

Thought of the Week

By Rabbi Zvi Yehuda

THE IDEA OF THE SANCTITY OF THE JEWISH PEOPLE is succinctly expressed in Jeremiah (2:3): "A sanctity to the Lord is Israel!"

The idiom "Sanctity to the Lord!"—"*Kodesh Ladonai!*"—is an old ritual pledge of dedication to God, of offering mundane objects to the Temple, elevating them to the sacred domain, and thus rendering them untouchable. Jeremiah's verse means that Israel is dedicated to God, and thereby holy. This "dedication" or "holiness" entails a two-sided, covenantal relationship: On the part of the People—special commitment to cherish and follow the divine teachings of Torah. On the part of God—an irrevocable promise to cherish and protect the Jewish People. Israel is thus likened to the "first fruit" of the harvest, the defilement of which is severely punishable (Leviticus 22:1-16).

Using this ritual terminology, Jeremiah issues a prophetic warning to the enemies of Israel:

*All who devour her, would be held guilty!
Disaster would befall them, says the Lord!"*

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THE JEWISH LAW OF CONTRACTS is molded after the agreement between Moses and the Reubenites and Gadites (Nu. 32). These tribes agreed with Moses that they will settle on the East Bank of Jordan, a region suitable for their extremely large number of cattle, on condition that they will participate in the conquest of the rest of the land for all the tribes of Israel.

This classic agreement follows, as recorded, four rules: (1) The condition is stated twice, positively and negatively; (2) the positive formulation precedes the negative; (3) the condition phrase ("if") precedes the outcome ("then"); (4) the condition itself is fulfillable. These rules are followed in all conditional contracts in Jewish law (Kidushin 61a-b).

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RABBI ZVI YEHUDA

THE POWER OF A PERSON'S WORD is the core of Torah's rule (Nu. 30:3) that a person must not disregard his pledge: "(A person) shall not break his/her word." The Hebrew verb for "break" (*yahel*) conveys the notion of violation, desecration and trivialization. A person's word is sacred, and must be treated with utmost respect. Yet it must not become tyrannical. Realizing the dynamics of human growth and a person's freedom to make new choices, Torah prescribes ways to annul pledges.

The Jewish law of contracts is molded after the agreement between Moses and the Reubenites and Gadites (Nu. 32). These tribes agreed with Moses that they will settle on the East Bank of Jordan, a region suitable for their extremely large number of cattle, on condition that they will participate in the conquest of the rest of the land for all the tribes of Israel.

This classic agree-

ment follows, as recorded, four rules: (1) The condition is stated twice, positively and negatively; (2) the positive formulation precedes the negative; (3) the condition phrase ("if") precedes the out-

come ("then"); (4) the condition itself is capable of being executed. These rules are followed in all conditional contracts in Jewish law (Kidushin 61 a-b).

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THE POWER OF A PERSON'S WORD is in the core of Torah's rule (Nu. 30:3), that a person must not disregard his pledge: "he shall not break his word." The Hebrew verb for "break" ("*yahel*") conveys the notion of violation, desecration and trivialization. A word is sacred, and must be treated with utmost respect. But it also must not become tyrannical. Realizing the dynamics of human growth and a person's freedom to make new choices, Torah prescribes ways to annul pledges. Sacred as the word is, it must not be worshipped. Torah instructs us to treat our words with dignity, not to disregard or ignore them, but also not to be enslaved by them.

THOUGHT OF THE WEEK

By **RABBI ZVI YEHUDA**

The experience of Israel during 40 years of wandering in the Sinai desert is seen by Jeremiah as the people's idyllic epoch. Harsh as the physical conditions were then, the desert was nonetheless the arena of first love between God and Israel, where it grew and blossomed with the vigor of fresh beginnings. Israel's condition in the days of the prophet (at the threshold of the kingdom's destruction) stands in contrast to Israel's desert experience. That is the theme of Jeremiah's prophecy. God remembers the people's first love in the desert (2:2):

I recall the devotion of your youth, the love of your bridal clinging;

How you followed Me in the desert, in a

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land unsown.

In contrast, by the time of Jeremiah, the people do not cherish this memory anymore (6): They do not ask: "Where is Hashem, Who brought us up from Egypt; Who led us through the desert; through a wasteland of drought and darkness; a land which no one ever crossed, where no one ever stayed!"

Jeremiah's equation conveys a double complaint: Why don't the people recall God's devotion in the past? Why don't they recall the harshness of the desert? Recalling both may serve as inspiration and comfort. For harsh as the desert was, it prevented neither God nor the people from showing devotion to each other.

THOUGHT OF THE WEEK

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RABBI ZVI YEHUDA

JEREMIAH'S IDEAS on Israel's present condition and her desert experience: Contrasting the two is the theme of Jeremiah's following prophecy. God remembers the people's first love in the desert (2:2):

I recall the devotion of your youth, the love of your bridal clinging:

How you followed Me in the desert, in a land unsown.

In contrast, the people do not cherish this memory (6):

They do not ask: Where is the Lord, Who brought us up from Egypt; Who led us through the desert;

Through a wasteland of drought and darkness; a land which no one ever crossed; where no one ever stayed!

Jeremiah's equation conveys a double complaint: Why don't the people recall God's devotion in the past? Why don't they recall the harshness of the desert? Recalling both may serve as inspiration and comfort. For harsh as the desert was, it prevented neither God nor the people from show-

ing devotion to each other.

On the sanctity of the Jewish people: Jeremiah (2:3) says that "Israel is a sanctity to the Lord" (*Kodesh La-donai*). Jeremiah's verse means that Israel is dedicated to God and, thereby, holy. This "dedication" or "holiness" entails a two-sided, covenantal relationship: On the people's part, special commitment to cherish and follow the Divine teachings of Torah; on God's part, an irrevocable promise to cherish and protect the Jewish people.



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RABBI ZVI YEHUDA

JEREMIAH'S IDEAS: Jeremiah (2:3) says that "Israel is a Sanctity to the Lord" ("*Kodesh La-Donai*"). The Hebrew idiom is an old ritual pledge of dedication to God, when one offers mundane objects to the Temple, elevating them to the sacred, and thus rendering them untouchable. Jeremiah means that Israel is dedicated to God and, thereby, holy. This "dedication" entails a two-sided, covenantal relationship: on the people's part, commitment to cherish and follow the Divine teachings; on God's part, an irrevocable promise to cherish and protect the Jewish people. Israel is thus likened to the "first fruit" of the harvest, the defilement of which is punishable (Lev. 22:1-16). Using ritual terminology, Jeremiah warns of calamity to the enemies of Israel. Did his warning ever deter them?

Can people change? Jeremiah seems to say they cannot (13:23): "Can the Cushite change his

skin; the leopard its spots?" And (2:22), "Though you wash yourselves with soap and use much lye, the stain of your guilt is still before Me!" And (17:1), Jeremiah does not deny the idea of *teshuva*, the human potential to return, improve and start anew! By employing exaggerated rhetoric, however, the prophet implies that the people's attempts to cover up, to erase telling traces of evil by "skin-deep" changes, is futile. True *teshuva* involves a total and fundamental change.

The desert experience of Israel – 40 years of wandering in Sinai – is seen by Jeremiah as the people's ideal epoch. The physical conditions were harsh, but spirituality was where the love between God and Israel first grew and bloomed. God cherishes this memory (2:2): "*I recall the devotion of your youth, the love of your bridal clinging.*" Lesson: True love endures all hardship.

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RABBI ZVI YEHUDA

CAN PEOPLE CHANGE?

Jeremiah (13:23;2:22:17:1):

Can a Kushite change his skin? A leopard its spots?

So can you do good, accustomed as you are to evil!

Though you wash with soap, and use much lye,

The stain of your guilt is still before Me!

Jeremiah certainly does not deny the power of *teshuva*, the human potential to return, improve, and start anew. Otherwise, his entire prophetic mission would be a vain exercise. The prophet

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means that all attempts to remove external symptoms of evil – “skin-deep” changes – are all futile. True *teshuva* is a total, genuine and fundamental change.

The desert experience of Israel – the 40 years of wandering in the Sinai before reaching the Promised Land – is seen by Jeremiah as the people’s ideal epoch. The physical conditions were harsh but, spiritually, the desert was the arena of first love, where the love bond between God and Israel grew and bloomed. The desert experience illustrates that true love endures any hardship. So does the eternal love between God and Israel.

RABBI

THE DESERT EXPERIENCE of Israel during the 40 years of wandering in the Sinai is seen by Jeremiah as the people's ideal epoch. Harsh as the physical conditions were, the desert was the arena of first love between God and Israel, where it grew and blossomed with the vigor of fresh beginning (2:2):

*I recall to your credit
your youthful devotion,*

*The love of your bridal
clinging;*

*How you followed Me
in the desert, in a land not
sown.*

By contrast, the people in the prophet's day do not remember this love; they do not inquire (6):

*Where is Adonai (God),
Who brought us up from
Egypt;*

*Who led us through the
desert;*

*Through a wasteland of
drought and darkness;*

*A land which no one
ever crossed;*

*Where no one ever
stayed!*

The prophet's complaint is doubled-edged: Why don't the people recall God's devotion in the past? Why don't they recall the harshness of the desert? Harsh as the desert was, it prevented neither God nor the people from showing devotion to each other.



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Thought of the Week

By RABBI ZVI YEHUDA

THE DESERT EXPERIENCE of Israel -- the Forty Years of Wandering in the Sinai before reaching the Promised Land -- is seen by Jeremiah as the people's ideal epoch. The physical conditions were harsh, but, spiritually, the desert was the arena of first love, where the love bond between God and Israel grew and bloomed with the vigor and completeness of fresh beginning (2:2):

I recall the devotion of your youth,

The love of your bridal clinging;

*How you followed Me in the desert,
in a land unknown.*

Harsh as the desert was, it prevented neither God nor the people from showing devotion to each other. The desert experience illustrates that true love endures any hardship. So is the eternal love between God and Israel.

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"EARLY DEVOTION" (*hesed ne'urim*): Prophet Jeremiah depicts the covenant relationship between God and His people Israel in terms of a love affair between man and woman. Although the people, symbolized by the figure of a beloved woman, did not constantly remain loyal to God, nevertheless God will never break His marriage-covenant with Israel: the love-bond between God and Israel is indestructible! One reason for this supreme and complete love-bond (1:2): "To your credit, I always remember your early devotion, your bridal love; how you followed Me through the wilderness, in a land unsown." This period of beginnings, of Israel's Desert Generation, is remembered with deep affection; it is the period of "early devotion." The Hebrew phrase combines two terms: *hesed* and *ne'urim*. The former means devotion, intimacy, kindness, love; the latter, youth, vigor, freshness, aliveness. The relationship which comprises both endures forever.

Candlelight time 8:34 Sabbath ends 9:26

Scriptural reading for Saturday, July 25:

MATTOT: Numbers 30:2-32:42

HAFTARAH: Jeremiah 1:1-2:3