

STANDING BY THE COVENANT

by Rabbi Berel Wein

There is a cynical but unfortunately accurate statement rife in the ranks of diplomats that treaties are made to be broken. We here in Israel have plenty of experience with that viewpoint and assessment of international life. However, in this week's parsha we are told that the Jewish people under the leadership of Moshe and just before his death entered into a treaty - a covenant with God that was never meant to be broken or unenforced. This covenantal treaty was not limited to its generation or its place and time. It binds those "who are here with us present today and those who are not present with us here today." It combines the past, present and future of Jewry and its destiny into one unified whole and it makes clear that there really is no escape for any Jew individually and certainly not for the Jewish people as an entity from the terms of that covenant. The past century bears harsh witness to the unsuccessful and tragically inept attempt by many Jews and Jewish organizations and movements to sever their ties with Jewish tradition, the Jewish people or the Jewish future. Hitler, Stalin, Arafat and their ilk took the terms of the covenant with God more seriously than did many of the Jews themselves. Too our sad learning experience, we have been taught that the old covenant of Moshe is still operative over three millennia later. The comfort that we may derive from this realization is that all of the other terms of that covenant - the great and good future that it guarantees to us and all humankind - are also still binding and actual.

The word "nitzavim" that gives this week's parsha its name means to be present and accounted for, to stand erect, to appear. There can be no better description of the duty of a Jew than this word "nitzavim." Every Jew is responsible to be present and accounted for. Every Jew must be a proud Jew, standing erect and strong in one's loyalty to tradition and Jewish values. The Torah specifically warns against any attempts to shirk one's duty, to be absent without leave, so to speak. It is tantamount to desertion on the field of battle, the most severe crime in warfare. Only if we view ourselves in the light of having to report "nitzavim" for holy duty can we truly appreciate the import of the covenant and its binding quality upon us. "Nitzavim" is not history alone - it is a never-ending always-renewing challenge to the Jewish people as a whole and to each and every Jew individually. It is a call and challenge that cannot be ignored.

The parsha of Nitzavim always immediately precedes Rosh Hashana. It sets the tone for the days of mercy and forgiveness, for the heavenly judgments that mark the Days of Awe. On Rosh Hashana we pass before God, according to one opinion in the Talmud as "soldiers in King David's army." On Rosh Hashana, whether we wish so or not, we are all "nitzavim" before the heavenly court. If the rest of the year we are also to be counted as "nitzavim" then we can stand with pride and confidence

before that court and pray for receiving its benign and merciful verdict.

B'virkat ketiva v'chatima tova - a good and happy year to all.

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