

Parashah and Politics: How Torah Changed the World

Parashat Nitzavim-Vayelech, Deuteronomy, Chapters 29-31 | September 28, 2024

By Rabbi Meir Soloveichik

The Covenantal Song and the Joining of Generations

Of all of my columns for *Commentary* magazine, none received more of an abundance of emotional correspondence than the one that recounted the tale of the song of Yossi Hershkovitz. As I wrote there, Colonel Golan Vach, who leads Israel's National Rescue Unit, related that he was serving in Gaza with his fellow soldiers in the dead of night, when he heard a voice, humming a song, suddenly intrude on the darkness. It came from his comrade, Yossi Hershkovitz, a distinguished educator and also a violinist. "I asked him what he was humming," Vach recounted, "and he said it was a song that he used to sing to himself. I asked him if he had written the tune and he said yes. I asked him when and he replied, 'When we started walking.'"

The song had been composed in Gaza, in the midst of war. Vach added, "I asked him to sing it." And so Hershkovitz sang for his friend the tune that he had composed, to which ancient words were set, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for You are with me" (Psalms 23:4). So they sat there, at war, in the valley of the shadow of death, as Yossi Hershkovitz sang the tune he had brought into being.

Soon after, Yossi Hershkovitz fell in battle in Gaza. Among the mourners was Golan Vach, who said, "I was sitting there by myself, amidst all this death. And what most upset me was that I couldn't remember the song." But

then, he added, "At the funeral, I remembered it." Vach sang the song to Yossi Hershkovitz's family, and the mourners followed the *shiva* by recording the song together. Golan Vach gave the members of this family a link to a husband and father, allowing his fallen comrade to live through song in a family's hearts and souls.

[T]he bond between Yossi Hershkovitz and his family, forged in song, reflected the covenantal nature of Judaism itself.

If this story resounded with readers, it was of course because of its great poignancy; but also, I think, because the bond between Yossi Hershkovitz and his family, forged in song, reflected the covenantal nature of Judaism itself.

Our reading of *Nitzavim* begins with a striking description of the way the covenant of God's people binds past, present, and posterity:



Parashah and Politics

Nitzavim-Vayelech | September 28, 2024

You stand this day all of you before the Lord your God; the heads of your tribes, your elders, and your officers, all the men of Israel, your little ones, your wives, and the sojourner who is in your camp, both he who hews your wood and he who draws your water, that you may enter into the sworn covenant of the Lord your God, which the Lord your God makes with you this day; that he may establish you this day as his people, and that he may be your God, as he promised you, and as he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. **Nor is it with you only that I make this sworn covenant; but with him who stands here with us this day before the Lord our God, as well as with him who is not here with us this day.** (Deuteronomy 29:10–15)

Those that are here, and those that are not: the covenant connects generations to each other. Should we seek parallels in political thought, we might look to the language and eloquence of Edmund Burke, describing how a society is obligated by the traditions of the past, and acts with a duty toward the future:

As the ends of such a partnership cannot be obtained in many generations, it becomes a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born.

But for Judaism, the covenantal experience across generations is more than obligation; it involves an experience in which those who are not alive in our generation can nevertheless have their presence felt. As Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik put it:

Time [for the Jew] . . . does not simply consist of fleeting, imperceptible moments. The Jew walks alongside Maimonides, listens to R. Akiva, senses the presence of [the Talmudic sages] Abaye and Raba. He rejoices with them, and shares in their sorrow. . . . Both past and future become, in such circumstances, ever present realities.

Rabbi Soloveitchik's description was reified by great individuals from our own lifetime who were sustained by this feeling of covenantal bonds that cut across space and time. In his memoir of Soviet prison, *White Nights*, Menachem Begin describes how his interrogator tortured him by confining him to an inhuman form of social isolation: forcing him to face a wall for 60 hours straight.

Begin did not crack; and as he recounts, he was able to become existentially bound up with moments from his own childhood and adolescence, with central moments in his life, while simultaneously pre-experiencing the future as well. Through covenantal connection, he was transported to moments when he proudly proclaimed his Jewish identity in Polish schools, when he led the Zionist Beitar youth group in Poland, and the moment he met his mentor, Vladimir Jabotinsky. And he was transported as well to moments yet to come: when he would make it to the Land of Israel and be reunited with his wife and with his comrades in arms:

It is true that even a point on a wall can be an open book, that even a point on a wall can conjure up again pictures that one has forgotten and that help one to forget. Even a point on a wall can tell of home; of the hot tears that fall from a child's eyes because of a bad mark he has received from the teacher, not because he had not learned or did not know his lessons, but because he did not want to write in a



Parashah and Politics

Nitzavim-Vayelech | September 28, 2024

Gentile school on the Sabbath, and wanted to say in the face of the humiliation and the contempt for his people: “Yes, I am a Jew and I am proud of it.” A point on a wall can show wonderful processions of the new, proud Hebrew youth. . . . It can tell of the first meeting with Ze’ev Jabotinsky. . . .

And a point on the wall can not only bring up from the depths of the forgotten that which has been, but also conjure up things that are going to happen in the future: the rapture of meeting someone you love after a long separation, the light of joy in the eyes of friends as they welcome you back, and the continuation of battle for the ideal that has become your aim in life. That one single point on the wall can take you out of the detention room and carry you beyond its narrow confines, away from the building of horrors and the lost world of the NKVD, to the world of the living, into your world which was and will be again.

As you sit and stare, a miracle occurs. By means of self-commands, that magic creation of the human soul, the one reality departs and another comes in its place. The reality imposed upon you disappears entirely, and the reality for which your soul yearns, and upon which even the NKVD cannot impose its will, appears in all its splendor.

So Begin writes, and it is his joining of Sabbath observance, love, and Jewish peoplehood that truly reflects the covenantal connection that can be felt across time. He concludes by insisting that this was a genuine, and real, experience:

What I have written is not mere theory. I am not dabbling in mysticism. I have told the truth of what happened not only around me but within me during the 60 hours when I sat facing the wall. That is how the time went by. Goodness only knows how it would have passed otherwise.

To be a Jew, and to be part of the Jewish covenant, is to be linked to others, including those not physically present on earth. And if we wish to understand this better, we can look to what is understood by Jewish tradition to be the last commandment in the Torah, the 613th *mitzvah*, which appears near the conclusion of our reading this week. Moses exhorts the Israelites:

Now therefore write this song, and teach it to the people of Israel; put it in their mouths . . .
(Deuteronomy 31:19)

At first blush, “this song” refers to the song that Moses will declaim in the next *parashah*. But as interpreted by the Talmud, the “song” of which Moses speaks is the entire Torah, and the commandment here is to write a Torah scroll. As I put it in *Commentary*:

Judaism, according to this scriptural simile, is a song. It is not turgid text—it is sheet music. The point, as Rabbi Jonathan Sacks suggested, is that no single note makes a song . . .

Only by being connected with others do the notes together create a composition. To speak of Judaism as a song is to emphasize that our lives are covenantally connected. The notion of Judaism as song is a profound allegory for the interconnectedness of generations, the eternity of Judaism, and the nature of faith. Or as Rabbi Sacks writes:



Parashah and Politics

Nitzavim-Vayelech | September 28, 2024

Faith is more like music than science. Science analyzes; music integrates. And as music connects note to note, so faith connects episode to episode, life to life, age to age in a timeless melody that breaks into time. . . . *Faith is the ability to hear the music beneath the noise.*

The ability of Yossi Hershkovitz's family to sing the song composed when he served on behalf of his country and people in the valley of the shadow of death reflects the covenantal bond between a husband and father, and the family he loved. It reflects a bond between, in Moses' words, those who are here and those who are not here. Yossi Hershkovitz's song, in other words, is the embodiment of the covenant, inspiring us in its symbolism, and, in the midst of the profound sadness brought on by his story, reminding us in a spiritually resonant way that Hershkovitz will remain bound to his family as a note is joined to another, so that in singing the melody bequeathed them, his family will feel his presence still.

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Additional Resources

Rabbi Meir Soloveichik on Yossi Hershkovitz's Song, "The 23rd Song," *Commentary*, February 2024. [Click here to read.](#)

Israel National News on the Hershkovitz Family Song, "Heartbreaking: Hershkovitz Family Sings Their Father's Song," December 14, 2023. [Click here to read.](#)

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks on Judaism as a Song, "The Spirituality of Song," September 2015. [Click here to read.](#)

