If you were Moses, and you had just freed the Jewish people from 430 years of brutal slavery, only to lead them for 40 more years of hardship and toil through the hot sandy desert, finally arriving in your old and broken age at a mountain top overlooking the promised land of Israel, "What would you say to them?"

And lets suppose at this same time that you knew that you would not lead them any further. You knew that the rest of their journey as individuals and as a nation would be in the hands of others and its outcome yet unknown. If you could muster the courage what final words would you impart to them?

I can tell you honestly, I have no idea. I look to times in my life when I have been standing on that mountain top or more likely in that airport, college dorm or wedding hall, standing there looking out over the uncertain future, and all that comes to mind is something my parents and probably most of our parents must have said, "Work hard, do your best, remember what you believe in and who you are, be true to yourself." Advice like this is usually followed with a pat on the back, a hug and a kiss and then an urgency to tackle the unknown that waits ahead. It is no different for Moses.

In this week's parsha, Nitzavim, when Moses arrives at just such a moment with the children of Israel he chooses very similar parental words. Choosing to challenge the children of Israel with keeping God's commandments Moses proclaims, "You stand this day, all of you before Adonai your God... to enter into the covenant of Adonai your God... as God swore to your ancestors, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. I make this covenant... both with those who are standing here with us this day... and with those who are not with us here this day." The covenant will last he warns, only if they stay true to their faith in God. If they forsake God and God's commandments then devastation, plagues and curses will afflict them.

But Moses, like a thoughtful parent reminds the children of Israel that this is not an impossible task, in fact it is a very achievable condition. He stresses to them that

their faith does not depend upon a prophet or a messenger of God working on their behalf. The Covenant rests with them as a community of individuals each challenged with the same obligations, each responsible for themselves and each other. Moses is very clear on this point. The covnant between God and the children of Israel cannot be maintained only by the few. It must be a communal, consolidated effort. As example of this Moses recounts the destruction that befell Sodom and Gemorah in the time of Abraham. These two cities contained both the lawless and the faithful. But it was because of the lawless that they were destroyed, inspite of the few faithful. The covenant is made with all of the children of Israel as Moses says, "This generation here this day and those not [yet born]."

But as with parental advice, even stead fast adherance to the the instructions does not guarantee that life will be without tragedy and obstacle. Moses fortells of the exile of the Israelies from their land in future generations. He tells them that this happens because they will be come complacent and negligent in their faith. Perhaps performing the letter of the law but not living up to the spirit or intention that it is founded upon.

Perhaps seeing the impossibility of maintaining a covenant that cannot be repaired once it is broken, God through Moses instructs the people on the nature of Teshuvah or Repentance. If and when the Jewish people stray from their path, God will maintain the covenant if they make heartfelt and consistent efforts to return to the proper faith. Such is the source of the passage from Nitzavim that has become a corner stone of our High Holy Day liturgy. When Moses proclaims, "I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day; I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse, Choose Life." The Jew does this by loving God and observing the commandments. And when as Moses foretold and as we are personally aware, when the Jew strays from that course, they need only to turn and return to God in a heartfelt and sincere manner and the covenant will be maintained.

Moses' words were directed to all generations of Jews on each of our mountain tops looking out on all of our uncertain futures. For in truth we all stand at some point

in our lives at the end of one journey and the uncertain beginning of the next. But through all of our travels, on all of our mountain tops God and the covenant explained to us by Moses is with us, and even when we stray from our path, when we turn from our faith we can turn again for the "Gates of repentance are always open" (Lamentations Rabbah 3.44) and the covenant God has made with Israel is for each generation and all time.

Tonight night is slichot, we will change the covers on our torah scrolls to white. As we change the outside of those sacred scrolls, let us use it as an opportunity to change the inside of our very souls. To take this moment in our calendar for reflection and introspection. To meet Moses' challenge to ourselves. To look over the expanse of our life, the uncharted course that lies ahead and to give ourselves advice for the journey about to unfold. What words of wisdom would we impart to ourselves before we embark upon the exploration of a new year, what choices are before us and what decisions can we make now so that we might find more meaning in our life, acknowledge our unique blessings, cope with and better adapt to our specific challenges. On a mountain top, over looking the Promised Land, Moses gave his advice to the whole of the people of Israel. Stand where we stand today, over looking the promise of a coming year, what words of advice and guidance do we have for ourselves. My prayer may we not only hear them, but may we listen as well.