

A Radical Covenant

Parashat Nitzavim

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The opening of Parashat Nitzavim describes the formation of a covenant between Hashem and His chosen nation. If we carefully study the structure of the covenant, we find two radical elements, which defy the natural structure of an agreement.

First, it is natural that any agreement binding two parties will be enacted by the leading representatives of those entities. If two nations come to a peace treaty, one might expect the countries' respective foreign ministers to sign the document, representing, of course, the entire nation.

And yet, in this covenant, between the Almighty and the Jewish people, one finds that God is striking the covenant not merely with the leadership, but with each and every class of society: included are men, women, children, leaders of tribes, elder statesmen, officers of the law, converts alongside naturally born Jews, and menial laborers. No one has a role which is privileged over and above anyone else's position. This element alone is remarkable. God has reached down to the level of the individual, and His presence has rendered them all equal before Him.

Second, it is natural when an agreement is struck between parties that it reflects the present moment, and may be abrogated by any future generation which disapproves of its content. After all, how exactly can one be bound by an agreement agreed to centuries or millennia before one was able to express his own viewpoint concerning the arrangement?

And yet, this covenant reflects precisely this notion, as the Torah states "it is not with you alone that I establish this covenant, and this oath. For, it is with those present, standing here today in the presence of God, and with those who are not present with us today."

These two aspects of the covenant between God and his people are anything but an accident. On the contrary, they reflect two of the deepest truths which Judaism has expressed.

First, when it comes to a relationship between the Almighty and a person, all have equal standing. While it is true that only a Kohen can offer a sacrifice, and that only a Levi may sing in the Mikdash, when it comes to entering into the covenant with the Almighty, all, indeed all, are fully equal. The king has no greater access than the woodchopper, the high priest has no greater access than the water drawer. Contrary to ancient societies, with their emphasis on nobility and aristocracy, Judaism offered the world a different vision, one summed up best by the Psalmist, “for the Lord is close to all those who call to Him, to all those who call to Him earnestly.”

Second, with respect to a covenant that binds not only those present, but the future as well, we have here perhaps an even more radical notion. To a certain degree, Judaism rejects the standard definition of time, which utilizes the categories of past, present, and future.

When it comes to the Jewish nation, each generation simply embodies the role of Knesset Yisrael, what the Rav called the ‘covenantal community.’ While it is a matter of fact that we live in the twenty-first century, we are not merely the descendents of Jews who lived in Biblical times, but, remarkably, are actually the current representatives of a timeless *tzibbur*, an eternal community. As such, it is not precise to state that the covenant applied, in later generations, to those who were as yet unborn, on the basis of some kind of automatic renewal mechanism, but that those as yet unborn actually are deemed to be part of the very same group which participated in the covenant altogether.

In summation, Judaism has gifted the world, through this covenant, two vital ideas: a radical kind of egalitarianism, as far as each individual being an equal participant in the covenant with the Almighty. *Atem nitzavim ha-yom kulkhem lifnei Hashem Elokeikhem*, each one, literally, is before God.

Second, Judaism has challenged the standard notion of time. Not as individuals, in which our reality is bound by normal historical processes, but as members of the Jewish nation, we are part of a timeless entity whose *raison d’etre* is to promote Divine values here on earth.

We are merely the current representatives of a timeless entity called *knesset yisrael*, whose existence, very much like the other party in this covenant, the Almighty Himself, transcends time itself.