

SHABBAT SHALOM FROM CYBERSPACE

NISABIM/ROSH HASHANAH

SEPTEMBER 15, 2012

28 ELUL 5772

**DEDICATIONS: In memory of Victor Azrak – 7 Tishrey
Happy Anniversary to Lauren and Jonah and to Mom and Dad**

SEPHARDIC CONGREGATION OF LONG BEACH SCHEDULE AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

PLEASE SEE HIGH HOLIDAY SCHEDULE AND HONORS AS SEPARATE DOCUMENTS

Friday Night: Candles: 6:46 PM

Afternoon and Evening service (Minha/Arbith): 6:45 PM

Morning Service (Shaharith): 9:00AM –Please say Shemah at home by 9:01

11:00 - 12:00 Shabbat Morning Kids Program for girls ages 4-8 - Stories, Tefillah, Games, Snacks and more . . .

NEW! Shabbat morning babysitting from 11-12 with Leah Colish. Downstairs in the playroom. Snacks will be served. Ages 2-4. Please no one less than 2 years old.

Minha: 6:15PM

Seudah Shelishi and a Class – Pirkei Avot with Rabbi Aharon – 6:50

Evening Service (Arbith): 7:40 - Shabbat Ends: 7:45 PM

Rosh Hashana Children's Programming Schedule

Rabbi's Study 10:30 -11:30 with Orah ages 4-8. Stories, Tefillah, Games, Snacks and more . . .

Downstairs Playroom 10:30-12:30 Babysitting available ages 2-4 with Leah Colish and Orah

Please no one less than 2 years old.

During the week Selichot at 6:15AM followed by Shaharit at 7:00AM

Torah Classes

For those who missed and of Mr's Gitta Neufeld's classes, you can review the notes and listed to those classes by using this link - You'll see all 4 classes -

<http://torahcentral.com/YUTorah/browse.php#speaker=81486>

Registration is underway for the continuation of our Kosher Kitchen Class series with Rabbi Yosef for men and ladies. Classes will resume in October. Details to follow

Gentlemen, please advise if you will be joining us for Halacha class on Tuesday evenings at 8:30 beginning November in Hilchot Pesach Belyun.

Community Events

Saturday Night September 23rd: Motzi Shabbat Melave Malka at Subsational followed by 1AM Selichot in Brooklyn. Teenage boys only with Rabbi Colish and Lloyd. Please RSVP. Meet at Sephardic at 10:00 pm.

The Community wide Men's Softball Event was a smashing success. Thank you to the congregants of the Sephardic, Bach and Young Israel who came to play. A special thanks to Sam Shetrit and Rabbi Colish for organizing the event. Stay tuned for details on the next game!

Cub Scout Registration is under way! If you'd like to sign up or know somebody who might, please contact Rabbi Yosef.

Registration is underway for Fall Sunday Funday Hoolahoop in for girls ages 5 and up in the Sephardic Congregation of Long Beach. Sunday mornings from 10:00-11:00

please reply to
ShabbatShalomNewsletter@gmail.com

Take a peek into Kosher Culinary Arts School in Jerusalem with my daughter Mikhayla who is going through a rigorous 6 month program. bitemebymik.blogspot.com

Dear Friends,

I have been working with a family in my side gig as The Rabbi! The father has been going through Cancer Treatments for 4 ½ years and though there is no cure, B'H the doctors have stopped the progression and the man looks forward to heading back to work. We have been meeting with the doctors and the insurance people. Finally last week, we were able to \$250,000 in bills to \$7000. The doctors have been incredible. They are only asking for a very small reimbursement of expenses outlaid. So now I need to raise the \$7000 and write a check to the doctors. I have already received a pledge for \$1800 from one of my cousins. I'm hoping the rest of you will help with the \$5200 this week as we head into Rosh Hashana. Anything you can do to help would be greatly appreciated. Email me back your pledge.

The check can be made to
 The Sephardic Congregation of Long Beach
 And in the memo (Cholim Fund)
 P.O. Box 567 Long Beach, New York 11561

Daily Minyan Mon – Thurs at 979 Third Avenue, 17th Floor, Artistic Frame at 4PM – Please join us!
 212-289-2100

Editors Notes

So even though Sam Basile and his 100 Jewish Businessmen don't exist and are simply the creation of a Coptic Christian named Nakoula Basseley Nakoula who wanted to get back at his Egyptian Islamic brothers by making a poorly created movie, it's the Jews who are still getting blamed. Read through the comments on YouTube and the commenst affixed below stories on the subject and its "those Jews who are responsible for the deaths" in Libya of Ambassador Christopher Stevens and three other Americans. Witness a modern day blood libel. At least this one was quickly revealed, yet still the hatred against us persists.

Why? Why are we hated so much? I recall it once pointed out to me that it's because many of the nations of the world don't want to answer to any higher call. They want freedom to dictate their own paths whether that freedom is hidden in their atheism, idolatry or their created religions. As long as they can decide what right and wrong is then they can do what they want and always be right. The Jews represent something different. They represent unchanging values. No matter how many times our backs are whipped, we rise again and again. We are a people of Truth. We are what the nations can and should be. We're in the face. (In contrast Rabbi Abittan often spoke of the founding fathers of America and their desire to align themselves with Hebraic principles – this he recalled, made America both blessed and great. Sorry my friendly Republicans but America is probably based more on Judaism than on Christianity)

"The Jews are the conscience of the world". I recall these words by Raul Hilberg author of The Destruction of the European Jews. His work was required reading in our study of the Nazi

Final Solution. "Jews are iconoclasts. They will not worship idols... The Jews are the conscience of the world. They are the father figures, stern, critical, and forbidding."

The midrash teaches us that following creation, the angels initially thought that Adam HaRishon was Hashem, and wanted to pay him homage until Adam pointed out their error. This was Adam before the sin. He was at such a high level, that the angels associated him so closely with his Maker. This is the level that we reached at Mount Sinai before failing with the Golden Calf and this is the level we hope to again achieve.

Imagine being identified with G-d himself. The Talmud states in Menachot, "And all the peoples of the earth shall see that the name of the L-rd is upon you" ... R. Eliezer the Great says, This refers to the tefillin of the head. Man as G-d's representative on earth.

We spent the last few weeks studying the book of Yonah with Mrs Gitta J. Neufeld, Director of Education at The Allegra Franco School of Educational Leadership. Yonah is this tragic figure seemingly filled with pessimism and depression. Asking a Jew to go out and preach to the Nations of the World is usually not much fun. To me though, Yonah's heartbreaking fault lies in his inability to see his own alignment with G-d and their joint mission. He does not see himself as G-d's partner.

I was discussing with Aryana while driving into the city some of the reasons we blow the Shofar as explained in Sefer Abudraham, based on the words of Rav Se'adya Gaon. After I dropped her off I was thinking about various other explanations on

why we blow. One is that Satan will hear and think the Messiah is coming and fear that his job is finished. This is based on the prophet Zephaniah's prophecy of "The great day of HaShem is near A day of shofar.

We often speak about Satan as the brilliant strategist directed by Hashem to test us in this world. Satan knows every trick in the book. He is shrewd and clever. So why would Satan after hearing us blow the Shofar confuse it with some heavenly call?

Last week I spoke of our duty to become G-d's partner. Rabbi Lau in his book discusses his first meeting with the Lubavitcher Rebbe. He quotes the following:

Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him. G-d said to Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?" And he said, "I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper?" Then (God) said, "What have you done? Listen! Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground!"

When we examine the Hebrew, the word for blood is written in a plural form to read the bloods of your brother.

Why plural? Kol Demey Achicha. Upon which Rashi comments, Abel's blood and that of his descendants.

When one kills a person, he not only kills the person but every one that would descend from that person in the future. Losing one Jew, means we lost that Jew and all their descendants. But saving one Jew, means saving him and his descendants. The Talmud goes on to teach that whoever destroys a single soul is as guilty as one who destroys a complete world. And whoever preserves a single soul is merited as though he saved a complete world.

Only G-d can create worlds. But we as his partners can destroy or sustain them. What incredible power and responsibility we were given.

On Rosh Hashana we proclaim Hashem as King. But Hashem proclaims us as his children who he brings into the business as or as his servants, faithful employees he brings in as junior partners. Whether as son or servant, we have the responsibility of being a partner and representative on earth.

Partners have a responsibility to support each other. If we do what we must then He does what He can for us. Anyone who has a representative wants to make sure his representative lacks nothing.

When Satan hears the blast of the shofar, he knows that's its coming from man. But if that man is not just a man, if that man lives in the image of G-d, if that man is G-d's partner on earth and if that man is G-d's representative then Satan has reason to shudder, because its as if G-d himself is blowing.

We can save worlds and we can destroy worlds. Whether we like it or not the world sees us its conscience. It sees us (though it is reluctant to admit) as Truth's representative on earth. This Rosh Hashana, we need to ask ourselves. Will we live up to what we were created for? Will we dedicate ourselves to save or to destroy? Will we attempt to prevent our relatives and friends from cutting themselves off through intermarriage or stand idly by? Will we reach out to neighbors who have lost their connection and reconnect with them or will we lock our windows and doors? Will we place G-d's name upon us and live up to our

call as his ambassador on earth or will we shun the responsibility?

May we make the right decisions. May the curses end with the year end and may the new year begin with only blessings. May you all be blessed with a year of peace, happiness, health and prosperity. AMEN

Shabbat Shalom

David Bibi

Summary of The Weekly Torah Reading:

It's about time we stopped making excuses and took responsibility for who and what we are. It's long overdue. Here we are at the threshold of a new-year and it's all about being honest with ourselves. The degree of our commitment to Torah and Mitzvos will be in direct proportion to how many excuses we make for ourselves in avoiding commitment. The more the excuses, the less the commitment. As Moshe continued his final discourse, he confronted the primary excuses we all use in avoiding commitment and responsibility.

1st & 2nd Aliyot: Moshe presented the entire nation with the basis for our covenant with G-d. Starting with the promise to the forefathers and stretching across 500 years of history, our relationship with G-d had been substantiated through miracle after miracle. Yet, future generations might deny their personal obligation to continue the relationship and its attendant responsibilities. Therefore; Moshe made it absolutely clear that each generation is obligated to educate their children and train them to accept the covenant with G-d. Subsequent generation should not be able to excuse their

responsibilities for Torah and Mitzvos due to ignorance.

3rd Aliya: The next excuse Moshe confronted was the modernization of Torah. In every generation there are those who see Torah as archaic and outdated. "Only by grafting new ideas and practices to the stale practices of Torah will Judaism continue to exist and flourish." This excuse for changing Torah's eternal truths will result in the compromise of Torah observance, our land, and our people.

4th & 5th Aliyot: As history will tragically prove, Moshe's warnings would be ignored. Subsequent generations would wonder about the destruction and desolation and, in their search for answers, return to the uncompromised truths and practices of their forefathers.

6th Aliya: As a generation of Baalei Teshuva find their way back, many will be overwhelmed by the seemingly inaccessibility of Torah knowledge. Moshe reassures us that Torah is accessible to all those who truly desire it. Ignorance and a lack of opportunity for learning should never be an excuse.

7th Aliya: Finally, Moshe presented the bottom line. Endowed with free will we must choose properly. In the end, we are responsible for what happens.

Summary of The Haftorah:
Haftorah Netzavim
Isaiah 61:10-63:9

The 7th and final Haftorah of Consolation is from Yishaya 61:10 - 63:9. Coming before Rosh Hashana, this selection perfectly focuses us on the intended purpose of the High Holy Days.

We are dependent upon Hashem. He is the source of our protection,

well being, and purpose. His constant love and attention is evident in the miracle of our survival and the strength of our limited numbers. As the Navi prepared the hope which allows us to place tragedy in perspective, we prepare ourselves to acknowledge Hashem's providence through Tefilah and justice. There will soon come a time when we, as the Chosen People, will embrace the gift of G-d's special attention. At that time the "...nations will see your righteousness and all the kings your glory..."

Glory and honor are the byproducts of devotion and commitment. Our responsibility in the coming days is to "...recount G-d's mercies and praises..." Our goal is to acknowledge G-d and for G-d to proclaim "...Surely they are my people... (63:8)

EXCERPTS FROM THE JERSEY SHORE TORAH BULLETIN

Rabbi Reuven Semah

"You are all standing here today." (Debarim 29:9)

"It shall be a day of shofar-blowing for you." (Bemidbar 29:1)

There are many hints to the month of Elul throughout Tanach. At first glance one of these hints seems difficult to understand. A pasuk in the Megillat Esther (9:22) states: "and sending delicacies to one another and gifts to the poor." The first letters of the last four words (in Hebrew) spell out the name Elul. The obvious question is: What is the connection

between these two misvot of Purim, and Elul?

When a kingdom is full of people who are always fighting and squabbling, it is an indication that these people have their own interests uppermost in their minds. On the other hand, when there is unity among the subjects of the king, this is a sign that the primary focus of their lives is the glory of the king.

The Alshich Hakadosh writes that the expression *teruah* (referring to the blowing of the shofar), as in *Yom Teruah* (Bemidbar 29:1), the name the Torah designates as the title for the day of Rosh Hashanah, is closely related to the term *re'ut*, friendship. In fact, there is a pasuk in Nehemiah (8:10) that speaks of Rosh Hashanah and also refers to people sending *manot* (portions) to one another.

One Ereb Rosh Hashanah, the Gerrer Rebbe was occupied with all of his last minute preparations for the Day of Judgment. He was in his office, deep in thought, when one of his assistants knocked gently on the door. When the Rebbe called him in, he whispered something into the Rebbe's ear. The Rebbe looked up, stopped what he was doing, and walked toward the door.

An elderly Sephardic Jew stood there holding a package of food, which he handed to the Rebbe. The Rebbe looked at the package in surprise. The old man explained himself with one short comment, "The Pri Chadash (Rabbi Chizkiyahu ben David DeSilva) was the Rav of Yerushalayim."

Those who witnessed the strange event asked the Rebbe to elaborate. He responded that the Pri Chadash mentions that he would give a *Mishloah Manot* on

Ereb Rosh Hashanah (based on the aforementioned pasuk in Nehemiah). Wanting to fulfill this dictum, the old man had brought the package of food, knowing that the Rebbe would appreciate the sentiment.

I am looking forward this holiday to praying together as friends in honor of the King.

Rabbi Shmuel Choueka

When the Jewish people heard the ninety-eight curses said to them in last week's perashah, the Midrash says that they turned white from fear. Moshe then told them, "You are all standing here today," meaning, although you may have done things wrong in the past, you're still around, so don't worry so much. This seems to be self-defeating, for if Moshe is telling them not to be afraid, why then do we read the ninety-eight terrifying curses?

The answer is that once we took the message to heart and became afraid, at that point Moshe can console us and say, "Don't worry," because that means we got the message. This is similar to a school teacher who shows his students the "stick" that he uses to punish if they don't behave. He will never have to use it during the year if on the first day, he scares them with the stick to keep them in line. It says in the laws of Rosh Hashanah that we don't say Hallel on this holiday, since the books of life and death are open. How then can we say Hallel? Yet the law is that we dress up for Rosh Hashanah and have a festive meal. Aren't these two things contradictory? The answer is the same. Once we come to the realization that it's such a serious day that we can't even say Hallel though it's a holiday, then and only then can we allow ourselves to dress up and eat a festive meal. We must

take these days very seriously, realizing that our whole year depends on how we pray and how we act on Rosh Hashanah. Then we can be assured to be inscribed in the book of life, health and happiness.

RABBI ELI MANSOUR
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Outreach by Default
 Moshe Rabbenu tells us in Parashat Nisavim (29:28), "Ha'nistarot L'Hashem Elokenu Ve'ha'niglot Lanu U'l'banenu Ad Olam" – "That which is hidden belongs to Hashem our God; but that which is revealed is for us and our children, forever." This verse establishes the concept of collective responsibility toward Torah observance. We committed ourselves to the Torah together as a nation, and not just as individuals. And therefore, we have a responsibility to see to it, as best we can, that all other Jews observe the Misvot. It does not suffice to ensure that we and our families are devoted to the Torah. We must also be concerned that all our fellow Jews are likewise committed. This verse tells us that although we are not responsible for the "Nistarot," for the sins we are not aware of, the "Niglot" – the spiritual ills and failings of which we are aware – are our responsibility to address.

The Hafetz Haim (Rav Yisrael Meir Kagan of Radin, 1839-1933) explained this concept through an analogy to a borrower who borrowed a large sum of money and asked a friend to sign as his guarantor. Sometime later, the guarantor sees his friend, the borrower, walking into a casino with a wallet stuffed with money. The guarantor rushes up to him

and reprimands him for going gambling.

"What's it to you?" the friend angrily retorts. "It's my money, so I can do what I want with it."

"Oh no," the guarantor replies. "This directly affects me. If you throw your money away, I'm the one who's going to have to come up with a million dollars to repay your loan!"

Similarly, the Hafetz Haim explains, it is very much our business whether our fellow Jews observe the Torah, because we accepted collective responsibility toward it. We all jointly share the consequences of the nation's collective success or, Heaven forbid, failure to observe the Misvot, and we must therefore do what we can to bring back those who have strayed from observance.

Of course, this responsibility gives rise to the question of how this can be done. People don't like being told what to do. It's clear and obvious to everyone that if we go up to non-observant Jews and angrily reprimand them for violating the Torah, this tactic will not succeed. If anything, it will breed resentment that will further distance these precious Jews from our heritage.

The solution is to affect people without saying a word, to show them the beauty of Misvot and the satisfaction they bring without talking about it. When we see, for example, a great Torah Sage poring over his Torah books with passion and excitement, we are inspired. And even the rest of us can inspire people by performing Misvot with fervor and enthusiasm. If people see us feeling happy and fulfilled for having chosen a Torah lifestyle, they might be open to the idea of trying it out. If we have non-

observant guests for Shabbat meal and they see and feel the special joy of a family sitting together, sharing ideas and singing Pizmonim, this will have an effect. But if people see us performing Misvot begrudgingly, complaining about the responsibilities and rushing through them as fast as we can, they will remain distant from Torah life, and will in fact be happy that they do not embrace our lifestyle.

We do not have to – and we should not – go over to our fellow Jews and tell them directly they must be observe the Torah. But what we can and must do is reach out to them automatically, by default, exuding joy and fulfillment in our performance of Misvot, and making it clear that we view Torah life as a great privilege and source of unparalleled satisfaction.

Rabbi Wein

The title of this week's parsha says everything that needs to be said about the Jewish story, nation and people. After forty years of war, rebellion, strife, great accomplishment, Divine revelation, miracles, defeats, Torah study, and personal and national tragedies and heartbreak, Moshe remarks, almost incredulously, that *atem nitzavim* – you are erect and still standing proud and mighty.

Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman (Ramban), in his famous thirteenth century debate with the apostate Jew Pablo Christiani, told King James of Aragon that the greatest proof of Jewish uniqueness is that the Jews have

survived as a people and a faith over all of these many centuries in spite of its being “a sole and small lamb amongst seventy wolves.”

I had a neighbor of mine in the United States who was a Holocaust survivor. She spoke to me often and told me that she wished to return to her hometown in Poland to revisit her house and the surroundings of her shattered youth. She finally did so and when she returned I inquired of her as to how the trip and visit played out. She told me that she was able to find her house, still intact and even familiar to her. Her former Polish neighbor, a girl that she knew and played with when they were both children, now inhabited the house. She said that the Polish woman immediately recognized her even though more than four decades had passed since they last saw each other. The Polish neighbor exclaimed: “Bella, you are still alive!?”

Much of the world then wanted to be rid of the “Jewish problem” once and for all. There are many malevolent nations and people around today that still want to solve the “Jewish problem.” But somehow Bella is still alive.

All of the predictions regarding the long story of the Jewish people that are recorded for us here in the book of Dvarim have come to pass in all of their grandeur and in all of their horror. Tradition has it that Rabbi Eliyahu Kramer, the Gaon of Vilna, stated that all of Jewish history, past, present and future is recorded for us in this book of Dvarim.

Certainly the Holocaust fits eerily and almost perfectly in the descriptions of Jewish pain and suffering recorded in last week's parsha of Ki Tavo. The search for God, for meaning in one's life, for

transcendent values and ideals that will somehow give justification to one's efforts and life's toils, is really the hallmark of our world today, especially the Western world.

This angst and soul-searching, the chaos and loneliness of human existence, the inscrutability of God's guiding hand, so to speak, in human affairs, are all poignantly recorded for us in this week's parsha. Humans search for certainty in a very uncertain world. Many Jews, buffeted by ignorance, amnesia and false ideals, still somehow seek their identity and heritage and the road to spiritual fulfillment. We are a generation that wrestles with our own angels, the good ones and the better ones. But we are all still present here to do so. And that is the greatest wonder of all.

Sir Jonathan Sacks Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth

Why Be Jewish?

In the last days of his life Moses renews the covenant between God and Israel. The entire book of Devarim has been an account of the covenant – how it came about, what its terms and conditions are, why it is the core of Israel's identity as an *am kadosh*, a holy people, and so on. Now comes the moment of renewal itself, a kind of national referendum as it were.

Moses, however, is careful not to limit his words to those who are actually present. About to die, he

wants to ensure that no future generation can say, "Moses made a covenant with our ancestors but not with us. We didn't give our consent. We are not bound." To preclude this he says these words:

It is not with you alone that I am making this sworn covenant, but with whoever is standing here with us today before the Lord our God, and with whoever is not here with us today. (Deut. 29: 13-14)

As the commentators point out, the phrase "whoever is not here" cannot refer to Israelites alive at the time who happened to be somewhere else. That cannot be since the entire nation was assembled there. It can only mean "generations not yet born." The covenant bound all Jews from that day to this. As the Talmud says: we are all *mushba ve-omed me-har Sinai*, foresworn from Sinai (Yoma 73b, Nedarim 8a). By agreeing to be God's people, subject to God's laws, our ancestors obligated us.

Hence one of the most fundamental facts about Judaism. Converts excepted, we do not choose to be Jews. We are born as Jews. We become legal adults, subject to the commands and responsible for our actions, at the age of twelve for girls, thirteen for boys. But we are part of the covenant from birth. A *bat or bar mitzvah* is not a "confirmation." It involves no voluntary acceptance of Jewish identity. That choice took place more than three thousand years ago when Moses said "It is not with you alone that I am making this sworn covenant, but with ... whoever is not here with us today," meaning all future generations including us.

But how can this be so? Surely a fundamental principle of Judaism is that there is no obligation

without consent. How can we be bound by an agreement to which we were not parties? How can we be subject to a covenant on the basis of a decision taken long ago and far away by our distant ancestors?

The sages, after all, raised a similar question about the wilderness generation in the days of Moses who were actually there and did give their assent. The Talmud suggests that they were not entirely free to say No. "The holy one blessed be he suspended the mountain over them like a barrel and said: If you say Yes, all will be well, but if you say No, this will be your burial-place" (Shabbat 88b). On this, R. Acha bar Yaakov said: "This constitutes a fundamental challenge to the legitimacy of the covenant." The Talmud replies that even though the agreement may not have been entirely free at the time, Jews asserted their identity voluntarily in the days of Ahasuerus, as suggested by the book of Esther.

This is not the place to discuss this particular passage, but the essential point is clear. The sages believed with great force that an agreement must be free to be binding. Yet we did not agree to be Jews. We were, most of us, born Jews. We were not there in Moses' day when the agreement was made. We did not yet exist. How then can we be bound by the covenant?

This is not a small question. It is the question on which all others turn. How can Jewish identity be passed on from parent to child? If Jewish identity were merely racial or ethnic, we could understand it. We inherit many things from our parents – most obviously our genes. But being Jewish is not a genetic condition, it is a set of religious obligations. There is an halakhic principle, *zakhin le-adam*

shelo be-fanav: "You can confer a benefit on someone else without their knowledge or consent." And though it is doubtless a benefit to be a Jew, it is also in some sense a liability, a restriction on our range of legitimate choices. Had we not been Jewish, we could have worked on Shabbat, eaten non-kosher food, and so on. You can confer a benefit, but not a liability, on someone without their consent.

In short, this is the question of questions of Jewish identity. How can we be bound by Jewish law, without our choice, merely because our ancestors agreed on our behalf?

In my book *Radical Then, Radical Now* (published in America as *A Letter in the Scroll*) I pointed out how fascinating it is to trace exactly when and where this question was asked. Despite the fact that everything else depends on it, it was not asked often. For the most part, Jews did not ask the question, *Why be Jewish?* The answer was obvious. My parents are Jewish. My grandparents were Jewish. So I am Jewish. Identity is something most people in most ages take for granted.

It did, however, become an issue during the Babylonian exile. The prophet Ezekiel says, "What is in your mind shall never happen—the thought, 'Let us be like the nations, like the tribes of the countries, and worship wood and stone.'" (Ez. 20: 32). This is the first reference to Jews actively seeking to abandon their identity.

It happened again in rabbinic times. We know that in the second century BCE there were Jews who Hellenised, seeking to become Greek rather than Jewish. There were others who, under Roman rule, sought to become Roman. Some even

underwent an operation known as epispasm to reverse the effects of circumcision (in Hebrew they were known as meshukhim) to hide the fact that they were Jews.[1]

The third time was in Spain in the fifteenth century. That is where we find two Bible commentators, R. Isaac Arama and R. Isaac Abarbanel, raising precisely the question we have raised about how the covenant can bind Jews today. The reason they ask it while earlier commentators did not was that in their time – between 1391 and 1492 – there was immense pressure on Spanish Jews to convert to Christianity, and as many as a third may have done so (they were known in Hebrew as the anusim, in Spanish as the conversos, and derogatively as marranos, “swine”). The question “Why stay Jewish?” was real.

The answers given were different at different times. Ezekiel’s answer was blunt: “As I live, declares the Lord God, surely with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm and with wrath poured out I will be king over you.” In other words, Jews might try to escape their destiny but they would fail. Even against their will they would be known as Jews. That, tragically, is what happened during the two great ages of assimilation, fifteenth century Spain and nineteenth and early twentieth century Europe. In both cases, racial antisemitism persisted, and Jews continued to be persecuted.

The sages answered the question mystically. They said, even the souls of Jews not yet born were present at Sinai and ratified the covenant (Exodus Rabbah 28: 6). Every Jew, in other words, did give his or her consent in the days of Moses even though they had not yet been born.

Demystifying this, perhaps the sages meant that in his or her innermost heart even the most assimilated Jew knew that he or she was still a Jew. That seems to have been the case with figures like Heinrich Heine and Benjamin Disraeli, who lived as Christians but often wrote and thought as Jews.

The fifteenth century Spanish commentators found this answer problematic. As Arama said, we are each of us both body and soul. How then is it sufficient to say that our soul was present at Sinai? How can the soul obligate the body? Of course the soul agrees to the covenant. Spiritually, to be a Jew is a privilege, and you can confer a privilege on someone without their consent. But for the body, the covenant is a burden. It involves all sorts of restrictions on physical pleasures. Therefore if the souls of future generations were present but not their bodies, this would not constitute consent.

Radical Then, Radical Now is my answer to this question. But perhaps there is a simpler one. Not every obligation that binds us is one to which we have freely given our assent. There are obligations that come with birth. The classic example is a crown prince. To be the heir to a throne involves a set of duties and a life of service to others. It is possible to neglect these duties. In extreme circumstances it is possible for even a king to abdicate. But no one chooses to be royal. That is a fate, a destiny, that comes with birth.

The people of whom God himself said, “My child, my firstborn, Israel” (Ex. 4: 22) knows itself to be royalty. That may be a privilege. It may be a burden. It may be both. It is a peculiar post-Enlightenment delusion to think that the only significant things

about us are those we choose. For the truth is some of the most important facts about us, we did not choose. We did not choose to be born. We did not choose our parents. We did not choose the time and place of our birth. Yet each of these affects who we are and what we are called on to do.

We are part of a story that began long before we were born and will continue long after we are no longer here, and the question for all of us is: will we continue the story? The hopes of a hundred generations of our ancestors rest on our willingness to do so. Deep in our collective memory the words of Moses continue to resonate. “It is not with you alone that I am making this sworn covenant, but with ... whoever is not here with us today.” We are part of that story. We can live it. We can abandon it. But it is a choice we cannot avoid and it has immense consequences. The future of the covenant rests with us.

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