



# Shabbat Table Talk Page

## Overview

- **Parashah: Nitzavim (נִצְבִים, "standing")**
- **Chapters: Deut. 29:10-30:20**



בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו, וְצִוָּנוּ לַעֲסוֹק בְּדַבְּרֵי תוֹרָה

– Torah Study Blessing –

## Synopsis

In last week's Torah portion (Ki Tavo), Moses warned the Israelites that obedience to the LORD would bring blessing, whereas disobedience would bring a litany of dreadful curses - including the prospect of being scattered among the nations in exile. In this week's portion, Moses formally gathered all of the people together to deliver them a final solemn appeal to uphold God's covenant. Obedience to this covenant would formally ratify the people as God's chosen nation subject to the terms and conditions previously stated, and would apply to all future generations. All Israel would be bound to the terms of the covenant for all time.

Moses then warned that anyone who attempted to be exempted from the terms of the covenant would be blotted out from the earth. Moreover, if the entire nation broke the covenant, the land itself would be made desolate and the people exiled. Moses then prophesied that when later generations would ask about the meaning of the exile of the Jews, they would be told that it was a direct result of breaking the covenant which Moses was mediating with them this very day. However, in the end of days, after the people had experienced tribulation, Israel would return to the LORD: "The LORD your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you, and he will gather you again from all the peoples where the LORD your God has scattered you. If your outcasts shall be at the ends of the heavens, from there will the LORD your God gather you and bring you back to the Land which your fathers have possessed. And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live."

The portion ends with an appeal to practice the Torah and its commandments. The covenant obligations are not too difficult or esoteric for them, but are completely within their reach - since they are a matter of the heart - and are known by the heart's decision to obey the LORD. Moses makes a final plea: "I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live! "The path of life is to love the LORD and obey His voice.



## Parashah Questions

1. What does the word *nitzavim* (נִצְבִּים) mean? (Deut. 29:10) <sup>1</sup>
2. *Where* were the people standing? (Deut. 29:10) <sup>2</sup>
3. *Who* was present during this convocation? (Deut. 29:10-11) <sup>3</sup>
4. *Why* were they gathered together by Moses? (Deut. 29:12) <sup>4</sup>
5. Why did Moses say “today” God is establishing you as His nation, when this had been expressed earlier during the Sinai revelation? (Deut. 29:13, Exod. 6:7, 19:5) <sup>5</sup>
6. Who (else) were made parties of this covenant? (Deut. 29:14-15) <sup>6</sup>
7. What does the Hebrew word “arevut” (עֲרֻבוֹת) mean? <sup>7</sup>
8. Why does Moses first mention the idols of Egypt and the nations? (Deut. 29:16-19) <sup>8</sup>
9. What is “a root producing fruit of poison and bitterness”? (Deut. 29:18-20)? <sup>9</sup>



<sup>1</sup> Nitzavim means “standing,” from the verb *natzav* (נָצַב) meaning to stand upright, or to be established as a pillar. Unlike the usual word for “standing” (עוֹמְדִים), the word *nitzavim* has the connotation of strength – a powerful stance. Though you will suffer through the curses, in the end you shall stand. God will preserve Israel – covenant of salt.

<sup>2</sup> “Before the LORD your God,” i.e., before God in the presence of the Ark of the Covenant in the plains of Moab, just east of the Jordan river, where Moses was giving his final address to Israel.

<sup>3</sup> The totality of the Jewish people, including women, children, sojourners, and slaves. No one was excluded.

<sup>4</sup> Moses was going to die and he called the people together for a final warning and ratification of the covenant.

<sup>5</sup> This is unclear, though perhaps the earlier statements were “suspended” due to the sin of the spies and the desert wanderings. Some have linked this statement to the entry of the promised land.

<sup>6</sup> The present parties of the covenant were the LORD and the people of Israel (Moses functioned as the mediator), but the people present also represented their descendants, i.e., the future generations of Israel. Note that unlike the covenant given earlier at Sinai, which was made with the nation as a whole, the language here is in the second person *singular*, referring to each individual person. It was therefore a “personal” covenant.

<sup>7</sup> Arevut means “mutual responsibility,” the idea that the terms of the covenant (that were spoken in the *singular* rather than the plural) were directed both vertically (toward God) and horizontally (toward man). Each person has a responsibility to live in obedience before the community and to help his neighbor do likewise (Lev. 19:17). This idea is sometimes expressed using the phrase, *kol Yisrael arevim zeh bazeh* – “all Israel is responsible for one another.” The concept of arevut entails that you are indeed your “brother’s keeper.”

<sup>8</sup> Moses did this to warn the people not to allow their hearts to stray from God and worship such idols. Note the progression from a single man or woman to a family and then to an entire tribe.

<sup>9</sup> A “root of bitterness” refers to a person who falls into self-deception and unbelief, and “blesses himself in his heart” by saying, “I will be safe, though I walk in the stubbornness of my heart” (compare to Heb. 12:15 where this idea is connected to a lack of the “grace of God”). This person, a practical atheist, will assuredly come under God’s curse as defined earlier in the “tochachah” portion of Moses’ speech. God will not forgive that person, since there is no atonement for the sin of unbelief...The phrase, “adding drunkenness to thirst” may refer to constant craving, or it may refer to the judgment that will befall all Israel for allowing this person to continue in their apostasy (see 29:22).



10. What purpose is given for retribution upon Israel? (Deut. 29:22-28) <sup>10</sup>
11. Was the covenant given to Israel *conditional* or not? (Deut. 29:28) <sup>11</sup>
12. What is meant by the statement, “The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us... so that we may do all the words of this law”? (Deut. 29:29)? <sup>12</sup>
13. What did Moses foretell would happen to Israel during the exile in the latter days? (Deut. 30:1-6) <sup>13</sup>
14. What does it mean when God says he will “circumcise your heart”? (Deut. 30:6)? <sup>14</sup>
15. After Israel returns to God at the End of Days, what will happen? (Deut. 30:7) <sup>15</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> God’s punishment would be seen by the nations and everyone would understand that it could not have come about by chance. The nations would then recognize that because the Jewish people abandoned the covenant, God sent retribution just as he promised. This will glorify God’s holiness and righteousness among the nations. Notice that the punishment of exile comes from the tochachah given in Leviticus (Lev. 26:32-33), and therefore the “entire curse written in the book” refers to the *entire* Torah, not simply the terms stated in this Torah portion.

<sup>11</sup> It was conditional based on the terms of the Sinai/Moab covenant (however the earlier promises made to the patriarchs were unconditional, since they were based on God’s unconditional oath). Note that the phrase “as you are today” refers to the state of the people at the time Moses spoke, i.e., still in the desert without a homeland.

<sup>12</sup> There is much discussion on this. Since the people were responsible for one another, they might have wondered how they could “police” the private matters of others, and therefore “secret” things may refer to the private transgressions of individuals. The people would be responsible only to judge “revealed” matters (i.e., public sins), but not the private thoughts and deeds of others. On a mystical level, the “secret things of the LORD” (הַסְּתֵרִים לַיהוָה) may refer to God’s hidden decree to exile the people to extend the offer of salvation to the nations. This “partial hardening” upon Israel is given “until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in” (read Rom. 11:25-36). Note that this mystical interpretation “fits” with the prophecy of Israel’s future conversion given in the following verses (Deut. 30).

<sup>13</sup> After the people experienced *both* the blessing and the curse (i.e., tribulation), while Israel is scattered among the nations (this refers to the Roman exile after the destruction of the Second Temple, since the Babylonian exile was not worldwide), the people would return to God with all their heart. Note that the phrase, “God will return your captivity” (30:3) uses a grammatical construction that implies that He (God) will return with them (וְשָׁב יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ אִתְּךָ שְׂבוּתְךָ), “The LORD your God will return with your captivity.” This points to the Second Coming of Yeshua at the end of the Great Tribulation. “At that time I will bring you in, at the time when I gather you together; for I will make you renowned and praised among all the peoples of the earth, when I restore your fortunes before your eyes” (Zeph. 3:20). Note that the double reference to being “brought in” (Zeph. 3:20) is thought to refer to two separate ingatherings - the first for those who are in the land during the return of Yeshua, and the second to those who are still located “at the ends of heaven.” “Who are these that fly like a cloud, and like doves to their windows? (Isaiah 60:8).

<sup>14</sup> Circumcision involves the removal of the “outer” to reveal the inner (and more sensitive) part. The metaphor suggests “heart surgery” where the people will be “opened up” to love God without blockage or obstruction. This is connected with the New Covenant (Jer. 31:30-32) when the Torah would be “written upon the heart” and become part of the inner character of the soul. The purpose of this is “so that you may live,” i.e., experience rebirth and new life.

<sup>15</sup> God will judge the nations that oppressed Israel. This refers to the judgment of the nations after the Great Tribulation period. The sages identify “your foes” as the seed of Esau (i.e., thought to refer to Rome and institutionalized Christianity) and “your enemies” as the seed of Ishmael (the Arabs).



16. Moses explained to the people that the commandment is not too far away – not up in heaven, nor over the sea – but instead is as close as your mouth and heart, so that you can do it. What commandment is meant in this case? (Deut. 30:11-14)<sup>16</sup>
17. Discuss how the Apostle Paul interpreted Deut. 30:11-14 in Romans 10:5-8.<sup>17</sup>
18. Ultimately, what was the choice that Moses set before Israel? (Deut. 30:15)<sup>18</sup>
19. What is the consequence of turning your heart away from God? (Deut. 30:17-18)<sup>19</sup>
20. What did Moses entreat the Jews to do? (Deut. 30:19)<sup>20</sup>

### Discussion Topics:

1. Why is this Torah portion always read before Rosh Hashanah?
2. What is *teshuvah*? Is it the same thing as “repentance”?
3. Paul stated that the Jews have a “zeal for God, but not after knowledge,” since they attempted to establish their own righteousness apart from God’s righteousness (Rom. 10:2-3). Discuss Paul’s idea of “righteousness that is from faith.”

### For Next Week:

- Read Parashat **Vayeilech** (Deut. 31:1-30)
- Read the Haftarah (Isaiah 55:6-8)
- Read the New Testament (Rom. 10:14-18)



<sup>16</sup> The sages interpret the commandment to be the one related to teshuvah, when the Jewish people will return and obey God after they have experienced the blessing and the curse of the latter days. Note that the goal of teshuvah, as described in this passage, is so that the people “can do it,” i.e., keep the commandments.

<sup>17</sup> Paul first quotes Lev. 18:5 as a summary of the *meaning* of the law (you must keep the commandments in order “to live by them,” i.e., you must *entirely* obey them to find life). He then contrasts the “righteousness which is from the law” with the “righteousness which is of faith.” Only God can bridge the gap between heaven and earth. When Paul quotes Deut. 30:14, i.e., “But the word is very near you. It is in your mouth and in your heart,” he *omits* the last clause (i.e., “so that you can do it”) precisely because we *can't* “do it,” i.e., keep the commandments. The “word of faith” is the message that God’s righteousness now comes through Messiah’s work for us, and the *confession* of faith ascribes salvation to be “of the LORD,” not based on our own works of righteousness...

<sup>18</sup> The choice between life and good, and death and evil. This is the fundamental principle of “free will,” that God does not decree whether a given soul will be either righteous or wicked.

<sup>19</sup> If you turn your heart aside, you will be led astray into idolatry, which will lead to exile and eventual death.

<sup>20</sup> God wanted the Jews to chose life by loving, obeying, and “cleaving” to Him. “For God is your life and the length of your days...” Psalm 36:9 – “For with you is the fountain of life” (כִּי־עִמָּךְ מְקוֹר חַיִּים).