

The Covenant and the Blessing of the Land

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Rabbi Anne Landowne

Temple Beth El

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Soon we will read our Torah portion, *Nitzavim*, in Deuteronomy, chapters 29 and 30. This *parasha* describes the solemn covenantal commitment made between God and Israel. “You stand this day, all of you, before your Eternal God, every one in Israel, men, women, and children to enter into the sworn covenant as the people whose only God is the Eternal. “This first statement is very inclusive. All people from the leaders to the guest workers, adults and children, male and female are included.

Now the portion takes an unusual turn. “And it is not with you alone that I make this sworn covenant. I make it with those who are standing here with us today and equally with all who are not here with us today. “Now what does that mean? Is this a contractual agreement, a covenant, with people who are not present? This is understood by the rabbis to mean that all future generations are included and bound to God by this original agreement.

In our individualistic society it can be hard to accept this definition of covenant. We had no choice, as Jews, we are automatically included. Dr. Ellen Umansky has written about a related idea. In her words, “ I would suggest that the Jewish self exists in covenant not as ‘a single soul in its full individuality’ but as a relational soul in community with others. Rather than beginning with the autonomous self who chooses to become a Jewish self, I would suggest that we begin by recognizing that no self is fully autonomous, that as Martin Buber wrote long ago, we always exist in relationship to others and to the world in which we live.” This sense of community, shared destiny and values are present in our portion, *Nitzavim*, which I will elaborate on as “ Here we stand, here we are grounded, and these are our core values. “To quote from our *parasha*, “For this commandment which I command you this day is not too hard for you, nor too remote. It is not in heaven that you should say: Who will go up for us to heaven and bring

it down to us. Nor is it beyond the sea. No it is very near to you, in your mouth and in your heart, you can do it.” We as the Jewish people are inheritors of this ancient covenant. We have a path for life and goodness.

“ For I command you this day to love the Eternal, to walk in the ways and to keep the commandments laws and teachings, that you may live and increase and that your God may bless you in the land that you occupy.” The blessing of land is very important to the establishment of a people with a shared destiny. But today we are in a quandary. After two thousand years of exile from the Land of Israel, following the *Shoah* and the devastation of European Jewry the blessing of the covenant has been fulfilled again. The Jewish people have their own land, *Eretz Yisrael*. Residing in this land is the largest Jewish community in the world. So what is the quandary?

The Palestinian people also consider this their land. Although their history probably does not span the millennium, by our usual way of understanding ownership, there are disputes over who is entitled to what parts of the land. How do we as Jews relate to the current political situation where the Palestinian people are striving to be recognized as an independent nation?

In difficult situations such as these people tend to become polarized and express strong opinions. The spectrum ranges from a belief in the God given right for Jews to possess the entire land of Israel including the territories known by their biblical names of Judea and Samaria. This group is roughly identified as religious Zionists.

The polar opposite often identified with the extreme left, tends to see the Jews as white European colonialists acting in a repressive way and depriving the native born population of their right to live in their ancestral homes.

Where are we as Jews along this continuum? The Reform movement, which was historically opposed to Zionism, became a strong supporter of Israel in the early years of the state. Hebrew Union College’s Jerusalem campus is right within the Green Line. Prior to the Six Day War, the building adjoined no man’s land. This unwavering support continues despite the difficulties created by the religious authorities in Israel. Reform Jews, rabbis, and cantors are not fully recognized and there are obstacles to our freedom to practice Judaism within the State of Israel.

Fellow Reform rabbis attacked the future head of the URJ, Rabbi Rick Jacobs, Rabbi Eric Yoffie's successor in a very public way in the media. They were criticizing his stand on Israel and condemned him for not being a strong enough proponent. Rabbi Jacobs who has an apartment in Jerusalem and is deeply committed to *Eretz Yisrael* was attacked for meeting with organizations like J Street. In his attempt to build bridges and find common ground with Jews who have misgivings about Israel he became a target himself for harsh and painful criticism and character assassination.

As we all know there are no easy answers, to these divisions between Jews let alone the divisions between Israeli's and Palestinians. But the purpose of discussing this today is not to enter into a political discussion. Today is a day for reflection and unity. As your new rabbi I wanted to let you know that the question of Israel's existential survival and its moral and spiritual health are deeply important to me. *Kol Yisrael aravim zeh b'zeh*. All Jews are responsible for one another.

During the year of 5772 I hope to have conversations about Israel with you. I am interested in hearing your thoughts and feelings. Here in Dubuque, where many of you interact with young people in a variety of university settings, it is essential to carefully think through your opinions so that you are prepared to answer questions and respond to the opinions and questions posed by students. We are all responsible and therefore required to care. *Kol Yisrael aravim zeh b'zeh*.