



DVAR TZEDEK

Parashat Nitzavim 5772

By Sarah Mulhern

September 15, 2012

Parashat Nitzavim describes a ceremony through which the people of Israel will “enter into the covenant of Adonai [their] God.”¹ It is a powerful ritual, with its recited litany of curses for when the Israelites abandon God and blessings for when they return faithfully,² but it is strangely redundant. The people of Israel already affirmed their commitment to God’s covenant before the revelation at Mount Sinai. Why is Moses orchestrating a second entry into a covenantal relationship that already exists?

Rashi explains that this ceremony occurs on the day Moses dies³ and Joshua assumes leadership, just as the people, at the end of 40 years in the dessert, are poised to attempt to conquer the land of Canaan. In this interpretation, Moses is creating an opportunity in this transitional moment for the people to pause, shore up their enthusiasm and seriously recommit to taking the next difficult steps.

Some modern commentaries, however, hint that it was necessary to enter into the covenant again because the first experience was flawed in a critical way. When Moses issued his instructions for preparing to receive the Torah at Sinai, he said: “Be ready for the third day; do not go near a woman.”⁴ Some feminist commentaries⁵ have suggested an interpretation of this verse, strongly rejected by classical commentaries⁶, that implies that the covenant at Sinai was made only with men. Whether or not this is correct, it is clear that the experience was far from participatory. We are told that the people were so overwhelmed that they remained “at a distance” while Moses went forward to receive revelation on their behalf.⁷

In contrast to this exclusionary or passive revelation, the covenant ceremony in *Parashat Nitzavim* repeatedly emphasizes inclusion and participation. The ceremony begins by declaring that *all* members of the community are present—“You stand this day, *all* of you, before Adonai”—and then goes on to list the groups who are represented: “Your tribal heads, your elders, and your officials, *all* the men of Israel, your children, your wives, even the stranger within your camp, from woodchopper to water drawer.”⁸ From the elites to the most economically and socially disadvantaged, everyone in the community is explicitly acknowledged and welcomed. While *Parashat Nitzavim* does not go as far as we might wish to eliminate the hierarchy between these groups, it does teach us a key lesson—that everyone, including the most marginalized, must have a seat at the table. This seemingly redundant ceremony shows us that the presence and affirmation of the entire community is crucial to truly entering the covenant.

Like the Israelites in *Parashat Nitzavim*, the people of Burma⁹ stand at a moment of extreme transition. After enduring 50 years of severe political and social repression at the hands of their military government, they are finally

¹ Deuteronomy 29:11.

² Ibid 29:9-28.

³ Rashi on Deuteronomy 29:9.

⁴ Exodus 19:15.

⁵ See Judith Plaskow, “Reshaping Jewish Memory,” *MyJewishLearning.com*.

http://www.myjewishlearning.com/beliefs/Issues/Gender_and_Feminism/Feminist_Thought/Theology/Judith_Plaskow.shtml

⁶ See Shabbat 86a, Rashi on Exodus 19:15

⁷ Exodus 20:15-18.

⁸ Deuteronomy 29:9-10.

⁹ All information about Burma is sourced from AJWS publication “The Story of our Impact: Supporting the Movement for a Free and Democratic Burma.”

http://ajws.org/who_we_are/publications/case_studies/06_12_the_story_of_our_impact.pdf

seeing a window of opportunity for change. Activists in Burma and in the refugee communities along the Thai border have slowly built a movement for freedom, and their work is starting to yield results. This year, the government released hundreds of political prisoners and finally freed Aung San Suu Kyi, the country's leading democratic opposition leader, who had spent most of the last 20 years under house arrest. It established a parliament and held democratic elections in which Suu Kyi and other opposition leaders won seats. But this is not the end of the struggle for the people of Burma. Like the Israelites, who prepared for their next challenges in Canaan just as they concluded their desert trek, this is a moment for both celebration and recommitment in the face of the hard work to come.

And like the Israelites, to be successful, the people of Burma will need to embrace an inclusive approach like that championed in our *parashah*. Repression and violence against ethnic minorities has been a primary agenda of Burma's Junta government for decades, and it has kept members of minority groups, especially women and youth, excluded from society and robbed of their human rights. Recent outbreaks of violence between Buddhist and Muslim communities, coupled with government persecution against Muslims, highlight these ongoing tensions. As Suu Kyi and others begin negotiations with the government on democratization and ending violence in ethnic regions, marginalized communities must have a seat at the table and their concerns must be on the agenda. The process, like the ceremony of *Parashat Nitzavim*, must emphasize participation and inclusion and explicitly acknowledge and welcome all members of society. Just as in our *parashah*, the presence and affirmation of the entire community is the crucial key to success.

AJWS is helping the people of Burma achieve this participatory society by creating spaces for ethnic minority communities to come together to discuss their concerns and develop shared strategies. We support ethnic minorities, youth and women to advocate for their rights and gain a voice in Burma's development. Some of the leaders of AJWS's grantees are already taking part in national level negotiations about the future of their country. AJWS will continue to support their lobbying efforts and help them overcome those who would keep them "at a distance."

Only when *all* of the community is represented can there be a covenant, like the one in *Parashat Nitzavim*, that is "both with those who are standing here with us this day . . . and with those who are not with us here this day"—which, according to a *midrash*, means with all future generations.¹⁰ Through bringing representatives of *all* of the pieces of their diverse community into the negotiations, may the people of Burma—and those of us who support them—be blessed to achieve a free and democratic Burma today and for generations to come.



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¹⁰ Midrash Tanhuma Nitzavim 3. See also Rashi on Deuteronomy 29:14.

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