

NITZAVIM (DEUTERONOMY 29:9-31:30)

Who, Me?!

2009 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

On the last day of his life, our teacher Moses stood before the nation of Israel and administered an oath. The People were about to enter the Land of Israel, and a new Covenant was required between G-d and the Children of Israel. (There are different reasons given by the commentaries as for the reason for a new covenant. After all, what was wrong with the old one? Some say that the new covenant would make the Israelites into a nation. Others say that this would allow them to enter the Land of Israel, and others point out that the original Covenant needed to be renewed as a result of the collective national sin of worshiping the Golden Calf.)

"Today you are standing before G-d -- your leaders, the heads of your tribes, your elders, your police officers, every Israelite; your children, your wives, and your converts; your woodcutters and water drawers...But it is not with you alone that I am making this covenant...I am making it with those who are standing here with us today before Hashem our G-d and also with those who are not yet with us. (I.e., future generations) (Deuteronomy 29:9-10, 13-14)

Why did Moses need to give a list of who was there? It is understandable to point out that the covenant would also apply to those who were not yet present. But why was it necessary to take attendance?

When I was the rabbi of the Young Israel of Tucson, Arizona, I met a woman who was not at all religious. We had a deep discussion about the philosophies of the Jewish religion. At the conclusion of our conversation, she commented, "I am glad that there are people like you."

What a wonderful compliment for a Jewish outreach professional to hear! Obviously I had reached her in a profound way. She was now prepared to make a new commitment to her ancestral traditions and was happy that I had showed her the truth!

Well, not exactly. She went on to explain that she was happy that there are rabbis around who continue to follow the teachings of the Torah, so that the Jewish traditions won't die out.

In other words, I mused, it's o.k. for you to ignore the Torah and not teach it to your children, as long as there are still a few relics like me around to keep our quaint customs alive!

It is this attitude that Moses seems to be addressing:

"Today you are standing before G-d -- your leaders... every Israelite; your children, your wives... your woodcutters and water drawers..." Everyone.

Moses is pointing out that the Torah is not a cultural badge that identifies us all based upon the observance of a few token representatives. It is a covenant established with each and every one of us.

Let us consider the following: Regardless of our own personal current level of observance, we are Jewish only by virtue of our ancestors' acceptance of this covenant. What if our ancestors present at Moses' speech had said, "No thanks, Moses, you and the Elders can commit yourselves to follow the Commandments, I prefer to do my own thing." Would we be Jewish today?

What if we take the "I-am-glad-that-there-are-people-like-you" approach to religious observance and let the rabbis, etc. do all the heavy lifting? Will our children be Jewish tomorrow?

Food for thought a week before Rosh Hashanah.

Have a great Shabbos.

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