

A FINAL WARNING

by Rabbi Berel Wein

The final chapters of the Torah are poetic and to a certain extent melodious. Moshe sums up the Torah with a final warning to the Jewish people of the consequences of ignoring the covenant with God. But he also has soothing words about the ultimate destiny and accomplishments of the Jewish people, of their unending loyalty to their God and land, and of a better world for all of humankind.

In reality the parshiyot of this week sum up the pulls and twists of Jewish history. All other nations facing the events and destructions visited on the Jewish people over the ages would not have survived, let alone prospered and persevered. But it is the eternal covenant of God with Israel that has sustained us till this very day. And the covenant exists and remains binding and effective even when portions of the Jewish people deny or are unaware of its existence.

Ben-Gurion, the reputed skeptic and agnostic, nevertheless once famously said that miracles are the normalcy of Jewish life and existence. That idea is certainly the basis for Moshe's words in these final chapters of the Torah. The realization of the existence and continuing effectiveness of this ancient covenant that has weathered all storms and survived all attempts to obliterate it. Moshe tells them in advance that the song of the covenant will eternally rise to remind Israel of its mission and ultimate role in human affairs.

That is part of the mystique that allows the Torah to call itself a "song." It is the melody of holiness that resonates in our hearts and souls even amongst those who have forgotten the lyrics - the holy words - of the song itself. Melodies are not easily forgotten or eradicated from our subconscious. They create associative memory that does not easily leave us. People have their favorite songs. Countries have their national anthems. The melodies govern us even when the words are no longer sounded or expressed clearly. The Torah is therefore not only its holy words but also the haunting melody of Jewish existence and God's covenant throughout the ages.

Melody is one of the great memory aids of all time. For Selichot, we will say "to listen to the melody and to the prayers." Apparently, prayer without lasting melody accompanying it falls short of its desired purpose. Therefore, Jewish prayer throughout all of our history has been infused and beautified by melody. Some melodies are considered so sacrosanct that they defy change or improvisation. The Torah itself is read publicly to melody and special cantillations. In fact, rabbinic commentary has drawn upon the melodies of the Torah reading to find meanings and direction in the very words of the Torah itself. Thus, the covenant of the Torah itself is put to music, so to speak, by its holy melodies, and it rises continually to refresh our memories and strengthen our souls in all

times of danger and challenges.

Shabat shalom.

Shana tova

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Rabbi Berel Wein- Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com