

Torah Table Talk – *Sacred Words*

B'rit: God in Search of a Partner

Parshat Noah, Genesis 6:9 -

Dedicated by Frances and Buddy Brandt

With love to their grandchildren

Elka, Joshua, Lindsay, Oren z"l, Jenny, David, Lauren, Kayla, Zenna, and Emily

The hope and optimism of the creation story quickly give way to rebellion, disobedience and violence. God's response to a broken world is not so much anger as it is disappointment, much in the same way that a parent is disappointed when the child fails to live up to his or her expectations. God decides to make a clean break with the past and to start over again. In the face of this disappointment, a new idea is born: *b'rit* or covenant. This is "one of the core concepts of biblical theology regarding the relationship between God and mortals." (*Etz Hayim*)

Indeed, the entire Bible can be said to be the story of God searching for a partner with whom the divine can enter into a covenant. And while the word is used in different ways throughout the Bible, there appears to be certain elements that all covenants have in common including a concrete symbol of the relationship, and a set of expectations by which each partner in the relationship must live. In Parshat Noah, then, we read about the first covenant between God, human beings and the animal world. While we often focus on our Jewish covenant, we should not overlook the importance of this covenant as well.

Genesis 9:12-15

This is the sign that I set as a covenant (*b'rit*) between Me and you, and every living creature with you, for all ages to come. I have set My bow in the clouds and it shall serve as a sign of the covenant between Me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow appears in the clouds, I will remember My covenant between Me and you and every living creature among all flesh so that the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh.

Sources

Genesis 17:10-11

Such is the covenant between Me and your offspring to follow which you shall keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall circumcise the flesh of the foreskin, and that shall be the sign of the covenant between me and you.

Exodus 19:5

Thus shall you say to the House of Jacob and declare to the people of Israel: You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, how I bore you on the eagle's wings and brought you to Me. Now, then, if you will obey Me faithfully and keep my covenant, you shall be My treasured possession among the peoples. Indeed all the earth is Mine, but you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

Exodus 31:16-17

The Israelite people shall keep the Sabbath, observing the Sabbath throughout the ages as a covenant for all time: it shall be a sign for all time between Me and the people of Israel.

From the Siddur

Praise to You, Adonai our God, Sovereign of the Universe, who remembers the covenant, is faithful to the covenant and keeps promises.

Commentary

While *b'rit* is not a distinctively 'Jewish' expression, the way in which our ancestors used this term was different from the way other nations used it in the ancient world. In the Ancient Near East *b'rit* had a political connotation for Israel's neighbors; one made a *b'rit* with one's neighbors and nations would often make covenants with one another. In Akkadian, these treaties were called *biritu*. Nations entered into different types of treaties with one another depending on their needs. For instance, vassal nations might make a *b'rit* with a more powerful nation in which the stronger nation would promise to protect the weaker nation in return for their allegiance and possibly the payment of certain obligations. These treaties open with a preamble ("I am X, king of Y"), continue with a set of obligations ("You shall remain faithful to me") and conclude with a set of warnings for disobedience. There is also some type of ratification. This was called a suzerain treaty. In some cases, a *b'rit* could also be made between

equal powers, called a parity treaty. Sometimes a more powerful nation could also grant certain promises to a weaker nation without any guarantees in return; this was called a promissory treaty.

The suzerain treaty mentioned above should sound familiar. The Ten Commandments also begins with a preamble (“I am the Lord your God who took you out of Egypt”), continues with stipulations (“You shall have no other gods before me”), and the book of Exodus also continues with a set of curses and blessings as well as a formal ratification of the treaty. What was unique about Israel’s *b’rit* was the fact that the people of Israel were the first to use this as a means of expressing their unique relationship with the divine.

But the Torah suggests that *b’rit* is older than Sinai. The first covenant was made with the children of Noah. While the elements of the Noahide covenant are not clearly expressed, certain elements can still be seen here: there is a promise (“No longer will I flood the earth”), obligations on the part of the participants (“Be fruitful and increase; the prohibition against homicide”) and the presence of a concrete symbol of the covenant as a reminder (the rainbow for Noah, circumcision for Abraham) and the Sabbath for the people of Israel.

Why does God need to make a covenant? Relationships only exist where each party is free to choose. Our ancestors had a unique understanding of their connection to God: in order for a relationship to be meaningful it must be bi-directional. God not only chooses us but we must be free to choose to live in relation with God. This is clearly expressed in the language of the blessings one recites when one is called to the Torah: “Praised are You... who chose us from among all nations AND gave us the Torah.” Election and the obligations of Torah go hand in hand.

But what does covenant mean in the wake of the modern world? Some theologians have argued that in the wake of the death of the six million, Israel’s covenant has been shattered and must be viewed in a new and different way. We also struggle with the significance of Israel’s election in light of our understanding of other faiths and ways of life. And yet the power of covenant, of living in partnership with God still has meaning for us today. We have moved from a suzerain treaty to one of parity. Could it be, to quote Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel that God, is in need of human beings as much as we are in need of God? Covenant is no longer about promises or guarantees from above as it is about the significance of living in a relationship. Today, the covenant is no longer about a vassal and a more powerful entity as it is about two entities in need of one another – human beings to find meaning and purpose in life, and the divine, simply to be God. After all, what is God without someone to acknowledge God as the divine? The question of covenant, then, has a direct effect on how we view our obligations and responsibilities as part of the Jewish people.

Questions to Ponder

1. Does the word *b’rit* have the same meaning in all of the passages above? If so what do they have in common? If not how is the word used differently in the four *Torah* passages quoted from the Torah?
2. The Rabbis posited the idea of seven Noahide laws which the descendants must follow as humanity’s part in the covenant. These laws are: the prohibition against idolatry, murder, theft, blasphemy, sexual promiscuity, not eating the flesh of a living animal and setting up courts of law. Why did the sages single these laws out? Is there a basis for them in the language of the Torah?
3. How is God’s covenant with Noah different from God’s covenant with the people of Israel at Mount Sinai? In what ways are they the same?
4. How has the Holocaust affected your understanding and relationship with God? Do you find the language of religious faith difficult in the light of the events we’ve witnessed in the last generations? Do you think the challenges to faith in our time are more or less significant than the challenges that our ancestors have faced?
5. What does it mean to live in partnership with God?
6. In what other aspects of life can we speak about having a ‘covenantal’ relation? How should ‘covenant’ influence our understanding of community?

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