

A Weekly Message of Torah from Rabbi Rheins

The Chosen People Blessed By the Choosing People

On this Shabbat before Rosh HaShanah, the traditional Torah portion, *Nitzavim* (Deuteronomy 29:9 - 30:20), which always immediately precedes the New Year, speaks of our communal bonds and blessings:

The portion begins:

Atem nitzavim hayom, You stand this day, all of you, before Adonai 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 waterdrawer -- to enter into the covenant of Adonai your God, which Adonai your God is establishing with you this day, along with its obligations. This is for the purpose that you will be God's people and the Divine will be your God. This is in keeping with the oath God swore to your ancestors, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. (Deuteronomy 29:9-12)

This remarkably inclusive proclamation may sound quite startling to some ears. What does it mean that the covenant of God with Israel includes the “strangers in our camp –*geirkha asher bekerev machanekha*”?

Certainly, in our modern context, it should mean that all of our loved ones, including those who are not Jewish, share with us in the sacred covenant of God with Israel. Indeed, one of the hallmarks of the Reform Movement is that we are welcoming and embracing to all families. As well we should!

The vast majority of our families have loved ones who are not Jewish and it is an especially important mitzvah, an ethical and moral imperative, for us to lovingly and sensitively reach out to them and help them feel at home. We have to recognize that, at first, many or even most of our non-Jewish loved ones may feel awkward or uncomfortable here. It takes time before one can become familiar with Jewish rituals, our time-honored traditions and culture. We have to help them feel comfortable, wanted, and valued.

Of course, we are greatly honored and rejoice when some of our non-Jewish loved ones choose to become Jewish. I consider it one of my greatest privileges to teach and to help guide people through the conversion process. Temple Sinai member Betsy Epel is the head of Denver's Introduction to Judaism course (ITJ). Please know that I believe that conversion is a very personal decision and our welcoming embrace of our non-Jewish loved ones should never come with pressure to convert.

For more than 3 decades as a Rabbi, it has been my privilege to work with interfaith couples as they begin planning their lives together and, when invited, I attend their weddings in order to offer a blessing from the Jewish community and Temple Sinai. Most importantly, and I certainly hope that our interfaith families know this and feel this, the Temple Sinai community and I are fully committed to helping their marriages succeed and their families thrive and to ensuring that they feel respected, appreciated, welcomed and blessed at Temple Sinai. Your family is our family and here we are at home.

Please know that if you or a loved one is interested in learning more about Judaism, ITJ is a perfect course. And if you or a loved one is interested in choosing to become Jewish, please contact me or Rabbi Jordy. We will be honored to help guide you on your Jewish journey.

I pray that this New Year 5780 will be filled with God's blessings of good health, happiness and prosperity for you and your loved ones.

Shabbat Shalom v'Shanah Tovah teka-tay-vu ve-t'cha-tay-mu!

Rick

Rabbi Rick Rheins