

"THE TORAH UPHELD AND RESTORED"

The confirmation of the covenant that is described in this morning's Sidra, is a one-time event that must have been extremely impressive. The Levites and the Ark were in the valley, between two mountains, upon each of which stood six tribes. The Levites would pronounce 12 blessings in one direction, and the tribes on that mountain would answer, "Amen." The Torah gives us only one list, that of the curses.

The climax of these 12 is the following:

מלך אלהים יקום וישיב את ישראל ויחיה
"cursed is he who will not yakim the words of this Torah to do them." Translators differ as to the work yakim. Our text reads, "execute." Hertz translates, "confirm," probably following Nahmanides. Others render the word, "fulfill," or "uphold."

The Jerusalem Talmud, in Sotah, was also puzzled by that word, and apparently took it literally. Yakim means to upbuild, to erect, to restore, and not simply to uphold or confirm or fulfill. Thus:

מלך אלהים יקום וישיב את ישראל ויחיה
"I have seen the words 'who will not erect.' Is there, then, a fallen falling Torah?"

(The sukkah is presumed to represent Torah.)

The Talmud had in mind the relationship of the kind that is expressed in the verse that we add to the birkhat ha-mazon (grace) on Sukkot:

החיה את ישראל ויחיה את ישראל ויחיה את ישראל
"May the Merciful One restore for us the fallen Sukkah of David." That is why the Talmud asks: if we must restore (yakum), does that not imply that the Torah has fallen? It takes the word yakim not as related to יקום ("to uphold," passively) but יחיה ("to restore," actively).

The Jerusalem Talmud continues: how does one erect or upbuild the Torah?

The first answer is rather cryptic:

החיה את ישראל ויחיה את ישראל ויחיה את ישראל
it refers to the hazzan. The hazzan was, in Talmudic days and parlance, a functionary, what is today referred to as the shatz. How is this related to the upbuilding and restoring of the Torah? Nahmanides explains that the verse refers, quite literally and prosaically, to the task of raising the Torah at the end of the service -- the hagbah, performed (in those days exclusively) by the hazzan. Hence, the Torah, according to this interpretation, denounces one who performs the picking up of the scroll of the Torah incorrectly, and blesses the one asher yakim, who does it properly:

הנהגות פני כהנים... שגביר אור ומהלך פני
כהנים אלה המהנים פנינו ולשאלו ומחזירו לפני
ולאחריו שגביר אלה האלה וישם אלה הנבואה אצל
ולאחר ואלה המהנה אלה שגביר אלה

(Perhaps this is the source of the Rabbi's insistence:

) והנהגות אלה שגביר אלה

The second opinion is more fundamental:

ה' שגביר אלה המהנה אלה שגביר אלה

It is the responsibility of the earthly authority -- the king and the Sanhedrin and the judges and the rabbis and teachers and parents -- to raise the Torah, to give it stature and status and prestige, to restore it to eminence, when they notice that it is not being revered properly. It is their task, בגביר אלה, in the face of those who cause the Torah to suffer neglect, to upbuild it.

Thus, the Talmud continues,

אלה המהנה אלה שגביר אלה

When the priest Hilkiyah brought to King Josiah a copy of the Torah, which had not been seen for many years because of idolatrous persecutions, and he read the curse against one who does not restore the Torah, he rent his garments in grief, acknowledged his failure, and said: "it is my duty to restore it." That is precisely what he did. His reign was marked by the upbuilding and restoration of the Torah.

I am pleased to report that there are at least some signs of such upbuilding abounding in today's news, which is otherwise so depressing. Thus, many yishuvim, not at all formally religious, are putting aside a day for the study of Torah during the month of Ellul, under the influence of such groups as Pe'ilim, or TalaT, or Geshet. Our own city's Board of Jewish Education has instituted an "educational hotline," which in itself may not have any direct results, but certainly acts as a very constructive "consciousness-raising" mechanism. And the group of 15 American Jews from Yeshiva University who have just returned from Australia, have left behind a record of stunning, galvanizing effect on young people in Melbourne and Sydney. Hundreds of young people and their parents are being "turned on" to Judaism and to Torah.

Following the same thought, the Jerusalem Talmud continues by implying that the act of restoring Torah is not that of a single man, the hazzan, or even that of the authorities, but of every single Jew:

אלה המהנה אלה שגביר אלה
והנהגות אלה שגביר אלה

No matter how "frum" you are, no matter how much Torah you have studied or taught, no matter how difficult it is to give today, regardless of how high inflation or how depressed the market, Jewish charity and especially Torah must not become the first victim of the economy, and the last one to benefit from its upturn. Whoever can support Torah (and every one can to some extent) and does not, is included in the curse. Conversely, whoever does help according to the extent of his abilities, is included in the blessing.

Our task is manifold: to study, to teach, to do -- and to support those who study and teach and do and observe.

As we enter the new year, painfully aware of the economic problems of the old year that simply will not go away, we read a warning not to abandon expressions of Torah in our community.

But more than just continued and enhanced support in the objective sense is mandated by the Sidra. Also prescribed is: an attitude.

The whole *חובת* is not ascribed to a single sin -- save one small item: *לעזוב את התורה*. We must not only support Torah, but we must do it unbegrudgingly, with joy.

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I would like to give this first opinion, in which the verse is referred to the hazzan, a contemporary interpretation. Hazzan means "the cantor" in our modern sense. He is one who can, but the exercise of his talents and sacred purpose, enhance the kavanah and the piety of the entire congregation. Especially when that hazzan is involved with young people, he can be doubly effective in restoring Torah so that it never be a *חורבנה*.

In this sense, on your behalf, I welcome Cantor Irving Wietschner, his wife and their children, in our midst, confident that our new hazzan will play a major role, along with each and every one of us, in restoring Torah to its greatness in our midst. On behalf of all of us, we rephrase for him that same verse, for a blessing:

ברוך אתה יי אלהינו יהוה אלהינו שנתת לנו חזן

I am sure that you will all join me in:

ברוך אתה יהוה אלהינו