

“Nitzavim-Vayyeilech: Renewing the Covenant with Israel”

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(This Torah Thought is an expanded version of “Nitzavim-Vayyeilech: We need a new Covenant” – 11 Sept. 2020)

King David waxed lyrical regarding the absolute unity of the Jewish people: *Hinneih mah tov umah na'im shevet achim gam Yachad* – ‘See how good and pleasant it is when brethren dwell together’ (Ps. 133:1). And this is what was uppermost in Moses’ mind as he addressed his people for the last time before his death, as described in the opening lines of the sidrah *Nitzavim*.

He assembled before him representatives of every group within the nation: *Tribal heads, the elders, sundry officials, converts, the old and the young, even the wood carvers and the drawers of water* (Deut. 29: 9-10). All had a place within the covenant, irrespective of age or rank. All had a worthwhile contribution to make to the national enterprise. All possessed the potential to enrich the nation with their talents, vitality, and originality. Moses acknowledged that, sought to nurture it and reinforce it by calling upon them all to swear an oath of allegiance as they were about to enter the Promised Land, just as their parents had done 40 years earlier when the entire nation stood, as a unity, before Mount Sinai.

But one may question why the younger generation needed to be made to commit to a faith and a people into which they were born and reared, and with which they were wholly identified to the exclusion of any other affiliation. After all, they had grown up as desert travellers, bound by an intimate bond of shared experience, tradition, and preparedness for the unfolding of their destiny in the Promised Land. They had witnessed first-hand the daily miracles: the destruction of their enemies and the provision of heaven-sent manna to

sustain them in the desert. They would have listened, in awe, admiration, and with a profound sense of pride, to the reminiscences of their parents and grandparents regarding the plagues in Egypt, the destruction of the Egyptian army in the Red Sea, and the numinous sense of God's presence as they stood at Mount Sinai. All of that was surely their proud heritage, as was the still-present, daily evidence of God's protective embrace whenever they looked heavenward and surveyed the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night. Surely, it was unthinkable that they would ever repudiate their heritage and abandon their people and faith! So why did Moses require them to commit to such an oath of allegiance at this time?

The answer lies in the fact that Moses was fully aware that reliance on such generational loyalty and assumed commitment to inherited values, was misplaced, for which reason this formal renewal of the covenant was regarded as essential for both the younger and older generations. On the very last day of his life,¹ Moses shares that knowledge of his people's continued rebelliousness into the future, as foretold to him by God.²

When Moses had written the words of this teaching to the very end, Moses charged the Levites...saying: 'Take this Book of Teaching and place it beside the Ark of the Covenant...and let it remain there as a witness against you. For, well I know how defiant and stiff-necked you are: even now, while I am still alive in your midst, you have been defiant toward the Lord; how much more, then, when I am dead! ...For I know that, when I am dead, you will act wickedly and turn away from the path that I enjoined you, and that, in the time to come, misfortune will befall you for having done evil in the sight of the Lord and vexed Him by your deeds (Deut. 31:24-29).

Regarding the older generation, this was because the Sinaitic covenant did not invest them with any depth of faith and trust in God. Witness the fact that, only three days after their

rapturous singing of the *Shirah* (song of triumph and thanksgiving to God) at the destruction of their enemies in the Red Sea — described by the Torah as a token of their ‘fear of, and faith in, God and in Moses his servant’ (Ex. 14:31) — the entire people staged a demonstration, shouting and grumbling against Moses because there was a shortage of water, and the water they did find had a bitter taste (See Ex.15: 22-26).

Add to that, the catalogue of acts that betokened a total lack of belief in God’s providence. To name but a few: the worship of the Golden Calf, the rebellion of the spies and the people’s ready acceptance of their false report, Korach’s rebellion, and the immorality with the Moabite women.

As regards the younger generation, there was also a pressing need to bind them to a covenant of faith, given that most would have been too young to have remembered or comprehended the significance of the Mount Sinai experience. Also, their destiny, to inherit the land and enjoy a sense of sovereignty and national identity, meant that they and their progeny would view the Promised Land as their inalienable right. Unable to identify with their forebears’ mindset, rooted in the perspective of the hardships and frustrations of a desert lifestyle, they were more likely to focus on the prosperity that the land offered, and the attractions and cultural practices of the surrounding nations.

And that, we suggest, was the reason Moses insisted that the younger generation also bind itself and its offspring to a covenant of loyalty to their ancestral God and faith. Moses had this in mind when he appealed to them to

‘Remember the days of old,
Consider the years of ages past;
Ask your father, and he will inform you,

Your elders and they will tell you... (Deut.32:7).

OUR PARALLEL EXPERIENCE

Some might see a parallel to the above in our own contemporary Jewish experience. Those, like the present writer, remember well the covenant that we and our parents made with Zionism in the period following the declaration of the State. We remember the pride, the unity of purpose, the dream, and the ideal, of every Jew regarding Israel, and the fear, support, and sacrifice made by every community through the dark and dangerous days of The War of Independence, The Six-Day War, and The Yom Kippur War. In those far-off days, the Holocaust was still fresh in our minds. Survivors abounded, and most Jews readily acknowledged that Israel was our sole guarantor of survival in the face of the re-emergence of anti-Semitism in the post-World War period.

That covenant that we all made with Zion was the cement that bound our people for several decades into a homogenous and proudly committed entity. But then, sadly, the biblical prophecy was re-played, and the younger, largely assimilating and left-leaning, generation of Israeli and Diaspora Jews took their homeland for granted and didn't appreciate it for the miracle that it was. They were also blind to its spiritual significance as well as its national significance, with the Diaspora youth, in particular, viewing it primarily as a great holiday venue. This attitude has been encouraged by some of the Jewish youth movements listing it as but one of several exotic countries calculated to enhance the young people's Jewish identity and experience!

It is not surprising, therefore, that, periodically, the names of some high-profile Jews from the worlds of academe, the arts, the media, and business – graduates of such left-wing

youth schemes – appear in block press notices denouncing Israel and attempting to limit her self-defence capacity in the face of terrorist atrocities and the thousands of drones, long- and short- range missiles, and rockets, raining down on her cities and settlements. No thought they give, however, to the fact that it is Hamas, Hezbollah, Houthis, and others, who initiated and expanded the conflicts at the bidding of Iran, using its sophisticated weaponry and vast funds.

Such ‘liberals’ utter no condemnation of the murderers and rapists whose sole cause is the destruction of Israel and who think nothing of sacrificing their own citizens by stationing their weaponry and rocket-launchers in children’s bedrooms, schools, mosques, hospitals, and in UNWRA facilities. The conscience of some of our anti-Zionist Jews is untroubled by the fact that their open support of the Palestinian cause provides the terrorist organisations with a psychological and diplomatic advantage!

We are desperately in need of a third covenant. There is no mitzvah in Judaism to love or to defend the cause of those who seek one’s destruction. On the contrary, in the words of the Talmud *Ha-ba l’horg’cha hashkeim l’horgo* — ‘If someone attempts to kill you, go target him pre-emptively.’³

It is a source of particular pain that some who lay claim to a life of piety — such as the Satmar Chasidim — display hostility to their own country, while, at the same time, taking advantage of the security that the young Israelis they so despise provide for them and their families.

We need a new covenant, to be entered into by our schools, shuls, university Jewish societies, clubs, and youth organisations, to intensify the sense of Jewish identity and

involvement of the younger generation and to educate them about the history of Modern Israel.

This is a conversation that every parent and grandparent should initiate, without delay. And Rosh Hashanah is a most appropriate time for this. Let this New Year be the opportunity for us all to renew our covenant with Zion and pledge to involve ourselves in the vital task of Israel advocacy and support.

In today's Haftarah, Isaiah passionately proclaims: *For Zion's sake I shall not keep silent, nor for Jerusalem's sake shall I hold my peace* (Is.62:1). We should all commit to this summons with a resounding 'Amen! Hinneini!'

NOTES

1. See Rashi on Deut. 31:2.
2. See Deut.31:16ff .
3. See Tal. *San.* 72a. This principle is derived from the biblical law regarding an intruder into one's home who displays violent intent (Ex.22:1). If, during the course of attempting to defend oneself, a member of the household kills the intruder, it is not reckoned as murder,

כתיבה וחתימה טובה ושלום על ישראל

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& Gloria*