

SEPTEMBER 3, 2007

Parashat Nitzavim-Vayeilech

Held in Trust

L'ov'r'chah bivrit "To enter into the covenant" (Deuteronomy 29:11)

After a covenant as great as the one at Sinai, why does Nitzavim present yet another covenant? What is novel about this covenant? The Ramban explains that, at Har Sinai, the covenant signed between the Jewish people and Hashem covered the written Torah. In Nitzavim, the covenant covers the oral law.

We are a covenantal people. Our history began with the covenant between Hashem and Avraham with the *brit milah* and continued throughout the thirteen covenants we find in the Torah. In our tradition, it is impossible to decipher the written Torah without the oral tradition that accompanies it. *Torah sh'bichtav* and the thirteen covenants found in its holy words is our initial contract with HaShem. *Torah sh'ba'al peh* provides an accompanying explanation of the terms of those covenants.

It is well known that if two parties' trust in each other relies on a contract, the trust is imaginary. Trust is something two parties build together and, in our parlance, we can say that trust is the oral law to the written contract.

Even as it calls for peace talks with Israel, Syria is threatening war against the Jewish state. These threats are amplified by Damascus' continuing military build-up, its actions in Lebanon, including rearming Hizballah, and its support of Palestinian terrorist groups such as Hamas, whose top leaders reside in Damascus.

Syrian President Bashar Assad on July 17 said in a speech that Syria is "prepared for just and comprehensive peace," but then added that "developments ... have made us more determined to adhere to resistance as a policy and choice." Nawaf al-Faris, the governor of Quneitra, a town on the border of the Golan Heights, recently said, "The resistance is the guarantee to restore land [and] rights." Syrian Information Minister Mohsen Bilal on May 7 threatened violence if negotiations were not pursued, saying, "We Arabs have learned. Last year Hizballah clearly showed how to fight a guerrilla war of resistance to occupation."

Israel is prepared to negotiate with a Syrian partner serious about abandoning its destructive policies and promoting regional peace. But there must be an oral law of trust and good faith to go with negotiations over a written law. ■

Fear in Sderot

Vayeilech Moshe "And Moshe went" (Deuteronomy 31:1)

The *parashah* tells us that Moshe went, but it is silent about where he went. Ramban and Ibn Ezra explain that, before Moshe died, he went to each tribe to announce his impending death and soothe their fears. Because fear can

have such a devastating impact, *halachah* (see Shulchan Aruch Choshen Mishpat 420:32) forbids causing someone unnecessary fear.

In the case of Moshe's death, we can understand why the people might have been frightened: Moshe was not only the great leader and lawgiver, but he had personally intervened on their behalf with HaShem several times. In this case, though, B'nei Yisrael had no reason to fear because they still had Yehoshua to lead them.

American families are busy preparing to send their children back to school – indeed, some kids are already back in class. Parents in the U.S. have spent considerable time and money buying new clothes, notebooks, pens, crayons, and other necessities. In the Israeli town of Sderot – the victim of a daily barrage of rockets fired from Gaza terrorists – parents have had the additional burden of fortifying their school buildings against missile attack. In recent weeks, two kindergarten buildings have been hit by Qassam rockets. Those buildings were empty due to the summer holiday.

The Israeli newspaper Haaretz reported last week that Israeli soldiers will accompany the children of Sderot to school during at least the first part of the new semester and will help the schools respond to the frequent air-raid sirens. Once a siren sounds, residents have only 15-30 seconds to find cover.

While not allowing the terrorists to stop them from sending their kids to school, the parents of Sderot are, rightly, fearful of this intolerable situation. The rocket fire from Gaza must stop and the United States must continue to isolate Hamas and insist the rest of the world do the same. ■

To Light the Darkness

V'atah kitvu lachem et hashirah hazot "And now, write for yourself this song" (Deuteronomy 31:19)

This *pasuk* contains the last commandment given in the order of the Torah – to write the *sefer Torah*. In his commentary on this verse, the Chafetz Chayim notes that this *mitzvah* comes directly after the *pasuk* in which HaShem says *v'anochi hasteir astir panai*. According to the Chafetz Chayim, the reason for the order of these verses is so that we will know that even in times of darkness and despair – when God seems the furthest from us – we can take hope from the light and consolation of the Torah.

As we come to the end of the year 5767 and look forward to a new year, we find ourselves in a dark time. Our people have known other dark times. Our history is replete with moments at which it would have been easy – even understandable – to lose hope and give in to despair.

There are many challenges: the world's largest state-sponsor of terrorism has called for Israel's destruction and is unrelenting in its drive to produce nuclear weapons, persistent terrorist threats on Israel's northern and southern borders, new attempts to isolate the Jewish state while holding her to different standards than every other country in the world, and increased anti-Semitic activity all across the globe.

Indeed, it would be easy to despair. But that has never been the Jewish way. Even when light seems the furthest from us – even then – we write for ourselves a song. Notice...the song does not write itself. The *sefer Torah* does not magically appear on the page. It must be written down.

Let 5767 be the last year of indifference and disunity. Let 5768 be remembered as another year in which our people rose to the challenges facing us. Let it be a year of action, light, hope, and consolation. ■

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