

L'Dor Vador - Nitzavim-Vayeilech, September 11, 2020

“You stand this day, all of you, before the Eternal your God—your tribal heads, your elders and your officials, all the men of Israel, your children, your wives, even the stranger within your camp, from woodchopper to water drawer—to enter into the covenant of the Eternal your God” (Deut. 29:9). So begins this week’s parashah, Nitzavim-Vayeilech, with its stirring description of the assembled Children of Israel, standing together, on the verge of entering the Promised Land. Everyone, and I mean, everyone, is there -- young and old, men and women, laborers and officials, to affirm the covenant. This covenant is so expansive, so far-reaching, that it even includes those who are *not* there. As we read, “I make this covenant... not with you alone, but both with those who are standing here with us this day before the Eternal our God and with those who are not with us here this day” (Deut. 10). Wait, what?

As my mother the attorney would tell you, contracts must be entered into honestly and willingly in order to be valid. You can’t sign someone else’s name and expect it to hold up in court. Yet that is exactly the agreement being described here. As most commentators interpret it, this verse means that the covenant between God and Israel applies not only to the generation standing there in the desert, but to all of the generations that will follow as well. It’s a *chutzpahdik* demand, even for God, and an even more *chutzpahdik* response by the Israelites. “We’re in,” they say, “and so are our children, and grandchildren, and great-grandchildren....”

The *chutzpah* of this moment notwithstanding, it points to a universal truth. Whether we like it or not, we are all bound by the choices our forefathers and

foremothers made. Sometimes our ancestors knew that their decisions would have lasting effects, the way the Israelites knew they were committing their children to an eternal covenant. So many of us have benefited from the achievements and sacrifices of our parents and grandparents, some who immigrated to this country in search of a better life for us. But sometimes, those who came before us had no idea that their choices would live long after them. We look to our smoky, orange skies and see that while we didn't create climate change in this generation, we are certainly experiencing its effects. And we also know that our action or inaction in response to climate change will have significant effects on the generations to come.

As you may know, many of us have been engaged in reading and discussing a book this month called *Me and White Supremacy* by Layla Saad. The subtitle of the book is "Combat Racism, Change the World, and Become a Good Ancestor." It's a tall order, no question, but that last part, becoming a good ancestor, especially resonated with me. She writes, "The system of white supremacy was not created by anyone who is alive today. But it is maintained and upheld by everyone who holds white privilege--whether or not you want it or agree with it. It is my desire that this book will help you to question, challenge, and dismantle the system that has hurt and killed so many Black, Indigenous, and People of Color" (pg. 3). She both acknowledges the burdens we carry from those who came before us, and also the obligation we have to those who will come after us. Saad's argument is that by engaging in self-reflection and what we would call *teshuvah*, we have the potential to become good ancestors, to "seed new possibilities for those who will come after [we] are gone" (ibid). We may not have

invented racism, but it is still our duty to eradicate it, starting with removing it from our own hearts and minds and extending our work to the world around us.

As Jews, we are actually well-equipped to take on this challenge-- after all, we have Torah! So we read (also in this week's portion), "Concealed acts concern the Eternal our God; but with overt acts, it is for us and our children forever to apply all the provisions of this Teaching" (Deut. 29:28). This obscure verse, made more enigmatic by the strange dots placed over the words "us and our children" in the Torah scroll, seems to mean that while we can rely on God to judge the transgressions committed by individuals in secret, it is our duty to respond to transgressions committed in public. As the great medieval commentator Rashi puts it, "Those things which are revealed belong to us and to our children, so that we may put away the evil from our midst; and if we do not execute judgment upon them, the whole community will be punished." In other words, part of living in this covenant means taking responsibility for the behavior of the whole community, or at least the behavior we witness. When we see something, we must say something, we must do something. Failing to act is criminal.

On our watch, nearly 200,000 Americans have died from COVID-19, with a disproportionate number of those deaths occurring in non-white populations. Countless Black people have died at the hands of the police. You and I didn't cause the pandemic and we didn't pull the trigger, but we are witnesses to the suffering. And every day that we accept these facts as inevitable, every day that we shrug and say, "It's not my fault so it's not my problem," we make ourselves complicit. As Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel famously said, "Some are guilty; all are responsible."

It is easy to hear this and respond with anger or despair. Sometimes I can barely get through the day, we say, and now I'm supposed to dismantle systemic racism? Our *parashah* would say, yes, that is what we are called to do. But thank God, the work is not for each of us to complete alone, and the work is not for each of us to complete today. "It is for *us and for our children forever* to apply all the provisions of this Teaching." All of us, here and now but also forever after us, are called to learn and live Torah, to acknowledge evil when we see it and work to eradicate it, to make real in this world the ideals of our ancient story. So keep writing those letters to Congress, keep giving tzedakah, keep attending protests, and keep encouraging people to vote! And what do we get in return, as if creating a world we want to live in and pass on to our children isn't enough? Well, our portion tells us we will receive life, love, prosperity, and blessing. These are the terms of the Covenant. And if you're wondering whether it's worth accepting this Covenant, I'll just remind you: we don't have a choice. Our ancestors already signed us up.