

Those Not Standing Here This Day
Shabbat Nitzavim-Vayeilech 5777

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The Rabbi of my early childhood was infamous for berating the High Holy Day congregation for not showing up at Temple more often during the year. I was blessed with a different role model when I was Rabbi David Goldstein's rabbinic intern at Touro Synagogue in New Orleans. There, the door off the Sanctuary bimah opens directly into the rabbi's study. On Rosh Hashanah Eve, Rabbi Goldstein cracked the door open, peered out at the congregation, and exclaimed in wonder, "They're back!"

Tonight, I preach to the choir, as it were. Of course, we always have guests, not to mention members who attend from time to time because of a *yahrzeit*, a special occasion, a spiritual need, or maybe even an intriguing sermon title. On most Friday nights, though, the majority in attendance are "regulars." This week's Torah portion gives us an opportunity to think about how we regulars might view those who are not here tonight or on most Friday nights, but who will most assuredly be here come Rosh Hashanah Eve.

As the Children of Israel prepare to enter the Promised Land, Moses impresses their obligations upon them. He addresses *kol ish Yisrael*, "every single Israelite." It's Rosh Hashanah Eve, if you will. Everyone is there: elders, tribal leaders, water drawers, and so forth. But why mention each sub-group specifically, when they're obviously all included among "every single Israelite."

The weekly Torah commentary distributed by Rabbi Ciment from Lubavitch of Arkansas suggests a powerful reason: "Our sages have said, 'All Israel are guarantors for each other.'"ⁱ A guarantor is, for example, a wealthy person who guarantees a loan taken out by a person of lesser means. In this case, though, the wood chopper isn't being asked to back a loan to an elder. Instead, every Israelite is being called upon to assure that others will keep the Covenant. Rabbi Ciment shares the teaching of the late Lubavitcher Rebbe, who observes, "This means that in every Jew . . . is a quality in which he or she is superior to all others." The water-drawer, for example, provides a necessity for life, without which even the tribal leader cannot observe Torah.

Moses emphasizes that the group he's addressing includes "those who are not standing here this day." Who are those absent but included individuals? And what do they have to offer to "every single Israelite?"

Rashi and Ibn Ezra, two of our greatest medieval commentators, say that the people "not standing here this day" are future generations, the descendants of those standing on the banks of the Jordan.ⁱⁱ What do we have to offer those who came before us? I'm reminded of a *midrash*. When the Children of Israel stood at Mount Sinai, God asked for guarantors that they would abide by Torah. Our people offered their prophets and sages as guarantors. God finds favor with each, but deems neither to be sufficient. "Then the Israelites said: 'Our children will be our guarantors.' To that, God replied, "In truth, these are good guarantors. For their sake, I will give Torah to you."ⁱⁱⁱ As Jews who continue to study Torah and strive to make it live, we are the future of the generation that stood at Sinai and those who stood before Moses on the banks of the Jordan.

Bechor Shor, later than Rashi or Ibn Ezra, but still in the Middle Ages, suggests that "those not standing here this day" refers to converts, those who would later choose to join themselves to the Children of Israel.^{iv} Yes, converts should be considered as lineal descendants of Moses's audience. After all, each new Jew's name includes *ben* or *bat Avraham v'Sarah*, son or daughter of Abraham and Sarah. No mere formality, the rabbis of old who instituted this practice signaled that converts are legitimate heirs to our heritage. Still, something extra may be learned when we consider how converts might be guarantors for all the people of Israel. Converts are among our most regular worshipers and active Temple participants. Our converts are often "superior to every other Jew" in their enthusiastic embrace of the heritage bequeathed to us all.

No medieval commentator suggests that "those who are not with us this day" refers to "High Holy Day Jews."

Many of you have heard me say, "I don't count the empty chairs." I learned from Rabbi Goldstein to celebrate those who come – more than a minyan on Shabbat morning, our Friday night regulars, our Torah Study stalwarts, the handful who gather to learn on Thursdays at lunchtime, and, yes, our Rosh Hashanah Eve throngs. Occasionally, when a committee gets bogged down in trying to figure out how to bring more people to Temple offerings, I suggest that we concentrate on those who do attend regularly. We need to balance opportunities that may appeal to folks who may be enticed to darken the Temple

doorstep with programs and services that meet the deep spiritual, educational, and service needs of our “regulars.”

Last Sukkot, I gave a little impromptu *D’var Lulav*, a commentary on that symbol we wave in every direction to acknowledge the infinite sources of God’s blessings:

We hold the four species of the lulav together, symbolizing that all Jews – indeed, all humanity – must be united if God is properly to be praised. Nevertheless, I’ve never resonated to the specifics of the *midrash* detailing the four types of Jews which the species are said to represent: the *etrog*, or citron, with taste and smell, signifying Jews who study Torah and perform *mitzvot*; the palm branch, with taste but no smell, symbolizing those who study Torah but do not practice what they’ve learned; the myrtle, with good smell but no taste, standing for those who perform *mitzvot* but are not learned in Torah; and the willow, with neither taste nor smell, symbolizing those who lack both learning and Jewish observance.^v

Let me suggest an alternative.

Perhaps the *etrog* represents those who participate actively in Jewish worship, study, and performance of *mitzvot* as well as the stewardship of the Jewish community. The palm, then, might stand for those who practice Judaism actively but aren’t engaged in the business of the synagogue or other Jewish institutions. The myrtle would symbolize Jews who give their time to Jewish communal governance but don’t often worship, study, or observe the *mitzvot*.

But what of the willow, that symbol with neither taste nor smell? Which Jews does it represent? Fortunate congregations are blessed, and I do mean “blessed,” with more than a few “willows,” members who neither practice Judaism actively nor become involved in governance. Active congregants sometimes speak of these folks derisively, emphasizing that they attend “twice a year,” if ever. I, on the other hand, see these “willows” differently. Yes, I’m eager to find ways to engage everyone in Jewish life. Still, I am grateful for the “willows.” They stand up and let themselves be counted as Jews – and, I hasten to add, they continue to pay their annual financial commitments faithfully, even as they rarely “take advantage” of the “privileges of membership.”

As our High Holy Days approach, let us rejoice in every person among us. At this season especially, let us appreciate the “willows” in our midst, and not deride them. Perhaps with that more positive attitude, we can approach each one as an

individual, increasingly appreciating what he or she may offer to our people, that one aspect in which each person is “superior to every other Jew.” Each one has value. May we all pull together, appreciating one another, rejoicing that we do band together in diverse ways to serve the Holy One of Blessing.

Amen.

ⁱ Babylonian Talmud, Shevuot 39b.

ⁱⁱ Rashi and Ibn Ezra to Deuteronomy 29:14.

ⁱⁱⁱ Song of Songs Rabbah 1:4.

^{iv} Bechor Shor to Deuteronomy 29:14.

^v Leviticus Rabbah 30:12.