

They are beckoned to view themselves as integral parts of an expansive and inclusive community.

To deliberately and mindfully stand before or with anyone, we need to first make the choice to show up, and to be aware that our presence will be noticed and make a difference. In the moment of Israel standing before God, everyone counts—those with prestige and honorifics, and those who may be debased by others on any other ordinary day for not being “enough.” They all show up.

Troubled times can feel especially isolating; as our social media newsfeeds are saturated with images of terror and destruction, even those of us who live in safety and security can spin a narrative that we each stand alone. Yet, I am struck by the plentiful photographs of the people who show up—not because they are required to do so, but because they feel called to do so. Because they view themselves as part of something bigger—as connected to fellow humans in need. These images encapsulate this goodness. Who are these people behind the images? We don’t know. They may be leaders, officers, woodcutters, or water drawers. Possibly simply neighbors who heard cries of terror and leapt to action. They felt that they were a part of something larger. We honor them for showing up.

See one of the photographs that inspired these words at:  
[www.jtsa.edu/woodcutters-and-water-drawers](http://www.jtsa.edu/woodcutters-and-water-drawers)



Nitzavim 5779

נצבים תשע"ט



## We Need Each Other

**Rabbi Daniel Nevins, Pearl Resnick Dean of The Rabbinical School and dean of the Division of Religious Leadership, JTS**

One of the greatest privileges and responsibilities of a rabbi is to train candidates for conversion to Judaism. Such people are often spiritual seekers, and their questions challenge teachers whose Jewish identity and practice are well established. Why do you do this? What do you believe? What does this text mean? Will this practice make any difference? Faced with such inquiries, it becomes harder for teachers to treat ritual as habit, and faith as dogma. The questions posed by converts, children, or adults who are first discovering the depths of Judaism are exciting to those of us who teach Torah, forcing us to reexamine our own beliefs and practices.

In a sense, the convert challenges their teacher to detach from group habit and encounter Judaism as an individual standing before God. This is a healthy shift of focus for people who are deeply embedded in community. But the opposite is also true—teachers of Torah must infuse their students with a sense of collective purpose and identity. It is wonderful to be a spiritual seeker, but if one’s journey remains solitary, that is not the Jewish way. Judaism is intended to be communal and cannot be fully practiced all alone. The conversion process therefore includes participation in communal worship, festivals, and meals, as well as learning about Jewish history.

For this reason, the Talmud instructs teachers to ask candidates for conversion why they want to join the Jewish people (BT Yevamot 47a). *Don't you know of our historic struggles?* Only when the convert acknowledges the suffering of Israel and states that they are not “worthy” to share in it, are they accepted “immediately” and then taught “some” commandments. The Talmud’s examples of which commandments should be taught to the proselyte are surprising—we teach them about leaving the corners of the field, dropped and

forgotten fruits, and tithes for the poor. Not Shabbat, nor kashrut, nor prayer, but tzedakah is the essential commandment for those joining the Jewish people, just as it was for Ruth (see Ruth chapter 2). According to this Talmudic presentation, the key to conversion is neither theology nor ritual, but social solidarity with the Jewish poor. Of course, as Maimonides hastens to add, we do teach them the principles of faith and the essential practices of Judaism, but first comes community (Mishneh Torah, Laws of forbidden relations, 14:1-2).

This dialectic between individual and collective identity is at play in Parashat Nitzavim and in the Days of Awe. Our portion opens (Deut. 29:9-14) with a dramatic assertion of collectivism—you stand together—all generations, all genders, all levels of engagement, in the covenant with God. The Torah makes the remarkable claim here that physical presence is no limit to community. All generations of Israel are linked together to God, whose perspective transcends time and space. In English we miss the force of this opening since the words “you stand” are the same for singular and plural, but in Hebrew the Torah’s point is obvious—you stand together, or you don’t stand at all.

If we look at chapter 29, we notice a sudden shift from this emphatic collectivism to addressing the individual. The Torah anticipates individuals—men, women, families, and even clans, who will be tempted to break away and disassociate from the larger community of Israel. In verse 19 we read, “God will not desire to forgive him.” In contrast, back in Numbers 14:19-20, Moses pleads with God to forgive “this people” and God says, “I have forgiven as you have spoken.” There is safety in numbers, and not only when facing human enemies. God weighs our merits and sins within the context of community, and judges us not as individuals but as a people.

In Safed of the 16th century, Rabbi Moses Alsheikh pointed to this shift from group to individual identity and called it “backwards.” The divine attribute of mercy is aroused by group identity, not by individual merit. This makes sense, since to join a community and stick with it requires mercy from us as well. Which of us has not grown frustrated with some of the people and the dynamics at play in our Jewish community? Who needs this? We all do, it turns out. When we are willing to forgive others and join with them, despite their flaws, then God, as it were, is also willing to put up with us, forgiving us our flaws.

This truth explains the paradox of the High Holidays. You might think that the great task of the Ten Days of Repentance is to confess our individual flaws and become more faithful and righteous individuals before God. But that is precisely not the point of these Days of Awe. Even the exercise of confessing individual sins and begging forgiveness from each other is designed to strengthen solidarity between members of the community so that we may stand united before God. The point of the Days of Awe is to stand together, singing “We are your people, and You are our king!” The hours spent in synagogue are a process of amalgamation in which individuals become bonded into a covenanted community.

Pre-modern Jews often lived in tight-knit communities, frequently forced to dwell in close proximity. For Jews in America and other western democracies, we are typically more spread apart and may struggle to join together. Building Jewish community is labor-intensive, expensive, and sometimes exasperating. But spiritual community is the essence of Jewish identity. It is the key to our survival and the source of our strength. When we face troubles, as we surely have done in the past year with the surge in violent anti-Semitism, it is not only the converts who can say of these afflictions, “I know them, and I am not worthy of them.” Alone, none of us is worthy; together, we command the attention and mercy of God. May we together be signed and sealed in the Book of Life for a good and sweet new year!

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## דבר אחר | A Different Perspective



**Woodcutters and Water Drawers**  
**Dr. Shira D. Epstein, Dean of the William Davidson Graduate School of Jewish Education, JTS**

The opening verses of this week’s parashah pronounce that the entirety of Israel stands before God to enter into the covenant: the leaders, the elders, the officers; every man, child, woman, and convert, as well as the “woodcutters and water drawers” (Deut. 29:9–10). Unlike some other Torah excerpts that clearly demarcate mitzvot reserved for a particular classification of people, *all* people are told to show up in this moment.