

The other day a friend of mine told me a story about his acquaintance. The acquaintance is about my friend's and my age, in his late sixties. Recently he fell ill and became handicapped in need of a wheelchair. To his dismay he learnt that his health insurance policy does not cover the costs of a wheelchair. This provision is written somewhere on page 17 of the small print. And he had signed his policy some 40 years ago.

There is no small print in the covenant with Hashem. Our parashah Nitzavim emphasizes that all over again. "Surely, this instruction which I enjoin upon you this day is not too baffling for you, nor is it beyond reach." (30:11). "I command you this day, to love your God יהוה, to walk in God's ways, and to keep God's commandments, God's laws, and God's rules, that you may thrive and increase, and that your God יהוה may bless you in the land that you are about to enter and possess." (30:16). Jews wherever they are, repeat this commandment over and over again. "Vehaya im shamo'a tishme'u – This will happen if you listen carefully to My commands." Three times a day it is said after the paragraph of "Hear O Israel .... Love the Eternal your God..."

Parasha Nitzavim is the culmination of Moshe's sermons to the people of Israel on the bank of river Jordan on the brink of crossing over into the Promised Land. "Nitzavim – you stand today" to hear the promise of Hashem and your obligation that results out of this promise. I, HaShem, have delivered you from slavery in Egypt. That constitutes the basis of the covenant. R. Jehudah Halevi observes that the Ten Commandments do not begin with the statement: "I am the Lord thy God Who created heaven and earth" but with "I am the Lord thy God who brought thee out of the land of Egypt from the house of bondage." Moshe brings the dire consequences of disobedience home to the people of Israel, not only to those who are gathered but also to those "...who are not with us here this day" (29:14). Interestingly enough this agreement and particularly the consequences of a breach of it are not a private matter between Hashem and His people. It is there for all the world to see "...all nations will ask 'Why did Hashem do thus to his land?'" (29:23).

Abraham, who witnessed the Alhambra Decree evicting all Jews from Spain unless they converted to Christianity before July 31, 1492, observed: "Many of our brethren have forsaken the religion of their forefathers ... and wished to be like the nations of the world." And despite all their efforts, "they would still be called Jews against their own will ..." That is exactly what happened again 450 years later to Germans who did not even consider themselves Jewish, but were persecuted by the Nazis.

"We were all at Sinai" is the title of Nechama Leibowitz' first study on this week's parashah. The alternatives are clearly set before the people of Israel, and before us, since we were all at Sinai. Ha'avodah She'ba'lev Service of the Heart), the siddur of the Israel Movement For Progressive Judaism puts the alternative no less clearly, but less threateningly, by quoting Deuteronomy 30. "See, I have set before you this day life and good, or death and evil ... choose life, therefore, that you and your descendants may live – by loving the Lord your God, listening to God's voice, and holding fast to the One who is your life and the length of your days. (30:15, 19f).

Shabbat Nitzavim is the seventh shabbat after Tish'a be'Av. It concludes the *sheva de-nechamta*, the seven weeks of consolation. Consequently, we read in the haftara: "I greatly rejoice in the LORD, my whole being exults in my God. For He has clothed me with garments of triumph, wrapped me in a robe of victory, like a bridegroom adorned with a turban,

Like a bride bedecked with her finery. For as the earth brings forth her growth and a garden makes the seed shoot up, o the Lord GOD will make victory and renown shoot up in the presence of all the nations." (Isaiah 61, 10-11)

Shabbat shalom