

parashas
Nitzavim

P E R C E P T I O N S

But not only with you am I making this covenant and this oath, but with those standing here with us today before God, our God, and [also] with those who are not here with us, this day. (Devarim 29:13-14)

TALK ABOUT BEING born into servitude! At least the Amish, after making their children keep their very strict traditions to a certain age, give their children a year off when they reach a certain age to do as they please, and then to choose to remain Amish, or not.

I don't know how many Amish teenagers actually leave their traditions behind, but I imagine that many do not. But at least if they DO that and then return, it is of their OWN volition, not because they were threatened with all kinds of horrible consequences for straying in the first place, as our Torah does to Jews.

Aside from the halachic issue of imposing an oath on people who have yet to be born to even agree to take it, there is the philosophical aspect. What are we saying here? Are we saying God did not trust future generations to be able to make the right decision, so He took it away from them?

The bigger question is, did it really accomplish much? Millions of Jews have lived who haven't believed in the oath, or didn't even know about it in the first place! The only people it seems capable of impacting are those who believe in it enough that it makes them think twice before turning their backs on God and Torah, the so-called Torah "fence-sitters."

This reminds me of the first Rashi of the Torah. Rashi asks why the Torah began with God's creation of the world, and not the first mitzvah. After all, Rashi reminds us, the Torah is primarily for teaching Jews about mitzvos, not a history lesson about Creation.

Rashi answers that the Torah "deviated" in order to tell the world that God made Creation, and that He is the One Who designates who gets which land. The gentile nations have to remember this, the Torah is saying, any time they want to call the Jewish people "thieves" who stole Eretz Yisroel from other nations. We did not steal it. The Creator of EVERYTHING gave it to us.

Great. The only problem is that the people who need to hear this the most don't believe it is true. It's not like they bring this point up at the UN, where the Jewish people are regularly called "thieves" by many of its members. The only people who actually HEAR the message are those who already believe in it, and who certainly want to!

So again, what is gained by such obligatory words?

To answer this question, let's answer an even more important one.

The Talmud tells us that when God "offered" the Torah to the Jewish people, it was really an offer we could not refuse, unless we wanted to die on the spot. Apparently, when God said, "Do you want My Torah," He lifted up Mt.

Sinai, held it over the heads of the people, and basically said, “If you say no, this is your burial place” (Shabbos 88a). If you wanted to remain living, there was really no way NOT to accept the Torah.

So what was the point of the choice if it really wasn't a choice? The answer is on the same page of the Talmud, and it says that the continuance of Creation is based upon the Jewish people's acceptance of Torah. It's not that Creation is just TORAH-less if the Jewish people do not accept it. It's that Creation becomes CREATION-less if the Jewish people do not accept Torah.

In other words, lifting the mountain over the heads of the Jewish people was meant to emphasize to the Jewish people how dependent Creation and history is on their ongoing acceptance of Torah. Saying no to Torah, God told them, was like saying no to Creation, and that just wasn't an option.

Likewise, when the Torah begins with the creation of the world to teach that the land was given by God to the Jewish people, it is to emphasize this very point. He is the One Who has the nations of the world accept this, as was the miracle of Koresh and much later, the UN vote, and He is the One who tells the gentiles when to accuse us of stealing the Land. When they make such accusations, it is God's way of telling US that WE are not making it clear enough to the world that He made Creation.

Likewise, when, in this week's parsha, God tells the Jewish people that the oath is binding on future generations, He is telling us the extent of our responsibility to make sure that future generations know this. It is the obligation of the existing believing generation to make sure that the one that follows has all the necessary

knowledge and tools to believe likewise on their own. The failure of the next generation is really the failure of the previous one.

There is another level to this discussion. There were only three million actual “Jews” at Mt. Sinai. The rest were souls only. Thus, the “deal” was made with souls, and they NEVER forget their obligations...even if the body they occupy at the time is not yet conscious of what the soul recalls.

This is probably what drives many secular people to become ba’alei teshuvah. It may just seem random, or accidental, but more often than not something talks to them on a deeper level once they hear it, and makes them come back for more in the face of a society that says “don’t do it.”

It’s also what keeps people who have always been observant, or have become Torah observant that way. The bris made with the soul is always there in the background, like a foil to all that we do. Some might call it conscience, and they would not be far from the truth, because it is the truth of the bris to which the soul is committed that provides conscience.

Thus, it is quite fitting that this parsha is read just in advance of Rosh Hashanah. Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, and all the days in between, are to put us in touch once again with that soul commitment. You can’t really do teshuvah properly unless you are truly in touch with it, because then it is our love of our bris with God that makes us want to change for the better, not just a fear of losing money in the stock market, etc.

Shannah Tovah uMetukah. Thanks for reading, and I look forward to continuing on with Perceptions next year,

b”H.