



Stillness and Motion: Nitzavim, Rosh Hashanah and Beyond



By Steven Genack

On a conceptual level, the question must be asked how Nitzavim and Vayelech can be read together at all. Notwithstanding that only Nitzavim is read alone and apart this year, what can be extrapolated from the connect?

The Torah is demonstrating a sterling principle of stillness and motion: a model of behavior whereby one needs to first introspect and visualize and then carry out. One must first be Nitzavim—standing in stillness and reflection—before he can be Vayelech.

The famous question is asked that in Shema we first say not to look after the heart and only then not to look after the eyes. It seems to be out of order. It would seem to make more sense to say not to go after the eyes first, which in turn causes the heart to go astray. The answer given is that the heart (mind) always has the final decision in matters. Though outside influences always have the potential to lead one astray, it's the inner soul of man that really decides. This is another example of stillness and motion. There is always that still time for one to contemplate the road to take and decide whether it's the right one to choose.

From a practical standpoint, Nitzavim is the perfect symbol of Rosh Hashanah, where we stand for judgment before God just as Moshe recounts that "everyone" is standing before God. And everyone in this 40-versed parsha includes the generation of the 40 and all of future mankind, where a stillness and reckoning occurs. This 40 also correlates to the exact time period of the 40 days from the beginning of Elul to Yom Kippur, symbolic of purity and rebirth, as 40 seah are required in a mikvah to reach purity and a child is only considered viable after 40 days.

Nitzavim employs the language of visualization, as only in a state of stillness can one visualize. In a series of consecutive verses (Deut. 30:15-18), Moshe uses descriptive words. Moshe begins (Deut. 30:15), "Behold, I have set before you today life and good, and death and evil." In return for following the good, the next verse (Deut. 30:16) says, "Inasmuch as I command you this day to love the Lord, your God, to walk in His ways, and to observe His commandments, His statutes, and His ordinances, so that you will live and increase, and the Lord, your God, will bless you in the land to which you are coming to take possession of it." But we have the free will to disobey, as the next verse (Deut. 30:17) proclaims: "But if your heart deviates and you do not listen, and you will be drawn astray, and

you will prostrate yourself to other deities and serve them, "then the result is voiced in the next verse (Deut. 30:18), "I declare to you this day, that you will surely perish, and that you will not live long days on the land to which you are crossing the Jordan to come and take possession thereof."

Moshe delineates the choices we can freely make and the results thereof. If we engage in the stillness and motion model, we have the time to internalize the calamity that can occur through bad decisions, and conversely, blessings that can come from good decisions. We must make a conscious effort to adopt the right decision.

Just as Nitzavim fits with Rosh Hashanah, Vayelech, which will be read next week, coincides with the motion characteristic that follows stillness. Teshuvah involves action. Viduy must be done. The lips and the body must announce shame and regret. The body must act or not act. The state of stillness is no longer paramount.

Metaphorically, the idea of stillness and motion can be compared to Newton's first law of inertia—that if something is still it remains still unless a force is acted upon it. In our scenario, it would mean that man's life remains still until the mind acts to make a decision.

My first cousin, Rabbi Yakov Nagen (Genack), rosh kollel at Yeshivat Otziel, in his book "Nishmat HaMishna," asks: What is behind the requirement to say Shema twice a day, and how are the words beshivtecha b'beitecha u'belechtecha baderch to be understood?

He explains that the two times represent the two aspects in man's life. He has his life in the house and his life outside the house. Both of these lives must be imbued with a fear of God, signified by kabbalat ol malchut shamayim. In essence, wherever man is, he must take God with him. Said another way, in our context, one must function in a world of stillness and motion. This means one must contemplate what it means to be before God and then let his actions organically flow from that.

Perhaps one would ask a question from Pinchas, who initiated an action more based on passion than deliberation. The answer is Pinchas got the eternal brit shalom because

the action was for God, but he wasn't chosen as the leader as this went to Yehoshua who was a man *asher ruach bo*, who had a balanced spirit. Yehoshua was in tune with his innards and faced challenges with a thought-out approach. This comports with the philosophy of stillness and motion.

Rav Goldvicht, shlita, rosh yeshiva, Yeshiva University, offers a penetrating insight into how man's creation itself gives man an opening to ask for mercy, something we are all seeking during these days, and an idea that gives an even greater incentive to engage in the stillness and motion model.

The ground defied God's order by not making the fruit of the tree taste like the tree. In essence, the ground sinned before God. Man is created from the ground. Therefore, man can always claim that he was created from something that already sinned against God and should therefore be judged gently as there was already a tendency toward sin built into him.

This can shed light on a fascinating Midrash that describes how the angel of emet didn't want God to create man because he said man is full of lies. Upon hearing this, God hurled emet to the ground. The other angels went before God pleading for emet to be revived, and it was revived and grew out from the ground. Perhaps it can be said that emet became entangled with the ground that defied God as well. Once emet got intermingled with the ground and rose from it, it could no longer be "perfect" in the abstract as it came from the ground of sin. This can be another saving grace for man as he approaches the day of judgment. Even if we lacked full emet, at least we can look to emet itself that was compromised by having to grow from the ground.

Stillness and motion are a wonderful Torah principle plucked from the association of two parshiot, Nitzavim and Vayelech. We can use our mind to ponder and contemplate and then use our body to carry out. There's no better formula to achieve balance.

Steven Genack is the author of "Articles, Anecdotes & Insights," Genack/Genechovsky Torah from Gefen Press.

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