

# SHARED RESPONSIBILITY FOR TESHUVAH

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The opening verse of *parasha* (Torah reading) Nitzavim always brings home to us that we're on the verge of High Holy Days. It tells us: "You are standing today, all of you before God, your God—your heads, your tribes, your elders, and your officers, every man of Israel." (Deuteronomy 29:9) Moses is addressing himself here to those he imagines may increasingly distance themselves from God, until they become totally estranged by generational increments.

The people are assembled in the wilderness of Moab. They're expectantly awaiting the renewal of the covenant, which they had made on Mount Sinai 40 years earlier. The renewal was required because they had abandoned the first covenant at the incident of the golden calf.

Moses, however, extends the covenant beyond those who are present in the wilderness of Moab. He says: "And not with you alone do I make this covenant and this oath, but with him that is here with us standing before God our God this day, and with him that is not here with us this day." (Deuteronomy 29:13-14) Or Hachayim (Rabbi Chaim ben Attar, 1696-1744) tells us that, ". . . the whole intention of these verses is to obligate the people present . . . to commit their offspring to observe the Torah, forever."

The unasked but nonetheless inescapable question: How can unborn generations of Jews be obligated to live by a code that they haven't accepted for themselves?

The Talmud says: "One may act for a person in his absence to his advantage, but one cannot act for a person in his absence to his disadvantage!" (Ketubot 11a) And the next Torah verse offers another, more compelling rationale in answering the question of how it's possible to obligate unborn generations: "For you know how we dwelt in the land of Egypt. . . ." (Deuteronomy 29:15) Moses is saying, you know how bad life was before we received the Torah.

We're reminded in this regard that the essence of what we're to pass on to our children is not obligation and constraint, but the *privilege* of living a godly life according to Torah's vision and path. As Or Hachayim says: ". . . to avoid the pitfalls of the abominations and detestable idols the Egyptians were captive to. Moses tells the people present that inasmuch as they know all about this, they also know that what is being asked of them is to confer benefits rather than restrictions on their children and their children's children." And, certainly, the *halakhah* (rabbinic law) mandates us to do so.

The circumstances that Moses imagined might come to pass were realized in Ezekiel's time. The prophet lived during the Babylonian exile when the people challenged the legitimacy of the Torah's commandments. They regarded themselves as having been sold by God into exile, so they felt themselves no longer bound by God's commandments. (Ezekiel 20: 3, 32)

The prophet, not surprisingly, had a far different viewpoint. From his perspective, the bond between God and the Jewish people would always be renewed, thus was eternal. So far, history has not contradicted his prophetic acuity. Moreover, Ezekiel made it clear that severing their covenantal bond would lead to the complete elimination of the "rebels," as the scripture reads: *Uvaroti mikem hamordim* (וּבְרוֹתֵי מִכֶּם הַמֹּרְדִים)—"And I will purge out from you the rebels. . . ." (Ezekiel 20:38) And our expectation to this day is that those Jews who sever their covenantal bond with God are effectively eliminating themselves from the Jewish people, typically within two generations.

According to Or Hachayim, Moses had a particular objective in mind for this covenant: "It appears that what Moses wanted with this new covenant was to make the Israelites responsible for one another in their *mitzvah* (מצוה)-performance. Each Jew has to see to it that his fellow Jew does not stumble and commit sins. . . . Naturally, the degree to which we have to carry out this responsibility varies with our position in the community."

The opening verse of the *parasha* refers to *ish Yisrael* (אִישׁ יִשְׂרָאֵל), thereby including every man of Israel. Our Sages teach that every man of Israel—and, of course, nowadays we have the same expectations for women—shares responsibility for the sin of every other Israelite. (Tanchuma Nitzavim 1) And to the extent that we ignore this responsibility, the Torah says, *V'chashlu ish-b'achiv* (וּכְשִׁלּוּ אִישׁ בְּאָחִיו)—"And they shall stumble one over the other. . . ." (Leviticus 26:37)

Rabbeinu Bachya (Rabbi Bachya ben Asher, 1255-1340) tells us in his commentary on Deuteronomy 29:9: "This teaches the principle of reciprocal responsibility. . . . If such reciprocal responsibility extends to all Israelites sharing misfortune on account of the sins committed by the few, how much more so will it apply to the reciprocal entitlement to enjoyment. . . . One single individual whose lifestyle is beyond reproach may save all his peers from impending doom." And most of us have had the experience of witnessing the extraordinary effect one individual of great character, courage, and commitment can have on the lives of others.

Akeidat Yitzhak (Rabbi Yitzchak ben Moshe Arama, 1420-1494) teaches us that the message of this *parasha* is that *teshuvah* “. . . has to begin due to one’s feeling afflicted.” However, by this commentator’s lights, the larger message is that, “. . . leadership can accomplish for the nation what *virtues* accomplish for the individual. . . .” (Original emphasized.) So when estrangement from Torah and congregational life becomes widespread, the need for *teshuvah* applies to the whole community, and more than individual virtue is required—leadership is essential.

Akeidat Yitzhak, in his commentary on Deuteronomy 29:9, also explains that in our verse, “heads” is a reference to the intellectual leaders, “elders” is a reference to those who have mastered their *yetzer hara* (evil inclination), and “officers” is a reference to those who keep their composure even when provoked.

The tradition teaches us that anyone who has the wherewithal to protest wrongdoing committed by another Jew, and who does not, is considered complicit in the commission of that wrongdoing.

The reach of our authority to protest wrongdoing varies—for some it’s limited to our homes, for others it extends to the congregation, and for yet others it encompasses the activity of Jews in the larger, non-Jewish community. And so the Talmud cautions us: “Whoever can forbid his household [from wrongdoing] but does not, is seized for [the wrongdoing of] his household; [if he can forbid] his fellow citizens, he is seized for [the wrongdoing of] his fellow citizens; if the whole world, he is seized for the whole world.” (Shabbat 54b)

Our tradition teaches that our responsibility for our communal *teshuvah* is necessarily shared: each of us is responsible for the *teshuvah* of others in the arena where we are able to enforce our will for the sake of maintaining the covenant and the Jewish people’s commitment to it.

But ultimately it’s up to each of us how we will use our *b’chirah chafshit* (בחירה חפשית)—our free choice: we can ignore the tradition’s teaching of our shared responsibility for each other’s *teshuvah*, or we can learn how to live up to that teaching.

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