

Natural Jewish Instinct

Category: Devarim, Nitzavim

Can you donate someone else's time? Can G-d hold us responsible for an agreement which our ancestors accepted?

Donating Someone Else

For generations, many expecting Jewish mothers in America were prepared to swear that their unborn children were destined to become doctors or at least lawyers, and, in “worst-case scenarios”, accountants.... And indeed, these mothers' prophecies often came true.

But where did these women get the vision to decide for their unborn children what will happen when they are 40 years old?

On the first day of Rosh Hashanah, we read about the story of Chana, the mother of Shmuel HaNavi, Samuel the Prophet.

The Haftarah tells us how she arrived at Shiloh, the site of the Mishkan, the forerunner to the Beis HaMikdash, the Temple, and prayed to G-d. The verse states, “And she vowed a vow and said, ‘L-rd of Hosts, if you but see the affliction of your maidservant...and give to your maidservant the seed of men, I shall give him to G-d for his entire life, and no blade shall go up on his head.’”

This Jewish mother stood there and promised G-d that if she would have a boy, he would be dedicated to G-d for his entire life and would be a nazir, “and remain there forever.”

And indeed, that's what she did after she merited a son. She named him Shmuel, or Samuel, and after he grew up a bit she brought him to Shilo, where she presented him to Ayli the High Priest and said to him, “For this boy did I pray ... and I have also loaned him to G-d for all days.”

Now, what exactly is going on? How can somebody decide what someone else will do? How could have Chana decided to dedicate her son to G-d? Maybe he didn't want it! How is it possible to make a vow on someone else's account? You can vow

about what you are going to do—but to donate someone else to G-d—where did that idea come from?

Yes, it's true that wives always "volunteer" their husbands to help with the local Chabad minyan and so on, us husbands are already used to that—but whoever heard of volunteering a kid who has yet to be born?

This is a very practical question, as there are many Jewish parents who adopt non-Jewish children and then convert them. The same question applies in such cases, too: how is it possible to convert an infant and turn him or her into a Jew without asking him or her? How can one just insert an infant into the Jewish Nation with all of its pain-filled history—into a nation of faith with so many mitzvos that the Jew must fulfill? Upon growing up, the baby will be unable to eat non-kosher foods, will have to fast on Yom Kippur, eat matzah on Passover, and keep an endless list of other obligations and prohibitions. It's simply not fair at all to do that to an innocent baby!

And who says he'll want it at all in the first place? It's religious coercion if you really look at it—because we're imposing our religion on an individual born into an entirely different religion just because he can't protest.

In halachah, or Jewish law, this child has a specific status: conditional conversion. In a conditional conversion, the child is converted by the decision of the court, meaning that the Jewish court determines that it is in the child's best interest to be raised as a Jew. However, when the child becomes a legal adult in Jewish law—13 for boys and 12 for girls—then he or she has what's called revocation at hand, which means that if he or she decides not to be Jewish, they do not have to remain Jewish.

However, as soon as the child chooses to mark the rite of passage with a Bar or Bat Mitzvah celebration, they indicate that they wish to be Jewish, essentially agreeing with the conversion imposed upon them at infancy.

The same thing happened with Shmuel HaNavi. Yes, his mother dedicated him to G-d and turned him into a nazir. But ultimately, it depended on Shmuel himself—if he really didn't want it, then his mother's promise to G-d could not have obligated him to be a nazir, because it was done without his approval. To her good fortune, however, Shmuel opted to remain a permanent nazir—and not only that, but he became one of the greatest prophets and indeed dedicated his entire life to G-d.

The Covenant

This brings us to this week's Torah portion. In this week's parshah, we read how G-d forged a pact with the Jewish nation: "You stand here today... to be passed into the covenant of G-d." Later, the Torah continues, "Not only with you alone do I forge this pact... for there are those who stand here today with us before the L-rd our G-d, and there are those who are not here today with us."

The innovation in our parshah is that G-d not only forged a pact with those living in that generation, but also all future generations.

And the same question we had earlier, about making choices for those incapable of making choices, comes back to us. True, those who were alive in that generation consented to G-d's pact. They stood at the foot of Mt. Sinai and declared, "We will do and we will listen." But what about those not born yet? How exactly is it possible to obligate people who didn't even yet exist?

Now, a covenant is something that is forged between two sides, such as an engaged couple. They enter the covenant of marriage simply because they forged a commitment to love each other. But how is it possible to create a covenant with someone not yet born? How can you obligate him? Especially since the new generation will come along and say, "I wasn't there when this pact was forged. I'm not interested in this deal. It's not for me at the moment."

Ingrained in our Nature

The commentator Akeidas Yitzchak has a wonderful explanation. He says that this covenant was not an agreement between two sides but rather, it was G-d embedding in the Jew's very nature the desire to always want to be Jewish.

This is comparable to when G-d created the universe and gave Adam and Eve the very first mitzvah of "be fruitful and multiply." It wasn't just a mitzvah; it was a part of the very make up of a human being. G-d instilled a desire into the human being to have offspring. This is not a "mitzvah" that a human being must force himself to perform. On the contrary—every human being naturally wants to have children - often going to great effort and expense to be able to have children.

Yes, there are exceptions to the rule who decide that they "don't want

children”—but the world at large has never lost the will to reproduce. Thus, G-d ensured the endurance of the world.

The same is true with the Jewish Nation. G-d didn't just command us to be Jews and observe mitzvos—He did much more. He programmed our very nature to make us want to be Jewish, want to do mitzvos, and want to be connected to Him.

True, there will always be individuals who rebel against their very nature and want to have nothing to do with G-d. But as a People, the Jews will be there forever. Why? Because it's not “religion” or “philosophy” which a person can accept only after coming to an intellectual conclusion. Rather, it's instinctive for the Jew—it's a “lust” for the Jew. He wants to be connected to G-d.

It's just like a human being's natural will to live and the fact that a human being will do everything in his or her power to stay alive. The fact that sometimes, some individuals choose to commit suicide, does not detract from the will to live that defines the human race as a whole. So too with the Jewish People—by its very nature, the Jew wants to be Jewish.

That's what G-d's pact with the Jews is. It's not just an agreement—it's so much more. It's genetically encoding all future generations with a will as strong as the will to live and the will to have children—we have that same will to be Jews.

And this explains why Jews run to synagogues for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur even though they consider themselves atheists and such—because the decision to go to shul doesn't come from the mind but rather, from the Jew's Jewish instinct that is buried deep within each one of us.