

## Parshat Nitzavim/Vayelech: People of the Journey Rabbanit Michal Kohane Class of 2020

The third Torah portion from the very beginning of Bereishit, and the third Torah portion from the end of Devarim, share the same root.

Moshe and Avraham, both are characterized by walking. About Avraham we read:

1 Now the LORD said unto Abram: 'Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto the land that I will show thee. (Bereishit 12:1)

א וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל-אַבְרָם, לֵךְ-לְךָ מֵאֶרֶץ, וּמְוֹלָדֶיךָ וּמִבֵּית אָבִיךָ, אֶל-הָאָרֶץ, אֲשֶׁר אֲרָאָךְ. (בראשית יב:א)

And about Moshe:

1 And Moses went and spoke these words unto all Israel. (Devarim 31:1)

א וַיֵּלֶךְ, מֹשֶׁה; וַיְדַבֵּר אֶת-הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה, אֶל-כָּל-יִשְׂרָאֵל. (דברים לא:א)

Where are they going?

We are taught that Abraham was journeying to the Land of Israel, and yet, from the verse itself, that is not obvious. God simply instructs him to go from everything he has and knows to a land he will be shown. Rashi adds that Avraham simply had to go: and “there” (wherever that is), I – God - will make you a great nation; here you will not merit sons, and further, (by going “there”), I will make you known in the world.

And Moshe? Where is he going?

The Toldot Yitzchak (1458-1535, uncle of Yosef Karo, the editor of the Shulchan Aruch) writes:

*And Moshe went... and (the text) doesn't say where he went to, for everywhere he went he spoke these words: in the street, when bargaining, at work, when dealing with individuals in privacy and public matters; everywhere he injected the words of Hashem.*

“וילך משה...” ולא כתוב לאן הלך - כי לכל מקום שהלך דיבר את הדברים האלה: ברחוב, במשא ובמתן, בעבודה, בעסקי הפרט ובציבור, בכל מקום החדיר את דבר ה'

Our tradition teaches that the last four Torah portions of Devarim were written by Moshe during the last day of his life. On that day Moshe was 120 years old, and yet, he is not sitting in his tent, fanned by servants, as befitting a great leader; nor awaiting the people to come and greet him. But rather, he gets up and goes. In fact, The Noam Megadim (born in 1805, one of the third generation Chasidut sages) says that even after Moshe has “walked” in the sense of leaving the world, he still keeps speaking all these words to the Children of Israel, to all of us. Further, he adds: *halicha* – הליכה – walking indicates rising higher and higher.

Not only do our leaders walk; we do too. About eighty percent of the Torah describes our journey, and during the remaining twenty percent we move around as well, from Charan to the Land of Israel; back to Charan, back to the Land of Israel and then to Egypt.

And someone else walks as well. In this Torah portion of Vayelech we read:

Be strong and of good courage, fear not, nor be affrighted at them; **for the Hashem your G-d, He is the One who goes with you**; He will not fail you, nor forsake you. (Devarim 31:6)

חֲזָקוּ וְאַמְצוּ, אֶל-תִּירְאוּ וְאֶל-תַּעֲרֹצוּ  
 מִפְּנֵיהֶם: כִּי ה' אֱלֹהֵיךָ, הוּא הַהֵלֵךְ  
 עִמָּךְ--לֹא יִרְפֶּךָ, וְלֹא יַעֲזֹבֶךָ. (דברים לא:ו)

Hashem’s journey with us is reiterated in the partner Torah portion of this week, Nitzavim, when the Torah says (30:3):

that then Hashem your G-d will *turn your captivity*, and have compassion upon you, and will return and gather you from all the peoples, wherever Hashem your G-d has scattered you.

וְשָׁב יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֶת-שְׁבוּתְךָ,  
 וְרַחֲמֶךָ; וְשָׁב, וְקִבְּצֶךָ מִכָּל-הָעַמִּים,  
 אֲשֶׁר הִפִּיצֶךָ יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ, שָׁמָּה

The translation avoids the complexity in Hebrew, which does not say “God will turn” (or as it appears elsewhere – “God will restore”...). Instead, it says: God will *return*... as in, come back. Rashi says: Our sages learn from this that the *Sh’china*, God presence, is with Israel in their exile, and when they’re redeemed, God will redeem Himself and come back with us.

We’ve been called the People of the Book, but it would not be an exaggeration to say that we are likewise a People of the Journey. We journey physically – and spiritually. So much so, that as soon as we complete telling about the journey and are just about to set foot in the Promised Land, we roll our scroll back to the beginning and start all over. Jewish Law is also known as “halacha”, which comes from the same root indicating a lively path to walk on, not a stationary, frozen object. Like in the famous poem, Ithaca by the Egyptian Greek poet, journalist and civil servant Constantine Peter Cavafy, (1863-1933), the arrival is secondary to the journey and the movement, onward and upward.



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