quests for growth?

According to Rashi, these two classes of laborers were not selected at random. The wood-chopper and the water-drawer are listed right after the convert in these verses because they are converts themselves:

רש"י דברים כט:

מחטב עציך. מלמד שבאו כנענים להתגייר בימי משה, כדרך שבאו גבעונים בימי יהושע. וזהו האמור בגבעונים ויעשו גם הם בערמה (יהושע ט:ד), ונתנם משה חוטבי עצים ושואבי מים.

Rashi to Devarim 29:10

From the chopper of your trees. This comes to teach that Canaanites came to convert in the days of Moshe, like the Givonim came in the days of Yehoshua. And this is what was said about the Givonim: **They also did so by trickery** (Yehoshua 9:4) and Moshe made them choppers of wood and drawers of water.

Rashi is referring to a specific story in Sefer Yehoshua. According to Sefer Yehoshua,⁴ the nearby residents of Givon hear about Yehoshua's earlier victories and decide to trick him. They come dressed in tattered clothes, bearing old provisions as if they had been journeying for a great distance. They ask Yehoshua to establish a covenant with them not to harm them. They say that they were impressed by all that God has done for His people in Egypt and elsewhere and therefore have come to join their fortunes to that of the Jewish people. Yehoshua is taken in by this ruse and establishes this covenant. He abides by his word instead of attacking them, but when he finds out what happened he is furious:

יהושע ט:כב-כז

וַיִּקְרָא לָהֶם יְהוֹשֻׁעַ וַיְדַבֵּר אֲלֵיהֶם לֵאמֹר לָמָּה רַמִּיתֶם אֹתָנוּ לֵאמֹר רְחוּקִים אֲנַחְנוּ מִכֶּם מֵאֵד וְאַתֶּם בָּקָרְבָנוּ יֹשְׁבִים: וְעַתָּה אֲרוּרִים אַתֶּם וְלֹא יִכְרֹת מִכֶּם עֶבֶד וְחֹטְבֵי עֲצִים וְשֹׁאְבֵי מַיִם לְבֵית אֱלֹהֵי: וַיַּעֲנוּ אֶת יְהוֹשֻׁעַ וַיֹּאמְרוּ כִּי הִגַּד הַגִּד לַעֲבָדֶיךָ אֶת אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֶת מֹשֶׁה עַבְדּוֹ לְתֵת לָכֶם אֶת כָּל הָאָרֶץ וְלִהְיוֹתְכֶם אֶת כָּל יֹשְׁבֵי הָאָרֶץ מִפְּנֵיכֶם וַיִּירָא מֵאֵד לְנַפְשֵׁיכֶם וַיַּעֲשֶׂה אֶת הַדָּבָר הַזֶּה: וְעַתָּה הִנֵּנוּ בְיַדְךָ כְּטֹב וְכַיֵּשֶׁר בְּעֵינֶיךָ לַעֲשׂוֹת לָנוּ עֲשֵׂה: וַיַּעַשׂ לָהֶם כֵּן וַיִּצַּל אוֹתָם מִיַּד בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְלֹא הָרְגוּם: וַיִּתְּנֵם יְהוֹשֻׁעַ בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא חֹטְבֵי עֲצִים וְשֹׁאְבֵי מַיִם לַעֲדָה וּלְמַזְבֵּחַ ה' עַד הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה אֶל הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר יִבְרָר:

⁴ 9:3-27.

Yehoshua 9:22-27

Yehoshua called to them and he spoke to them saying, “Why did you trick me to say ‘we are very far from you’ when you dwell in our midst? Now you will be cursed and none of you will cease being servants and wood-choppers and water-drawers for the house of my God.” They answered Yehoshua and they said, “Because it was told to your servants that God commanded his servant Moshe to give you all of the land and to destroy all of the land’s inhabitants before you and we were very afraid for our lives before you, so we did this thing. And now we are in your hands, do with us as is good and upright in your eyes.” And thus he did to them, he saved them from the hands of *Benei Yisrael* and did not kill them. On that day, Yehoshua made them wood-choppers and water-drawers for the people and for God’s altar in the place He will choose, unto this very day.

According to Rashi, Moshe’s selection of these categories in Nitzavim prefigures and refers to what would happen later with his student, Yehoshua. Rashi’s words are based upon a *midrash*, but differ from that *midrash* significantly:

מדרש תנחומא נצבים ב

מחוטב עץ, אמר רבי יצחק בן טבלי:⁵ מלמד שבאו הגבעונים אצל יהושע בן נון וקבלו, שנאמר: ויעשו גם המה בערמה וגו' (יהושע ט:ד). מהו גם המה? ללמדך שבאו אצל משה ולא קבלו.

Midrash Tanhuma (Vilna) Nitzavim 2

From the chopper of your trees. R. Yitzhak ben Tavli says: This comes to teach that the Givonim came to Yehoshua ben Nun and he accepted them, as it says, **They also did so by trickery** (Yehoshua 9:4). What is **they also**? To teach you that they came to Moshe [as well] but he didn’t accept them.

The Tanhuma⁶ teaches that the categories of wood-chopper and water-drawer are placed intentionally at the end of the list. Not because they are menial laborers, but because they are examples of problematic people. And R. Yitzhak ben Tavli’s continuation designates that these categories are specifically used for people who applied as converts. According to the *midrash*, Moshe didn’t accept the Givonim as converts, rejecting those whom Yehoshua would

⁵ This seems to be the only time this personage appears in Rabbinic literature.

⁶ The section of the Tanhuma immediately preceding this has a more charitable reading of the water-drawer and wood-chopper: “...and not just the greatest among you, but **even your children, your women, and your convert**. Therefore it says **all men of Israel**, because human beings have more compassion on males than females, but the Holy Blessed One is not so, for His compassion is on all of His creatures, on the males and the females, on the righteous and the guilty, as it says **from the chopper of your trees to the drawer of your water**.” This is the Tanhuma’s way of addressing the problem of the hierarchy that Moshe follows in his presentation.



later accept. However, according to Rashi's retelling of the story, he imagines that Moshe did accept Canaanite applicants as converts, though he also made them into water-drawers and wood-choppers. But why? Why, if he accepted them, would Moshe deliberately place these new members of *Benei Yisrael* in these specific jobs? Yehoshua needed to punish the Givonim for tricking him, but Moshe had no reason to punish the Canaanites.

According to the Mei HaShiloah,⁷ these verses should be thought of figuratively, not actually. A wood-chopper and a water-drawer represent stages in divine connectedness:

מי השילוח נצבים

זזה פי' אתם נצבים, היינו שאתם מקושר בהש"י. ראשיכם, היינו מדרגה גדולה עד שואב מימך, שהוא מדרגה הקטנה. כלכם אתם מקושרים בהש"י...

Mei HaShiloah Nitzavim

And this is the explanation of **you are standing**, that is that you are tied to Blessed God.

Your heads is [at] a high level unto **the one who draws your water**, which is a low level.

You are all tied to Blessed God...

The spiritual insight of the Mei HaShiloah is that both the wood-chopper and water-drawer are a type of spiritual classification which could apply to any of us who are seeking to become close to God. Moshe is not necessarily punishing anyone by making them choppers of wood or shleppers of water. This is consistent with the rest of the *parashah*'s emphasis on returning to God despite great distance from Him on account of our sins:

דברים ל:א-ד

והיה כי יבאו עליך כל הדברים האלה הברכה והקללה אשר נתתי לפניך והשבת אל לבבך בכל הגוים אשר הדיחך ה' אלהיך שמה: ושבת עד ה' אלהיך ושמעך בקלו ככל אשר אנכי מצוך היום אתה ובניך בכל לבבך ובכל נפשך: ושב ה' אלהיך את שביתך ורחמך ושב וקבצך מכל העמים אשר הפיצך ה' אלהיך שמה: אם יהיה נדחך בקצה השמים משם יקבצך ה' אלהיך ומשם יקחך:

Devarim 30:1-4

And it will be when all of these things that I have placed before you come to pass for you, the blessing and the curse, you will return to your hearts, among any of the nations that God has pushed you to. And you will return to HaShem your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and you will listen to His voice, according to all that I am instructing you and your children today. And God will return your captivity and He will have compassion

⁷ R. Mordekhai Yosef Leiner Izhbitz, 1801-1854, Poland.



on you and gather you from all of the peoples that God has dispersed you to. If your dispersion reaches the end of heaven, God will gather you and take you from there.

This more metaphorical understanding of who these laborers represent allows us to reframe Rashi's textual insight (that these individuals are converts)⁸ by taking note of the interesting way that these verses are structured. Throughout the first verse and in the first half of the second verse, the "you" that is being addressed is plural, *atem*. Yet, when the second verse shifts to speak about the convert, the grammar also shifts to the singular possessive: **וְגֵרְךָ אֲשֶׁר בְּקֶרֶב מַחְנֶיךָ מַחְטֵב עֵצֶיךָ עַד שֶׁאֵב מִימֶיךָ**, **Your (*sing.*) convert who is in the midst of your camp, from the one who cuts your trees to the one who draws your water.** Whereas the teaching about inclusion is directed to "all of you" collectively, the convert—of which the water-drawer and the wood-chopper are subtypes—are related to who you are as an individual. The water-drawer and the wood-chopper should then be read quite differently. They are not foreigners who have joined your collective—they are whatever or whoever cuts down your trees and draws your waters. They are you. They are you as you are now, when you are taking upon yourself whatever it means to step into a covenant with God and be dedicated to serving Him. They are you as you confront this challenging commitment.

It is common in biblical and Rabbinic literature that the very righteous, *tzaddikim*, are referred to as trees.⁹ To cut down our internal trees is to do the hard work of examining what we are proud of in ourselves and being willing to confront that we may not be as great as we think we are. The labor of cutting down trees—and perhaps even uprooting them—is one stage of the process of repentance and reinstatement: being willing to abandon who we are in favor of who we might be.

This is reflected in a teaching in Massekhet Ta'anit:

תלמוד בבלי תענית ז.

א"ל ר' ירמיה לר' זירא: ליתי מר ליתני. א"ל: חלש לבאי ולא יכילנא. לימא מר מילתא דאגדתא! א"ל: הכי אמר ר' יוחנן: מאי דכתיב **כי האדם עץ השדה** (דברים כ"ט)? וכי אדם עץ שדה הוא?! אלא משום דכתיב **כי ממנו תאכל ואותו לא תכרת** (דברים כ"ט) וכתיב **אותו תשחית וכרת** (דברים כ"ט). הא כיצד? אם ת"ח הגון הוא, **ממנו תאכל ואותו לא תכרת**. ואם לאו, **אותו תשחית וכרת**.

⁸ According to the Mei HaShiloah himself, the wood-chopper represents someone who has insufficient fear of God and the water-drawer represents someone who struggles with insufficient love of God. He is not referencing the idea that these figures are types of converts.

⁹ See Tehillim 1:3, 92:13.



Talmud Bavli Ta'anit 7a

R. Yirmiyah said to R. Zeira, "Let the Master come and teach!" [R. Zeira] said to him, "My heart is weak and I cannot." [R. Yirmiyah said], "Let the Master speak a word of *aggadah*!" [R. Zeira] said to him, "R. Yohanan said: What does the verse mean by writing, **For man is a tree of the field** (Devarim 20:19)? And is a man a tree of the field?! Rather, since it is written, **You may eat of [the trees] but you may not cut them down** and it is written **These you may destroy and cut down** (Devarim 20:20). How? If a Torah scholar is worthy, **You may eat of them but you may not cut them down**. But if he is not worthy, **you may destroy and cut down**."

The external work of pruning trees referred to in this passage is deciding which Torah scholars are righteous and worthy and which are not. The internal work is to look at the forests of our own souls, minds, and identities, and look hard at who we are, who we think we are, what we should change, and what we absolutely must. The Talmud on the same page also discusses the character of water. The great tree symbolizes growth, earning, and honor, whether or not it is deserved. Water, on the other hand, reflects lowliness and humility:

תלמוד בבלי תענית ז.

אמר רבי חנינא בר אידי: למה נמשלו דברי תורה למים? דכתיב, **הוי כל צמא לכו למים** (ישעיהו נה:א). לומר לך: מה מים מניחין מקום גבוה והולכין למקום נמוך, אף דברי תורה אין מתקיימין אלא במי שדעתו שפלה.

Talmud Bavli Ta'anit 7a

R. Hanina bar Idi said: Why are words of Torah compared to water? As it is written, **Anyone who thirsts, go to water** (Yeshayahu 55:1). To tell you: Just as water abandons a high place and goes to a low place, so too, words of Torah are only retained by one whose attitude is low.

To be a person of water is to be a person who is humble. The one who draws the water elevates a person who feels low. A water-drawer brings a person up and shows them what they can contribute, that they have more to offer, that they should be raised.

So who are the wood-chopper and water-drawer inside of us? Both of these laborers do the work of leveling, of bringing everything to the surface of the earth. The tops of the trees kiss heaven until the lumberjack lowers his axe and the branches fall to the ground. The water is beneath the surface, deep beneath the ground, and it is the water-drawer who raises it up to be level with where the humans and our crops live. To be a wood-chopper and to be a



water-drawer is to seek and achieve equanimity. Our internal trees need to be chopped down and our internal waters need to be raised up.

This also helps us understand another anomaly of Moshe's phrasing, **from the chopper for your trees to the drawer of your waters**. Many commentators have pointed out that "from A to Z" usually implies that A and Z are on opposite sides of a spectrum, but both wood-choppers and water-drawers are low on the socio-economic scale. It would make more sense to say "from the heads of your tribes to the choppers of your trees." However, we can now understand that they are indeed opposite sides of a spectrum in their opposing spiritual vectors. One is the process of cutting ourselves down to size and the other is the process of repairing ourselves and nurturing ourselves after the blow. And we must do both in order to successfully improve—the felling of trees needs to be accompanied by the drawing of water.¹⁰

Some have taught that this phrase actually points to a different span, the expanded time of *teshuvah* which extends from the end of the cutting of trees for the altar on Tu B'Av¹¹ until the end of the water ceremony on Hoshana Rabbah.¹² Each High Holiday season offers us the opportunity to be the most profound *Ba'alei Teshuvah*: converts, who are willing to radically change who we once were in order to embrace a new identity and closeness to God. This is an important process, but it can also be a dangerous process. As we go through our identities uprooting and felling trees, we also need to make sure that we commit ourselves to future growth, to drawing up the water. We need to sustain ourselves with the knowledge that deep down we are good and can become better. *Teshuvah* is not only believing that we are capable of great evil, it is also about affirming that we can improve.

Wishing you a Shabbat on an upward trajectory.

¹⁰ This is reflected in Moshe's encouraging words later in the *parashah* that the Torah is not in heaven or across the sea. See Devarim 30:12-13.

¹¹ See Talmud Bavli Ta'anit 31a.

¹² This tradition is quoted in R. Eliyahu Ki Tov's *Sefer HaToda'ah*.

