

## A Muse: Nitzavim

“You stand this day, all of you, before the Lord your God - your tribal heads, your elders and your officials, all the men of Israel, your children, your wives, even the stranger within your camp, from woodchopper to waterdrawer – to enter into the covenant of the Lord your God, which the Lord your God is concluding with you this day, with its sanctions; to the end that He may establish you this day as His people and be your God, as He promised you and as He swore to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. I make this covenant, with its sanctions, not with you alone but with those who are standing here with us this day before the Lord our God and with those who are not with us here this day. Well you know that we dwelt in the land of Egypt and that we passed through the midst of various other nations.” (Deuteronomy 29: 9-15)

These are amazingly powerful words spoken to a people who have gone through the crucible of a forty year wilderness journey, unique and of unusual historic proportions. Unlike other people who develop through a natural process and under natural circumstances our development was supra-natural. Our cultural development was compressed in time, marked and guided by the hand of God and was artificially created through divine intervention.

Central to the text above is the simple, straight forward declaration that this covenant being presented to us wasn't only binding on those present that day, those people present in the plains of Moab, but binding on all those not yet present, the future generations and progeny for all time to come. The question that begs to be asked is by what power and how was it possible that those who were present and acceded to the covenant were able to obligate future generations. How far in the future would this obligation extend? Why have all the subsequent generations assumed the responsibility for that which had been committed in the past?

The Abarbanel raises this question as do so many other commentaries but typical of the Abarbanel his answer is crystal clear and concise. The foundational premise for the covenant being binding on all future generations to the end of time on the Jewish people

is by virtue of the fact that we were slaves in Egypt and were redeemed by God. The price paid for this redemption can never be paid in full and every generation must pay by accepting the covenant acceded to by our forefathers in the plains of Moab. "Had He not redeemed us from Egypt, we would still be slaves". Moreover, and as the Abarbanel being influenced by the Inquisition, underscores our debt and fealty by going one step further. Even if we wanted to renege on our obligation, the gentiles wouldn't allow us to!

Nechama Leibowitz underscoring the point of the Abarbanel suggests that when we read Torah we ought to be reading it as though we personally received it at Sinai as our ancestors did. While her point is well taken, one must wonder how this is possible. How can our western mind set make this enormous leap of faith? Experience and history has altered our DNA as well as our receptors for processing information. What our forefathers understood Torah to mean was based on a cultural affinity and on events that impacted on their national psyche. We too, products of western development and environment process information differently than our forefathers. What Torah meant to our ancestors is very different than what it means to us today. Do the myriad ways by which we understand and practice Torah today suggest that we are no longer acting in good faith in maintaining the covenant that we were entrusted to keep?

Towards the end of the parsha (chapter 30:19) we are presented with a carrot and a stick. Observe the commandments and chose life. The implied threat is that if the mitzvot aren't observed, life, or the good life will be forfeited. If this is the case then where is the free choice that is so fundamental to our faith? (Many such as R'Hisdai Crescas dismisses the notion of free will as well as Spinoza. The Rambam however, believes that we do have free will). Yeshayahu Leibovitz commenting on this believes that in fact we aren't denied the ability to choose not to do the mitzvot, rather we are enjoined to do everything possible to choose to practice living according to the mitzvot

handed down to us through the generations. How we interpret the method and performance of mitzvot brings us back to the question posed earlier.