Nitzavim, the final call to attention. Stand up, all the ranks of those before moses to hear the commandments, this time to include the women and children and converts, as well as the men, in their order of important, leaders, heads, elders, officials.

The message that is delivered is simple, not a list of moral obligations, rules of behavior or observance. One simple rule: keep the covenant.

One might ask, what is the covenant, but again it is kept simple. Believe in god and do what god says; do not follow any other gods.

It is difficult to construct much of a thoughtful argument on this one point. Everything in the parshah anticipates the questions, such as, well, what is “believe in,” what is it to be god’s people, or for god to be a god for us, or what is a covenant. The path to constructing this injunction is clearly laid out. First, this is for everyone, including those not here. If we thought it might have meant those to come in the future, or who were away, that too is swept away. Those not here must mean those who died, since the next sentence reminds us of the time in Egypt and the passage through the desert.

At that point comes the heart of the parshah, the matter of primary concern for Moses who says, beware of those other gods. Almost all the rest of the parshah consists of warnings and cajoling to stay faithful to god, called specifically Adonai eloheinu, who is set over against elohai, the gods of others. By the end, as if tacked on, we are reminded that keeping the covenant entails following the rules given by moses. But the emphasis here, and in the haftorah, falls on keeping the covenant, keeping faith in god, not straying to another god.

At one point the warning against straying is posed somewhat uniquely: it is not presented in the form of, keep the faith, be faithful to god, but rather don’t think if you are tempted by the god of another people, and do turn to it surreptitiously, that you can have your cake and eat it too. For you an even worse punishment will fall. And the punishment is delineated with sadistic relish.

But alongside the punishment comes the reward, the blessing, the promise fulfilled; or, as the pattern through torah and the prophets repeats, you will be saved after having suffered defeat, after failing to keep the covenant. Our high holidays follow this injunction and reiterate this-- Heed god, keep the commandments, *return* to god, you will be rewarded.

Lines of great beauty limn this simple message: it’s not too complicated to grasp, not beyond our reach, not in the heavens or across the sea, but within our immediate grasp, within our heart and mouth. You already know it, just keep to the covenant, and don’t ask what that means. You know it, as Kant would say of the categorial imperative, intuitively. We were meant for this covenant, god made us his people, we know the rules, and will benefit if we keep it.

Hedged off from the repeated commandments and calls for obedience are the Job figures whose unwarranted, unmerited suffering impose the profound doubts that this torah and set of prophetic writings continually attempt to lay to rest: is there really a god out there, a god for us, a god who will provide the answers to the questions of what is good and what is evil? The implied question is raised when Job’s day arrives, and if there wasn’t enough suffering, pain, and death for people in the past, for us to construct metaphorically as the life of slaves laboring in Egypt, we reconstruct such metaphors in our own times. Recently the emphasis on 1619, slavery, reminds us of negro spirituals sung by Paul Robeson, let my people go, and our ties to black slavery and freedom. Our holocaust left us not only marked by the historical trauma, for our generation, and our children’s generation and more. We have our own survivors who echoed the refrain that underlies Job’s question, why did you permit this, o god—implying, whom am I talking to, what more do we need to end this useless conversation with a non-God. After Nietzsche, after the holocaust, after repeated genocide after genocide, from American Indians to Cambodians, to Syrians, to Rwandans, to the deaths of 6 million Congolese in our times, the injunction “never again” drowns out the warnings against apostasy in Nitzavim. How little point is there in the warning against those who “turned to the service of other gods and worshiped them, gods whom they had not experienced and whom he had not allotted to them. So the Lord was incensed at that land and brought upon it all the curses recorded in this book.” No one can read that the same way after Auschwitz without defiling our experience of the Holocaust.

We need to read this parshah completely differently from the way its words would seem to want us to understand them. This is, in fact, always the way I think a Judaism of today must be: we have to read at an angle that pushes our understanding to our own limit. Not as an issue of faith, but of being in the world. The beginning for us, and I would say now all of us, is to accept the very thing denied us in the parshah—the gods of others, the temptation to turn to other people and their ways, to have our children marry their children, to learn to love our mixed grandchildren all the more, with all our hearts, with all the music of a prophetic trope that we once had learned as being reserved just for our own holy texts. We have to reread especially a passage like this, from Isaiah: “No longer shall "forsaken" be said of you, and "desolate" shall no longer be said of your land, for you shall be called "My desire is in her," and your land, "inhabited," for the Lord desires you, and your land shall be inhabited.” And at the same time, configure this person, the personification of Jerusalem, as being not only as “a young man who lives with a virgin” but as a young woman who lives with her own sister lover as well. Or more importantly, as being the one whose blood has provided the deep red color of the grapes who had felt the wrath of god’s feet as he stamped [her] down in divine fury:

**3**"A wine press I trod alone, and from the peoples, none was with Me; and I trod them with My wrath, and I trampled them with My fury, and their life blood sprinkled on My garments, and all My clothing I soiled.

We have to ask at this point, the day before erev Rosh Hashana, in reading this account of god’s fury in Isaiah, in Job, and where were we? Before the happy anticipated ending, where we become figured as god’s children, “and the angel of His presence saved them; with His love and with His pity He redeemed them, and He bore them, and He carried them all the days of old,” the stains of the blood on god’s cloths have barely dried, and we haven’t had time yet to recover from the ovens of Auschwitz-Birkenau, Bergen Belsen, Buchenwald, Chelmo, Dachau, Treblinka, Sobibor; not to mention the other camps in France, Germany Poland, the massacres of Ukraine and Latvia, the deeply etched past that traces our history back across Spain and North Africa to Egypt, where our people had lived, prospered, and then faced expulsion and the agonies of the inquisition.

The wrong question may have always been, what did we do wrong. The wrong answer may always have been, your turned away to other gods. So what then is the right way to read Nitzavim, and to continue to leyn torah, because on the eve of Rosh Hashana this is the key question to which we have to return every year.

Shabbat Shalom.