Renewing the Covenant Between God and Israel: Thoughts on Parashat Nitzavim

View PDF

By
Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Nitzavim

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

“You are standing this day all of you before the Lord your God; your heads, your tribes, your elders, your officers, all the people of Israel; your little ones, your wives and the stranger/convert that is in the midst of your camp, from the hewer of your wood unto the drawer of your water” (Devarim 29:9-10).

Over the years, I have received many hundreds of inquiries from people interested in converting to Judaism. Some have been spiritual seekers who have found meaning in the great teachings of Torah. Some have discovered Jewish ancestry and now want to reconnect with their Jewish roots. Some have fallen in love with a Jew, and have wanted to become part of the Jewish people and raise a Jewish family. Whatever the motivation for their contacting me, I have derived much satisfaction and joy in dealing with this large and diverse group of people.

But I oncel received an email inquiry which was entirely new to my previous experience. The note came from a person who had converted to Judaism with an Orthodox Beth Din—and now wanted to know if it would be possible to annul his conversion!

I informed him that once a person becomes halakhically Jewish, there are no annulments. But then I asked him why he wanted to annul his conversion? I wondered if he had lost faith in God and Torah, or if he had experienced anti-Semitism, or if there were other factors which motivated this unusual request.

His answer relieved me…and pained me deeply.

It relieved me because he assured me that he loved God and Torah, that he studied Torah regularly, that he found great satisfaction in observing mitzvoth.

His problem wasn't with Judaism and the Jewish way of life.

It pained me deeply because he informed me that the problem was the Jewish community in which he lived! He felt that members of the community treated him like an outsider. Being a single man, he was having great difficulty establishing a positive social life. Whether this was his own impression or whether it was objectively true, he felt that he was discriminated against because he was a convert, because he was of a different background from the mainstream of the community. So he decided he wanted to annul his conversion because Jews had rejected him.

I told him that he should stay true to God, Torah and mitzvoth—but that he might be happier moving to another community! He seemed reassured by this answer, and wrote to me that he indeed would continue to study and observe Torah…but that he would try to find a more congenial Jewish community in which to live.

In describing the covenant between God and the people of Israel, the Torah informs us that ALL Israelites were to stand before God—from the elite leaders, to the humble masses, men and women, old and young, born Israelites and converts. The essential quality of the covenant is that it included every Israelite—all as equals before God. If Israelites did not recognize the ultimate equality of each member of the group, this would constitute a breach in the covenant itself.

Maimonides (Hilkhot De'ot 6:3) provides the parameters for what it means to "love one's neighbor as oneself." His words are of profound importance: "A person must speak in praise of his neighbor and be careful of his neighbor's property as he is careful with his own property and solicitous about his own honor. Whoever glorifies himself by humiliating another person will have no portion in the world to come." In the very next law, Maimonides notes that it is incumbent to love the proselyte, first because he/she is a fellow Jew, and second because there is a special Torah obligation to love the proselyte. All Jews are equal before God; all are equal partners in the covenant with God; all must be treated with the same respect and consideration that we want others to show to ourselves.

As we prepare to observe Rosh Hashana, it is important that we re-focus on the framework of the covenant between God and Israel, that we recognize how important it is for each Jew to be treated as a fellow partner in our adventure with the Almighty. Our communities need to reflect a sincere inclusiveness, a feeling of mutual respect among ourselves. One of the great strengths of the Jewish

people is our diversity, our richness of traditions and backgrounds; we stand as one people before God, each of us equal in the eyes of God.

If even one Jew feels rejected or alienated because he/she is of a “different” background, race, or ethnic group—then the structure of the Jewish covenant with God is shaken. If even one Jew wants to “annul” his/her Jewishness because of feelings of rejection by other Jews, then the Jewish religious enterprise is challenged. Self-righteousness and smugness are antithetical to the ideals of Jewish peoplehood.

“You are standing this day all of you before the Lord your God…”

Let us each stand before the Lord imbued with love of God, love of our fellow Jews, love of our fellow human beings. Let our communities reflect love, compassion, spiritual vitality. Let us renew the covenant between God and Israel.

Angel for Shabbat