

*Atem Nitzavim: What Do You Stand For?*

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Being both the teacher and the rock 'n roll fan that I am, I want to ask you this question:

Who are you? (Who are you? Who, who, who, who?)  
I really wanna know (Who are you? Who, who, who, who?)  
-Pete Townsend -

Most likely, some of you recognize the lyrics of Pete Townsend, of the appropriately named rock band "The Who." Townsend's lyrics go off in a bit of a different direction from here. None the less, the question that we are asked to review each year during these awesome days comes down to Townsend's really not so simple question:

Who are you? I really wanna know.

How would you answer Townsend's question? I mean, with more than just your name. This is the the most difficult question asked of each of us as we peer into the mirror that is our Machzor, our High Holy Day prayer book: Who are you?

It is a question that strikes at the very core of what it means to be human. It is a question that is both as ancient as human consciousness and as current as the most popular trends in Western psychology and spirituality. The question, "Who are you?" is framed today as "mindfulness;" which, if you 'Google', you will find defined as an ancient Buddhist practice of self-awareness and growth. Of course, the Buddhist had no monopoly on practices of self-awareness. The ancient Jewish practice in which we are involved today is very much akin to this Buddhist exercise. In case you doubt the "JuBu" connection, a quick scan down the Wikipedia article on mindfulness makes this abundantly clear. There you will find the find the sadly amusing fact that the leading advocates of Buddhist mindfulness in the West are the great Buddhist teachers *Jon Kabat-Zinn*, *Jack Kornfield*, *Joseph Goldstein* and *Sharon Salzberg*: Yonatan, Ya'akov, Yoseph and Shoshana, all JuBus who should be bringing their students, eager to learn mindfulness practices, to the place that most likely provided the foundation of their own mindfulness – right here! Imagine if our ancient sages had had the foresight to market these *aseret yamei teshuvah*, Ten Days of Repentance, as a mindfulness seminar.

Imagine Crystal sharing tea [tomorrow/Friday] morning with her friend Harmony:

“I spent yesterday at the most amazing mindfulness retreat.”

“Really? “

“Yes.” Crystal would respond, “It was wonderful. First, we were not allowed any food or drink for the entire day. We were asked to forego all aspects of our physical nature so that we might meditate solely on our inner life. We joined together in ancient chants and modern words meant to deepen our inward focus. It was a remarkable experience. I feel like I learned so much about myself; but not only about myself. I spent the entire day shoulder to shoulder with others as I discovered my connection to, and impact on, the world around me. I feel like a new person.”

I really think we’re missing out on something big here!

Judaism is, first and foremost a lifelong, lesson on mindfulness. So, welcome, my name is Barry. I am blessed to be joined by my colleague Patti and her choir. Together, we would like to guide you through a journey that we hope will bring you, by the end of the day, to a place of heightened and deepened self-understanding, a new mindfulness regarding yourself and your impact on those whose life you share. By now, with any luck, through the power of meditations, reflections and chants you have already begun to feel the power of that journey. Before we move further along, however, let me pause to map out where we are headed.

There is a meditation in our regular Friday evening workshops that beautifully expresses the task to which we aspire today: “We harbor within, we all do, a vision of our higher selves, an image of what we could and should become.” (Oh, yes, in case I forget to mention it later, we do offer wonderful *weekly* opportunities to deepen and solidify the work in which we are engaged today). Central to our journey are four ancient texts, two we [will/have] read [tomorrow/this] morning, and two more [tomorrow/this] afternoon; four texts from our ancient books of wisdom, woven together by the founders of these sessions because of their power to help us actualize what we could and should become.

We [begin/began] [tomorrow/this morning] with this Torah challenge: “*Atem nitzavim* :” “You stand here this day ... before your Eternal God ...” Standing

does not seem to be a particular challenge for most of us. Until we consider that there are many ways to stand. We can ‘*omdim*’ stand physically – as we do for the ‘Amidah’ the ‘standing’ prayers. Not particularly challenging. But, we can also do what we [will/have] [be/been] asked: ‘*nitzavim*’ stand not only physically, but spiritually as well. Our mindfulness journey must begin by making the difficult choice to stand with our whole being before God; taking the risk to open ourselves body, heart and soul, ready to move in a new direction.

Answering the question “who are you?” begins with understanding what you stand for. Poet and philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson taught that “God offers every mind its choice between truth and repose. Take which you please – you can never have both.” Our journey today begins with a personal choice. If you choose to simply be who you are, if you choose to do nothing, to stand for no more, *then* there is nothing to be gained, no journey to be made on this day.

“*Atem nitzavim* :” “You stand here this day ... to make a difference tomorrow. One of the great founding fathers of our mindfulness work was a man called Isaiah, a prophet, really. He warned those who came to listen to him, and admonishes us as well, that if we expect reciting the words and going through the motions to, somehow, change our lives, we are sadly mistaken. Words alone mean nothing. They are useless except as an expression of what we choose to stand for. Words only matter if they are a mindful reflection of the personal responsibility we take to better the world, to fight for justice for all, to free the oppressed, to feed the hungry, house the homeless and clothe the naked. “The great use of life is to use it for something that will out last it.” wrote William James. That indeed is Isaiah’s counsel from [tomorrow/this] morning’s Haftarah: if today is to have any meaning, then you must commit to using your power to make a difference tomorrow. Find your passion. Stand up and be counted.

“*Atem nitzavim* :” “You stand here this day ... that you might fill up the world with acts of holiness. Holiness begins with loving your neighbor as yourself, ‘*V’ahavta l’rayacha camocha* ,’ so we will hear [tomorrow/this] afternoon. This command, emerging from the very heart of the Torah, must reside in our hearts as well. We have come here today to learn how to better love *ourselves* so that we can better love our neighbors. This is the very definition of living a holy life. This is not the holiness of secluded, mountaintop meditation, but rather the holiness to be found in removing stumbling blocks before those who are unaware; of choosing to avoid the curse of degrading and hurtful gossip; of making a commitment to fair and ethical business practices, of choosing to care for the outcast and downtrodden of our society, and to commit ourselves to the pursuit of freedom for those still shackled by the bonds of slavery which we experienced so long ago ... and not so long ago. “There are two ways to serve God, the great Hasidic rabbi,” the Baal Shem Tov, taught, “One is to separate yourself from people and from the world’s affairs, and to devote yourself wholly to a study of religious books. This is the safe way. The other way is to mingle with people, to engage in the affairs of the world, and, at the same time, to try to be an example of godliness. This way has its dangers, but it is far the more worthy.” We are each asked, “Will you choose to be an example of godliness, a provider of holiness and healing to your community?”

“*Atem nitzavim* :” “You stand here this day ... to decide if you will be Jonah or

a Ninevite? Do you stand with Jonah, a man who heard God's words but was stubbornly closed off to its meaning and power? Who, as Rabbis Simon and Garfunkel taught, listened but could not hear, and therefore, chose death over life? Or, will you be like the people of Nineveh who heeded Jonah's warning and chose life as they stood open hearted before God? The Ninevites, who, realized that the final verdict was yet to be written and performed *teshuvah*, transforming their lives and their world? Will you be Jonah standing firm, remaining at a distance from the community? Or will you be a Ninevite hearing the voice of God calling out to you to choose a new path?

A story is told of a young man who comes to his rabbi and demands to know why the messiah has not yet come. "Why, Rabbi?"

"Why?" his rabbi asks, for everyone knows that the only appropriate way for a Jew to answer a question is with a question. "Why has the messiah not come? I'll tell you why. Because, we are no different today than we were yesterday."

Four texts, two Torah portions and their accompanying Haftarot map out the mindfulness journey we must make if there is to be any chance that tomorrow will be different from today.

But, we need not focus solely on ancient words. There are, in every generation and in every community individuals whose lives serve as texts from which we should learn. Their examples are woven, as well, into the very fabric of this day.

I am mindful of the fact that we stand in close proximity to the *yahrzeit* of one such individual: Fran Rosenfield, of blessed memory, whose picture graces our hallway. Fran chose to stand and make a difference. Through the program that has come to bear her name, Fran Rosenfield's *Matanot miLibeynu*, Gifts from the Heart, this community has, over the years provided hundreds if not thousands of gifts to children at holiday times and for their birthdays. Fran continues to teach us all of the power inherent in mindfully standing up and choosing to make a difference. She was a powerful presence, a cornerstone of this community and her presence is sorely missed as we join together this day as a community. "*Atem nitzavim*:" "You stand here this day ... hearing voices both ancient and modern, of Torah, of Isaiah, Jonah and Fran, all calling out: Let this day change you. Stand no longer at a distance watching the community. Rather, join with it.

The well known therapist and concentration camp survivor, Viktor Frankl, wrote in his book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, "We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms – to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way." [*Man's Search for Meaning*, p.75]

"*Atem nitzavim*:" "You stand here this day ... to choose your way. So calls out Moses to us from the words of our Torah. Moses, who, himself was asked to choose as he stood on holy ground before the burning bush, asks us today to do

the same, to recognize the holy ground of possibility upon which we stand. It is a powerful image that beckons us: a promised land of milk and honey, a land filled with potential and hope. The great rabbi Bruce Springsteen once wrote, “Mister, I ain't a boy, no, I'm a man, and I believe in a promised land.”

I, for one, continue to believe. It is out of that belief and mindful of the call of this day to choose life and blessing, to choose to bring healing and repair into the world, that I am now going to call on your belief in that land as well.. As we listen to the beautiful voices of our Cantor and choir I want you to make a choice. Let me know who you are and where you stand. ‘Cause I really wanna know. As you entered the sanctuary you received a list of ways in which you can help transform yourself and your community. I ask you to make a choice, place your name on that sheet and leave it with an usher as you exit the sanctuary [tonight/today].

[Click here to see the list and make your choices online](#)

Enjoy the remainder of our workshop. May the meditations and teachings of this day help you to a deeper and more profound understanding of who you are and what you stand for, that we might, together, take one more step towards the Promised Land.