

Parashat Nitsavim

Deuteronomy 29:9 says, "We stand this day all of you before the Lord your God: your captains of your tribes, your elders and your officers with all the men of Israel...from the hewer of thy wood unto the drawer of thy water: that thou shouldest enter into covenant with the Lord thy God, and unto His oath which the Lord thy God taketh with thee this day." What is this covenant spoken about by Moses? Deuteronomy 29:1 says, "These are the words of the covenant, which the Lord commanded to make with the children of Israel in the land of Moab, beside the covenant which He made with them in Horeb."

It is obvious from these words that the Moabitic Covenant is different in kind from Horeb's Sinaitic Covenant. It is true that long before, God promised the Promised Land to Abraham and his seed forever. But that does not give the people *carte blanche* to do what they want without any regard to their spiritual condition. The promise to Abraham, a great man of faith, and his people, was given in expectation of a holy people, an elect people; God's people, whose walk was to be holy. Thus it is that the Moabitic Covenant is one in which God details His requirements for that holiness, *before* they cross the Jordan. He outlines the dire penalties for failing to meet His conditions.

It is interesting to note that Moses, one of the greats with regard to holiness, was not allowed to cross over to the Promised Land. It indicates that the Law made nothing perfect, even for an almost perfect Moses. We have observed in our talks, even before today's portion, that Moses himself foresaw another and higher stage of divine revelation for humanity. In today's portion this is emphasised yet again. Thus, it is fascinating to hear Moses speaking of the Diaspora to come, even though as yet, the people are still east of Jordan. In the scattering to come, should the exiled people call to mind their sinfulness of deeds past, then the Lord will have compassion and return the people to their homeland.

This poses a serious question. How to solve the problem of departing from the way of righteousness, it being that departure which caused Diaspora in the first place? Would it not happen again? Here, Moses brings into play a new factor. A factor which would change the character of people and their attitude to God. It is, "The Lord thy God will circumcise thine heart, and the heart, of thy seed, to love the Lord thy God with all thine heart and with all thy soul, that thou mayest live."

This week's portion falls on the last Shabbat before Rosh Hashanah. It is apt that it contains a very detailed treatment of repentance and that in it the Lord promises to "circumcise your heart and the heart of your seed, to love the Lord your God with all your heart, and all your soul, that you may live." This circumcision of the heart prophesies the Renewed Covenant about which both Jeremiah and Ezekiel speak: "This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says Adonai: I will put my Torah in their minds and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God and they shall be My people." (Jer.31:33). In similar vein,

Parashat Nitsavim

Ezekiel says (36:26): "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh." These prophetic words came to life in the days of the Messiah, Yeshua and were prophesied long before.

You will recall that a rabbi called Nicodemus once visited Yeshua. Yeshua informed him that he must be born again. This puzzled the rabbi: "How can these things be?" At this, Yeshua commented: 'Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not know such things?' (John 3:9-10). Surely, if Nicodemus is a master of Torah, he must see that Torah points to a God able to change us from within? To be born again is the new birth promised so long ago, outlined for us in today's splendidly enthralling portion.

There you have it - the Sinaitic Covenant, the Moabitic Covenant, and the New Covenant, according to which, God dramatically changes our hearts, from hardest 'stone' to softest 'flesh.' This change is not in a general nation-way, but individually, person to person, into a new person, with a new life. Thus it is that Yeshua could speak to Nicodemus about a new birth. As Paul rightly said, "If any person be in Yeshua, he is a new creation. Old things are passed away; behold, all things become new."

And so it is, on the threshold of the Holy Days, that we can echo 2 Cor.7:10, "Godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation." Conviction of sin is one of the most uncommon things that ever happens to a person. It is the beginning of an understanding of God's promises, His covenants. Yeshua said that when the Holy Spirit came personally within a person, He would convict of sin. And when the Holy Spirit stirs a person's conscience and brings him/her into the presence of God within, it is not the person's relationships with others that bother so much as does the relationship with God. As said in Psalm 51:4, "Against You, You only, have I sinned, and done this evil in Your sight." The wonders of conviction of sin, forgiveness, and holiness are so interwoven that it is only the forgiven person who is truly holy. How so? The person proves he/she is forgiven by being the opposite of what he/she was previously, by the grace of God within. I suppose that the ultimate goal of holiness is to be able to say, day to day, moment by moment, "we" and not 'I' when faced with difficulties and temptations. Our fleshly spirit is so in tune with Holy Spirit, that 'I' becomes 'we.' For most of us, this is a work in progress. The sure sign that God is at work in our life is when we can say, "I have sinned" and truly mean it. Anything less is simply sorrow for having made foolish mistakes - a reflex action caused by self-disgust.

In my experience, the entrance to the kingdom of heaven is through the many sharp pains of repentance, caused by collision with my respectable self-esteem and seeming 'goodness.' It is in these collisions that the Holy Spirit, who produces these struggles, begins the formation of the Son of God in my personal life. The very basis of our faith is repentance. We should ever understand its value in the work in progress, that is, a life of God-given holiness. Personally, last thing at night, I list the 'sharp pains' I have received during the day, from Holy Spirit's prodding. It is then a matter of working-in a greater sensitivity to my partnership with Him

Parashat Nitsavim

within. Discipline, obedience, and will power, are needed.

Our Lord does not pretend we are all right when we are all wrong. As one scholar put it, "We trample the blood of the Son of God underfoot if we think we are forgiven because we are sorry for our sins. The only reason for the forgiveness of our sins by God, and the infinite depth of His promise to forget them, is the death of Yeshua." That is what God uses to make unholy people like us, holy. Let us be assured, and say as Paul did to the Philippians, ".....being confident of this, that He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Yeshua."