

From Age to Age

Moses and the Israelites are encamped on the plains of Moab, poised to enter the promised land. There Moses gives a final speech, restating the obligations of the covenant between God and Israel. As he speaks, we hear this arresting statement:

"I am making this covenant, sworn by an oath, not only with you who stand here with us today before the LORD our God, but also with those who are not here with us today" (Deut. 29:14-15 NRSV)

Who are those "who are not here with us this day"? It can't mean absentees on the day since just a few verses earlier we were told that all Israelites from all groups are assembled.

According to the great medieval Jewish scholar known as Rashi, the souls of all future generations of Jews were present at this covenantal moment, just as they were at Mt Sinai. This concept is of profound importance to Jewish understanding of what it means to be God's people, bearers of the divine promises and the covenant from generation to generation. The fact that this verse uses the word "stand" when referring to those "here" and then omits it when speaking of those "not here" can perhaps be taken as a distinction between those bodily present and those spiritually present.¹

But how can a covenant made long ago obligate generations to come? Surely this is not possible! Abravanel, a 15th century Spanish-Jewish Torah commentator, tells of an argument he had with other sages over this very question. Before we hear how Abravanel replied, what reflections do you bring to the discussion?

Perhaps you made the observation that what occurs in the present does indeed impact on future generations. Every family, for instance, is shaped by the actions and choices of their ancestors, for good or for ill.

Abravanel compares Israel to a family debt. *"Just as the children inherit their father's property, so they inherit his debts. Even though the children were not alive when the debt was incurred they are still liable to repay it. Similarly, God conferred a*

*privilege on Israel and they were indebted to God for it."*²

What was that privilege that makes future generations "indebted" to God and bound to the covenant? Abravanel names first and foremost the Exodus miracle. Remember the verse that introduces the Decalogue: *"I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery"* (Exodus 20:2). The serious obligation brought to bear on the Jewish people derives from the wonder of being called into a relationship with God who liberates and calls them into a life of freedom as God's people.

Our Torah passage invites reflection on what God has done and continues to do for the people of God as they live in covenant with God. There will be similarities and differences as to how Jews and Christians interpret this passage.

For Jews, the all-embracing nature of their covenant with God has been experienced through history as both a joyful privilege and a heavy burden. Says Abravanel, writing at the time of the Inquisition and various forms of persecution:

*"Many of our people have forsaken the religion of their forefathers as a result of persecution and wished to be like the nations of the world... Though they and their descendants would do all in their power to assimilate they would not succeed. They would still be called Jews against their own will and would be accused of Judaizing in secret and be burnt at the stake for it."*³

These are sobering words for Christians to ponder in light of church history. They also draw us to ponder the privilege and burden of being, not simply a believer, but part of a people of faith.

1. See Elie Munk, *The Call of the Torah*, vol. 5 (New York, 1995), 319.

2. Quoted in Nehama Leibowitz, *Studies in Devarim* (New York, 1996), 299.

3. Leibowitz, *Studies in Devarim*, 302.

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