

A Covenant for All Generations: Thoughts for Nitsavim-Vayeilekh, September 20, 2014

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By

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“Not with you alone do I make this covenant and this oath; but with those who stand here with us this day before the Lord our God, and also with those who are not here with us this day” (Devarim 29:13-14).

As Moses approached the end of his life, he gathered all the people and affirmed the special covenant between God and Israel. He wanted everyone to understand that this covenant transcended time. It did not relate only to the generation then alive, but to all generations “who are not here with us this day.”

Moses was teaching a fundamental concept: the history of Israel must be viewed in its grand entirety from antiquity to the messianic future. Each generation needs to take into consideration the needs and concerns of the earlier generations and the future generations. Each Israelite is a link in the ongoing chain of history.

This trans-generational perspective has been a vital ingredient in Jewish continuity. It is reflected in reverence for the traditions of the past and in the commitment to our children’s and grandchildren’s Jewish wellbeing. While our individual lifespans occupy only a fragment of history, our national lifespan persists for countless generations.

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik spoke of the “masorah community,” the community of Jews of each generation that is committed to living and transmitting the Jewish tradition. “The masorah community cuts across the centuries, indeed millennia, of calendaric time and unites those who already played their part, delivered their message, acquired fame, and withdrew from the covenantal stage quietly and humbly, with those who have not yet been given the opportunity to appear on the covenantal stage and who wait for their turn in the anonymity of the ‘about to be’” (The Lonely Man of Faith,” pl. 47).

For members of the masorah community, Judaism is at the center of their lives. They live by its teachings, they observe its laws and customs, they sacrifice

tremendously to ensure that their children and grandchildren are educated and steeped in Jewish values and traditions. In one of his teshuvah lectures, Rabbi Soloveitchik stated that “the Jew who believes in Knesset Israel is the Jew who lives as part of it wherever it is and is willing to give his life for it, feels its pain, rejoices with it, fights in its wars, groans at its defeats and celebrates its victories” (Al ha-Teshuvah, p. 98).

When Jews stop feeling connected to the past generations of Jews, or when they no longer are willing to devote themselves to creating future Jewish generations—they risk breaking the chain of Jewishness in their family lines. Jews who judge reality solely on the basis of contemporary considerations are, in fact, cutting themselves off from the masorah community upon whom the continuity of the Jewish people depends.

In each generation, there are Jews who drop out of the Jewish adventure. They succumb to current fashions among the “politically correct;” they don’t stand up for the Jewish people when Jews are endangered; they turn their backs on the State of Israel in its struggle for survival; they disconnect themselves and their children from a meaningful engagement with Torah and mitzvot. They do not feel responsibility to the past generations of Jews nor to the future generations whose Jewishness they are effectively cutting off.

A story is told of an episode that occurred years before the United Nations Partition Plan of November 1947 that set the stage for the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948. The Zionist leadership, headed by David Ben Gurion, was offered a very meager parcel of land; Ben Gurion was unsure whether this offer should be accepted or rejected. He had high regard for a fellow Zionist leader, Yitzhak Tabenkin, and turned to him for advice. Although Ben Gurion was not one to shun making decisions on his own, he told Tabenkin he would abide by whatever Tabenkin decided. Tabenkin asked for 24 hours so that he could consult with two individuals.

The next day, Tabenkin advised Ben Gurion to reject the plan. Ben Gurion accepted the decision, but asked Tabenkin who his two advisors were. Tabenkin replied: “I had to ask two very important individuals, my grandfather and my grandson; I took counsel with my grandfather who died ten years ago, and with my grandson who is not yet born.”

Tabenkin understood the trans-generational covenant which binds the Jewish people together. He understood that contemporary decisions must factor in the

generations that came before and the generations yet to come.

When decisions are made without adequately consulting our earlier generations, we create a breach in our tradition. When decisions are made without consulting our future generations, we create a breach in Jewish continuity. The masorah community understands that the Jewish people functions as a trans-generational organism.

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[Angel for Shabbat](#)