GOD'S COVENANT

by Rabbi Berel Wein

The final words of Moshe to Israel regarding its future course in history and destiny are recorded for us in these last parshiyot of the Torah. Mincing no words and offering no simple palliatives, Moshe tells Israel of its impending tragedies and difficulties. He offers hope and confidence that eventually all will come right and that there is no room for despair no matter the problems that the Jewish people will encounter in their long journey through history.

But, he points out that God's eternal covenant with Israel is not one-sided. And if Israel refuses to live up to its end of the agreement - the observance of Torah values and mitzvoth - and apes the prevailing immoral societal behavior of the nations of the world, then dire consequences will result.

There will not be a free ride for the Jews in history. Payment will always be extracted for wrong decisions, abandonment of God's covenant with them, sinful behavior and false value systems. Terrible things will befall them - events that, even in retrospect, are hardly describable and certainly never could have been predicted in advance.

And yet, everything that Moshe foretold would happen to the Jewish people has in fact occurred. Ramban states that one of the great proofs of the veracity of Judaism is the fact that someone - Moshe - could stand millennia earlier and accurately describe what would happen in the far distant and then unimaginable future.

But it is not that fact alone that makes the Jewish story so exceptional in the annals of humankind. It is the continued effectiveness and eternal relevance of the covenant between God and Israel, a covenant that is clearly described in this week's parshiyot and which guides the story of the Jews over these millennia.

In the parsha we are told that when awesome and terrible troubles will befall Israel, the Jewish response will be that the reason for these cruelties is because "the Lord is not present within our midst." The simple and universally accepted interpretation of this verse is that the Jewish people slid away from Godliness and holiness, were not observant of the Torah and did not place any strong spiritual priorities on their behavior and in their lives.

They pursued physical pleasures and assets for their own sake and ignored their true calling to be a holy nation and a kingdom of priests. The Lord was not present in their midst and was not the major determining factor in their lifestyle and existence. However, the Malbim in a letter written at the turn of the twentieth century mentioned a different view of the verse. He, in describing the turbulent

disaffection of Jews from Torah that already characterized his time, stated that there would be sizable numbers of Jews who, because of the tragedies, would deny that God existed at all. They would refuse to believe in, much less honor, God's covenant with Israel. And this, in fact, is what happened to the Jewish people over the past century.

But God's covenant remains eternally in force with us and eventually the blessings of that covenant will be showered upon us in the great good new year that is arriving.

Shabat shalom.

Shana tova

Rabbi Berel Wein

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