

לע"נ
הרב יעקב צבי ב"ר דוד אריה ז"ל
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To Renew our Days

NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

The moment had come. Moshe was about to die. He had seen his sister Miriam and brother Aharon pre-decease him. He had prayed to God - not to live forever, not even to live longer, but simply, 'Please let me cross over and see the good land beyond the Jordan, that good hill country and the Lebanon' (D'varim 3:25). His request was simple. Please let me complete the journey. Let me reach the destination. But God said no:

'It is enough!' the Lord said... 'Never speak to Me about this again!' (3:26)

God, who had acceded to almost every other prayer Moshe prayed, refused him this.

What then did Moshe do on these last days of his life? He told the people:

'At the end of every seventh year, the year of remission, of cancelling debts, during the Festival of Sukkot, when all Israel comes to appear before the Lord your God at the place that He will choose, you shall read out this law in the presence of all Israel, for them to hear. Assemble the people -

men, women, and children, including migrants living in your towns - so that they may listen and learn to fear the Lord your God and carefully keep all the words of this Law, and so that their children, who do not know it, may listen and learn to be in awe of the Lord your God, as long as you live in the land you are crossing the Jordan to possess.' (31:10-13)

There is no specific reference to this command in the later books of Tanach, but there are accounts of very similar gatherings, covenant renewal ceremonies, in which the king or his equivalent assembled the nation, reading from the Torah or reminding the people of their history, and calling on them to reaffirm the terms of their destiny as a people in covenant with God.

That, in fact, is what Moshe had been doing for the last month of his life. The entire book of D'varim is a restatement of the covenant, almost forty years and one generation after the original covenant at Mount Sinai. There is a similar occurrence in Tanach, after Yehoshua fulfils his mandate as Moshe's successor, brings the people across the Jordan, leads them in their battles, and settles the land. Another occurred many centuries later in the reign of King Yoshiyahu. His grandfather, Menashe, who reigned for fifty-five years, was one of the worst of

Yehuda's kings, introducing various forms of idolatry including child sacrifice. Yoshiyahu sought to return the nation to its faith, ordering (among other things) the cleansing and repair of the Temple. It was during this restoration that a copy of the Torah was discovered, sealed in a hiding place to prevent its being destroyed during the many decades in which idolatry flourished and the Torah was almost forgotten. The king, deeply affected by this discovery, convened a Hakhel-type national assembly:

Then the king called together all the elders of Yehuda and Yerushalayim. He went up to the Temple of the Lord with the people of Yehuda, the inhabitants of Yerushalayim, the kohanim and the prophets - all the people from the least to the greatest. He read in their hearing all the words of the Book of the Covenant, which had been found in the Temple of the Lord. The king stood by the pillar and renewed the covenant in the presence of the Lord - to follow the Lord and keep his commands, statutes, and decrees with all his heart and all his soul, thus confirming the words of the Covenant written in this book. Then all the people pledged themselves to the Covenant.' (M'lachim Bet 23:1-3)

The most famous Hakhel-type ceremony was the national gathering convened by Ezra and Nechemiya

after the second wave of returnees from Babylon (Nechemiya 8-10). Standing on a platform by one of the gates to the Temple, Ezra read out the Torah, after positioning Levites throughout the crowd so that they could explain to the people what was being said. The ceremony that began on Rosh HaShana culminated after Sukkot when the people collectively "bound themselves with a curse and an oath to follow the Law of God given through Moshe the servant of God and to obey carefully all the commands, regulations and decrees of the Lord our Lord" (10:29).

The other command from our parsha - the last Moshe gave the people - was contained in the words: 'Now write down this song and teach it to the Israelites', understood by rabbinic tradition to be the command to write, or at least take part in writing, a Sefer Torah. Why specifically these two commands, at this time?

Something profound was being transacted here. Recall that God had seemed brusque in His dismissal of Moshe's request to be allowed to cross the Jordan. 'Enough! ... Never speak to Me about this again.' Is this the Torah, and this its reward? Is this how God repaid the greatest of the prophets? Surely not.

In these last two commands, God was teaching Moshe - and through him, Jews throughout the ages - what

immortality is, on earth, not just in heaven. We are mortal because we are physical, and no physical organism lives forever. We grow up, we grow old, we grow frail, we die. But we are not only physical. We are also spiritual. In these last two commands, we are taught what it is to be part of a spirit that has not died in four thousand years and will not die so long as there is a sun, moon, and stars.

God showed Moshe, and us, how to become part of a civilisation that never grows old. It stays young because it repeatedly renews itself. The last two commands of the Torah are about renewal: first collective, then individual.

Hakhel, the covenant renewal ceremony every seven years, ensured that the nation would regularly rededicate itself to its mission. I have often argued that there is one place in the world where this covenant renewal ceremony still takes place: the United States of America.

The concept of covenant played a decisive role in European politics in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, especially in Calvin's Geneva and in Scotland, Holland, and England. Its longest-lasting impact, though, was on America, where it was taken by the early Puritan settlers and remains part of its political culture even today. Almost every

Presidential Inaugural Address - every four years since 1789 - has been explicitly or implicitly a covenant renewal ceremony, a contemporary form of Hakhel. In 1987, speaking at the bicentennial celebration of the American Constitution, President Ronald Reagan described the constitution as a kind of "covenant we've made not only with ourselves but with all of mankind... It's a human covenant; yes, and beyond that, a covenant with the Supreme Being to whom our founding fathers did constantly appeal for assistance." America's duty, he said, is "to constantly renew their covenant with humanity... to complete the work begun 200 years ago, that grand noble work that is America's particular calling - the triumph of human freedom, the triumph of human freedom under God."

If Hakhel is national renewal, the command that we should each take part in the writing of a new Sefer Torah is personal renewal. It was Moshe's way of saying to all future generations: It is not enough for you to say, I received the Torah from my parents (or grandparents or great-grandparents). You have to take it and make it new in every generation.

One of the most striking features of Jewish life is that from Israel to Palo Alto, Jews are among the world's most enthusiastic users of informa-

tion technology and have contributed disproportionately to its development (Google, Facebook, Waze). But we still write the Torah exactly as it was done thousands of years ago - by hand, with a quill, on a parchment scroll. This is not a paradox; it is a profound truth. People who carry their past with them, can build the future without fear.

Renewal is one of the hardest of human undertakings. Some years ago, I sat with the man who was about to become Prime Minister of Britain. In the course of our conversation he said, "What I most pray for is that when we get there (he meant, 10 Downing Street), I never forget why I wanted to get there." I suspect he had in mind the famous words of Harold Macmillan, British Prime Minister between 1957 and 1963, who, when asked what he most feared in politics, replied, "Events, dear boy, events."

Things happen. We are blown by passing winds, caught up in problems not of our making, and we drift. When that happens, whether to individuals, institutions, or nations, we grow old. We forget who we are and why. Eventually we are overtaken by people (or organisations or cultures) that are younger, hungrier, or more driven than us.

The only way to stay young, hungry, and driven is through periodic

renewal, reminding ourselves of where we came from, where we are going, and why. To what ideals are we committed? What journey are we called on to continue? Of what story are we a part?

How precisely timed, therefore, and how beautiful, that at the very moment when the greatest of prophets faced his own mortality, that God should give him, and us, the secret of immortality - not just in heaven but down here on earth. For when we keep to the terms of the covenant, and making it new again in our lives, we live on in those who come after us, whether through our children or our disciples or those we have helped or influenced. We "renew our days as of old" (Eicha 5:21). Moshe died, but what he taught, and what he sought, lives on.

Around the Shabbat Table:

- (1) **Why is renewal important?**
- (2) **How can remembering where we came from help us avoid losing sight of where we are going?**
- (3) **Is preserving tradition enough, or does every generation have a responsibility to renew and reinterpret it?**

Y'HI ZICHRO BARUCH