

A-171

Nitzavim

A-171

- I - The central idea of the reading from the Torah this morning is one which is of crucial importance in both the history & theology of our religion. It is the niss - the covenant, or contract - which G-d made with Israel. It is by means of that niss that the relationship between G-d & Israel was legalized, a contract whereby we are bound to observe the Torah and G-d is bound to make us prosper, with the added proviso that if we should fail to live up to our obligations, G-d - i.e. - is released from His.
- II. Now the nature of the niss is, according to our Sages, that of a shvut, an oath (shvut sh"n). Our ancestors bound themselves, and their descendants - which means us, - to by means of an oath, to the terms of the agreement.
- III. Furthermore, while in general the oath calls for us to observe all the Torahs, it is directed primarily vs. sh"v. We swore to believe in & by G-d, & not serve any idol.
- IV. So that essentially what happened in the episode related in today's Sidra, is that Moses made Israel give its word, by oath, that they would refrain from serving strange gods. Moses, acting under command of G-d, exacted a shvut to refrain from sh"v.
- V. That would seem simple enough. But there is a logical difficulty here that makes it sufficient for us to understand what motivated Moses to this action; we fail to understand his psychology & his logic. And this logical criticism is leveled by the Tosafists, those the authors of that profound

commentary on the Talmud which took hundreds of years to compose
was first begun by the grandchildren of Nachi. They ask
(11765 & 11726) as follows: If Moses was afraid that some
day his people would degenerate to the point where they would
actually commit the worst sin known to man, the vilest
crime conceivable, that of ז' , how could he prevent it by an
oath? For violating an oath is indeed wrong, but if a man
will stoop to idolatry, the worst of all sins, he surely will feel
no compunctions about breaking his word, something which
is wrong, but insignificant compared to idolatry? If
Moses afraid they would serve idols, surely he should have
suspected they would violate their ~~oath~~. Making his
people swear, therefore, that they would not serve idols is an ineffective
as well as unnecessary step. That is the question, the criticism,
of the Tosafists, ~~and~~ which they mention no solution.

VI. And yet, despite the logical consistency of the Tosafists,
despite their accurate analysis, history & the experience of our
own times proves that Moses was right & the Tosafists
were in error. The facts of irrevocable & indisputable facts of
our day prove that life is not logical, & that men
have twisted & distorted & warped values, so that
what is of lesser importance become paramount & that it of
greater imp. becomes secondary. Moses was certainly right
when he ventured that some day men would hold ז'
more important than ז' , when they would take
the Torah's scale of values & turn it upside down.

VII. Such, indeed, are our times. We have experienced a change in
emphasis, a transvaluation of values, we have concurred to the
wrong stress, the erroneous evaluation & the lopsided perspective.

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Thus, for instance, the peaceful & constructive use of atomic energy, recognized though it is, is ~~is~~ runs a poor second to its destructive exploitation. The common yearning of ~~man~~ all men for peace are mentioned but action rests on the assumption that his instincts of aggression & fear are more important - ~~the historian~~ This lopsidedness of values finds much but excellent expression in ~~the~~ the situation in France where side-by-side there stand a grand, opulent tomb for Napoleon & a comparatively insignificant monument to Louis Pasteur, one of the greatest benefactors of mankind.

IX -

or take attitude towards Jews. The biased ^{English} historian Toynbee compares the situation of 100,000 Arab refugees to the Holocaust which wiped out $\frac{1}{3}$ of the Jewish people. To the mind of this insensitive, heartless historian, they are exactly equivalent. No one maintains that it is tragic for 100,000 people to live in poverty & squalor on a narrow strip of land. But, my g-d, how blind & how narrow does one have to be to compare that to cruel, barbaric, premeditated & cold-blooded ~~barbaric~~ murder of 60 times that number! Moses was, unfortunately right. Our world has lost its capacity to evaluate things properly. Our thinking is topsy-turvy. Our understanding ^{a myth} will, our logic is non-existent & our consistency dead when a man of Toynbee's reputation has to say publicly that the Zionists of Israel have sinned as evilly & cruelly & as ^{German} inhumanly as the Nazis!! Call him an intuitive anti-semitic if you will. But what about the thousands of his readers who naively & gullibly swallow this unmitigated unconstructed nonsense in one gulp? Yes, Moses was right. We have allowed the serious to shrink to nothingness, & the secondary we have hallowed & sanctified.

include them within the framework of our serious, intelligent
dedication to Torah. We will see them live them in the broad, clear
& perspicacious view of Halakha.

XVI. We shall learn & learn well the law (דבר) of our Talumud
that לִבְנֵי אֱדֹמִים יִשְׁכַּח בְּיָמֵינוּ - bless the important & include
the secondary - the law that when has before him two roads
which require different blessings, & one is of more importance than
the other, that he must recite the blessing over the 1st, &
that will cover the 2nd as well.

XVII. Loyal to the דברים - the important values - and
mindful of the לִב, the lesser values, we shall recapture
the דבר, the blessing of Torah. No greater tribute
can be paid to the memory of our teacher Moses than
to prove that as far as we are concerned, he was
wrong & the Tosafists were right.

1961: another example of "first things first" - when war threatened would
in 1958 & was uppermost in everyone's mind - League of Nations
was debating - the opium trade!