A Trans-Generational Covenant: Thoughts for Parashat Nitsavim

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Nitsavim

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

“You are standing this day all of you before the Lord your God….that He may establish you this day unto Himself for a people and that He may be to you a God as He spoke to you and as He swore to your fathers Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Neither with you only do I make this covenant and this oath but with him that stands here with us this day before the Lord our God and also with him that is not here with us this day” (Devarim 29:9-14).

The Torah presents the eternal covenant between God and the People of Israel in three dimensions. First, it is addressed to the current generation, rich and poor, old and young, men and women. We are standing before God *this day*. The covenant is experienced directly and personally.

Second, the covenant harks back to our ancestors Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (and their wives!). Our relationship with the Almighty has a long history, going back to our founding generations. We are not born in a vacuum. We have a deep history that sustains our covenant.

Third, the covenant is with the generations yet to come “who are not here with us this day.” Our actions and decisions today will have impact on our descendants.

Living as a thinking Jew requires a trans-generational approach. We are rooted in our history and strive to be faithful to the ideals of our ancestors. But the world

changes. We don't live in the days of Abraham and Sara, or in Temple times, or in the Middle Ages or even in more recent generations. We face new circumstances and challenges and must be wise enough to apply ancient wisdom to our current realities. When I was rabbi of Congregation Shearith Israel (a historic congregation dating back to 1654) I used to say: "Our ancestors have a vote; but not veto power." We don't make changes casually; we take into consideration the traditions of the past. But a living covenant necessarily entails ongoing development and renewal. We are standing before God *this day.*

We also must take into account generations yet to come. Decisions today impact on our descendants in many ways. People often worry about "a slippery slope," i.e. once changes of any kind are introduced, the whole framework may come apart. One thing leads to another until the original traditions slip away altogether. Our task is to take into consideration the "slippery slope," but also to strive not to become a relic chained to a frozen past.

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.

“You are standing this day all of you before the Lord your God….that He may establish you this day unto Himself for a people.” This is a singular honor…and awesome challenge.