

Covenant of Fire

Horav Tzvi Hirsh Meisels, zl, the Veitzener Rav, cites the Midrash Hane'elam that suggests that the letters of Bereishis, "Bais, Reish, Aleph, Shin, Yud, Saf," are an acronym for two words; bris eish, a covenant of fire. He explains the concept of a covenant forged in fire based upon the following story. Horav Meisels was the rav in the dreaded concentration camp Aushwitz. On Simchas Torah night a group of fifty young Gerer chassidim were brought to the gas chambers. Their sin was rebelling against the German government. Their act of mutiny - observing the laws of the Torah. These young men, who were defiant in life, were not going to go to their deaths without exhibiting the Jewish spirit that had maintained them to this point. They sang - and sang. They sang with a voice that was not theirs. They sang with a supreme power, imbued in them by the Almighty. They walked through the camp on the way to the crematorium with song and ecstasy. They were about to die Al Kiddush Hashem, sanctifying Hashem's Name.

As they entered the gas chamber, one of the young men said, " Tonight is Simchas Torah. While we have no Sefer Torah with which to dance, we have the Almighty with us. Let us dance with Him in our last moments." They formed a circle and started dancing, crying to one another in spiritual ecstasy. "Ashreinu mah tov chelkeinu, u'mah naim goraleinu," "We are fortunate - how good is our portion, how pleasant our lot."

The chief executioner, the devil's emissary on this world, could not tolerate their joy. He could not bear to see these young Jews cheating him and his cohorts out of their sadistical fun. Above all, he could not tolerate the faith and conviction that was manifest by these young Jews. He wanted to see broken, wretched, depressed people, not proud ecstatic Jews. What did he do? - He would not kill them! He would not grant them their wish. They lived - because they sang. This is bris eish. The ability to maintain our faith, and to sustain our conviction-in the presence of the fires of the crusades, the flames of the pogroms, and the inferno of the Holocaust-is the legacy that has been bequeathed to us by our ancestors. This is our covenant of fire.

This covenant is not exclusively the domain of the observant. Indeed, every Jew has within him that Pintele Yid, Jewish spark, just waiting to connect, to be ignited into a fiery flame, a brilliant light. Horav Meisels recounts how he met a secular Jew being led to his death, who turned to him and said, "Rebbe, I know that perhaps I did not live as a Jew should live, but, I am going to my death happy to die as a Jew!" The apex of Jewish living is to die as a Jew! To be able to sanctify Hashem's Name in death, is to have attained the zenith of Jewish sanctity. The last words of the Torah are " kol Yisrael." This is a reference to Moshe Rabbeinu's leadership and the actions he took to preserve the spiritual integrity before " kol Yisrael," all of the Jewish people. Many commentator, seek to connect the last words of the Torah with its beginning. Horav Meisels extends this idea with its accompanying narrative to interpret the words: " kol Yisrael - Bereishis" - " all of the Jewish People- regardless of their religious commitment and level of observance-are "Bereishis" - willing to share in the bris eish, covenant of fire, to stand ready to go into the fire for the Name of Hashem. "Ashreinu mah tov chelkeinu!"