

## Choose Life: The Central Message of the Covenant

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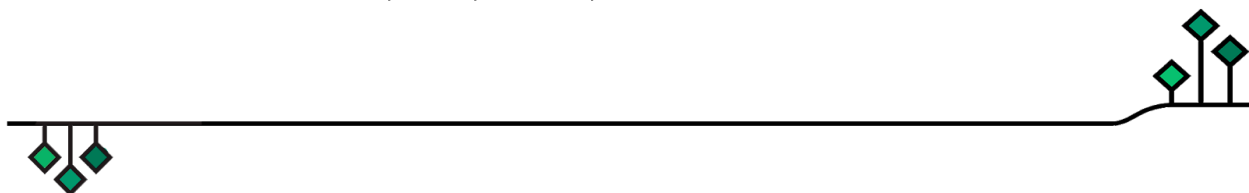
### Parashat Nitzavim 5781

As one of his last major acts of leadership, Moses gathers the Israelites poised to enter the land of Canaan on the plains of Moab. He brings this new generation, the children of those who stood at Sinai, into the *brit*, the covenant of Israel. In Parashat VaYelekh next week, I will discuss why this new ceremony is needed. Here in Nitzavim, it says “I command you to love the Lord your God, to walk in His ways, to keep God’s commandments, statutes, and judgments” (Deuteronomy 30:16). What does this add up to? Here is Moses’ elevator pitch of **the** meaning of the Torah: “Behold, I place before you today **life and good** and **death and evil...** I call on Heaven and Earth to witness to you that I have set before you **life and death**, the blessing and the curse—**choose life!**” (30:15, 19).

Maimonides points out that, in verse 15, the words “life and good” are in apposition, while “death and evil” are twinned. Says Maimonides: this is because in every act of good, there is an element of choosing life; in every act of evil, there is an element of choice of death.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Maimonides, Guide of the Perplexed, part 1, chapter 42.



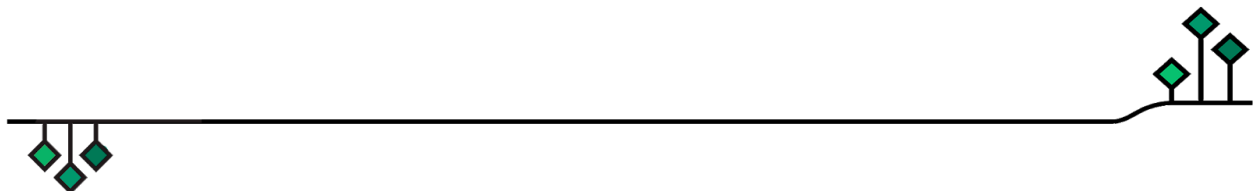
Overall, the purpose of the covenant is to repair the world so that life flourishes in this world and all its dignities are honored. But the committed member of the covenant cannot act in every matter at the level of perfection because the world is not fully redeemed. At this moment, every act in every life situation, involves a mixture of life and good, and of death and evil. Therefore, to live up to the covenant, every individual needs to live consciously. People must size up every situation before acting, ascertain the mix of good and evil and **shape the act to maximize elements of life and minimize elements of death**. The innovation in living covenantally is to literally become aware of every human behavior and not do it routinely. Rather, one should shape actions or modify them to, in some measure, increase the life quotient—and minimize the death quotient—in the act.

Take eating. If one does not eat, one will die. To live, a person must eat. But what and how we eat contains a mix of life and death elements. To live up to the covenant goal, one must maximize the life element. If I eat healthy food, then the eating is on the side of life. If I eat excessively processed foods which have lost vital nutrients, or food with a lot of salt, with a lot of sugar, that leads to obesity or diabetes, or meat that infuses excessive cholesterol into the bloodstream, one has increased the elements of death in the eating process.

Kashrut should be understood not just as a ritual commandment but as a covenantal guide to maximizing life in the process of eating.<sup>2</sup> Kashrut starts with the model of vegetarianism. Ideally, no other higher forms of life—organisms such as animals, birds, or fish—should die so I should live. In the Garden of Eden, the Torah projects its ideal that all living creatures be

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<sup>2</sup> See also my essay on this topic for Parashat Shemini, “Kashrut: Eating as an Act of Choosing Life,” available here: <https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/kashrut-eating-act-choosing-life>.



vegetarian.<sup>3</sup> The prophet Isaiah predicts that, in the Messianic age, when the process of *tikkun olam* is complete, even predatory animals will become vegetarian.<sup>4</sup>

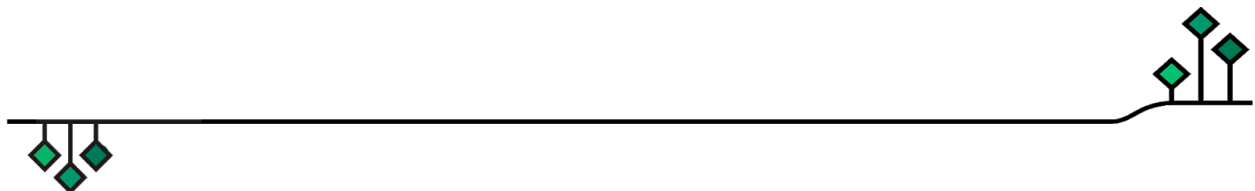
Since the world is not yet fully repaired (and meat eating provides a needed source of protein) eating animals is permitted, but heavily restricted. A very limited number of species of fish are permitted; only a limited number of (non-predatory) birds and animals are permitted, and they require *shehitah* (swift, painless slaughter). Furthermore, meat, the outcome of death, is prohibited to be cooked or eaten with milk, the source of life.

In the same spirit, the side effects of eating animals may undermine life. Raising meat animals in industrial quantities causes suffering and sickness among those creatures and increases methane (from cows) in the atmosphere, thereby warming the earth. Eating overfished species threatens their survival. All the above increase the quotient of death. Treatment of workers in the food provision industries may include elements of exploitation, pesticide exposure, and unsanitary conditions, just as abuse of agricultural workers may taint plant foods with evil or death. Drinking fair trade coffee or eating fair trade chocolate, buying local produce, and so on, are examples of choosing life. Covenantal eating requires that each aspect of food preparation be reviewed, and the quotient of life be maximized as against evil or death.

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<sup>3</sup> “The Lord said: I have given you every herb bearing seed... every tree on which there is fruit, to you it shall be for food. And to every beast... every bird... every thing that creeps... I have given every green herb for life” (Genesis 1:29-30).

<sup>4</sup> “The wolf will live down with the lamb... the lion, as the ox, shall eat straw” (Isaiah 11:6-7).



In the pandemic, we learned that praying—or any religious gathering—can be turned into superspreader occasions. This represents choosing death for people and turning worship of God from enhancing life to advancing death.

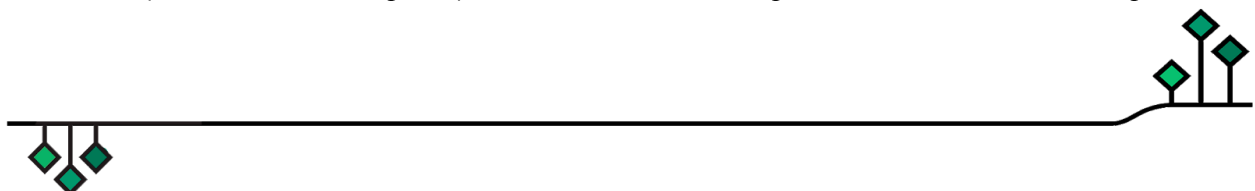
Every worldly life behavior should be reviewed to “choose,” i.e. maximize, life. Driving a car creates pollution. Reducing one’s carbon footprint by using mass transportation or by driving an electric car is an act of choosing life, as is using seatbelts religiously and driving safely and responsibly.

In doing business, I can build homes and rent apartments that improve people’s lives, or be a slumlord who exploits tenants and degrades the quality of their life. I can create a product of high quality that enhances life, or turns the manufacturing process into pollution, excessive waste, and non-recyclable products that poison the earth. I can pay a fair, living wage and set up a safe production system to which workers can contribute. Or I can create sweatshop conditions that harm the workers and impoverish society.

Or take the act of speaking. The words I speak to a fellow human being can be respectful, treating them as an image of God and therefore of equal value, increasing or enhancing their life. The words could also be words of denigration and hatred which makes others feel unequal or unwanted, reducing their life—and mine. My words have the ultimate power to make others feel loved and encouraged, to embrace life and do good. When I talk trivially or speak platitudes, I have chosen death for the listeners whose lifetime is used up with no gain or worthwhile outcome for either of us.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> In *The Triumph of Life* (forthcoming), I expound the theme of choosing life as Judaism’s central message.



The Torah's ethical laws are not simply commandments to obey. They are meant to be guidelines to treating others with dignity and respect and not exploiting. They need to be reviewed, upgraded, and applied to new circumstances in every emerging society or changing economy. The ritual laws also are meant to guide us to choose life and dignity as well as minimize death and devaluation of others. If they are applied to demean others or reduce the dignity of women, or racial and sexual minorities, then they are harming the covenantal goals and undermining the vision of choosing life. They need to be corrected or reoriented toward the divine goal of filling the world with life and generating a culture, society, and environment that sustains life.

Moses mentions that the Torah lines up blessing and curse, life and death, alongside each other and asks us to choose life. This is a reminder that every human behavior can advance life and be a blessing, but that same action (done or applied improperly) can be a curse that increases evil in the world. This is why living covenantally requires constant monitoring, preparation, and review. The coming High Holiday season reminds us that if we fail or do evil—inevitably we all do some—we can repent. We can admit our sin, make reparation to people we hurt, and change our behavior going forward. This turn to life is the central message of the Torah and the central purpose of the life of covenant.

