

The Covenant: Do We Claim It As Our Own?

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Rabbi Jay Perlman * Temple Beth Shalom, Needham, MA

We will never forget that day. Jonah – only six – had never before been to the Old City of Jerusalem. He and I had made plans to spend a “daddy-Jonah” afternoon together. And I know that I was just as excited as he was. To help make the trip more fun for both of us, I had made a special “Old City Scavenger Hunt” that we would work on together. The sheet was fairly simple - about a dozen hand-drawn items colored in with magic marker: the towering Jaffa Gate, a bearded man in traditional black Hasidic dress, a wooden cart where freshly squeezed pomegranate juice is being sold, the shining gold Dome of the Rock, and, of course, the Western Wall.

Getting off the bus, hand-in-hand, Jonah and I made our way towards the entrance of the city walls. And as we approached, he recognized his first “find” – the gateway entrance into the Old City. Jonah opened his backpack – pulled out a marker – and knelt down on the stone path outside the gate to check off the first item on the list. Tourists passing by carefully walked around us as Jonah stayed focused.

About an hour into our walk through the narrow streets and marketplaces of Old Jerusalem - with our hunt nearly finished – we made our way down the stairs and into the plaza of the Western Wall. Amongst the many people there, we found a place to stand so that Jonah could see where we were. And discovering the wall in front of us, his eyes lit up – excited to be able to check off one of the last items from our game. I asked Jonah if he wanted to get closer. And before long we were standing right in front of the Wall itself. His hand reached out to touch the smooth, but uneven Jerusalem stones that, over 2,000 years ago had surrounded the ancient Temple. I pointed out all of the pieces of paper – the personal prayers that had been written, folded and gently tucked into the crags and spaces between the stones. And then we listened as people all around us spoke their prayers.

After leaving the plaza, Jonah and I finished our scavenger hunt sitting on a bench, sharing some hot, freshly baked pita bread, and calling mommy and Liana to tell them about our adventure.

Jerusalem is a place that is BEYOND where memories are made. It is a place of **living memory**. To be in Jerusalem is to feel a connection to something that is at one and the same time both so great and yet so very personal.

It was here, 3,000 years ago, that King David established his capital – capturing it from the Jebusites – and unifying a fractured set of Israelite tribes into a single people. For centuries, it was here that not one, but two great Temples stood as the focal point of all of Jewish life. And it was here that both of these Temples were destroyed – first by the Babylonians and then by the Romans - each time dramatically altering the course of Jewish life.

During the 1500's, the Ottoman Ruler Suleimon the Magnificent built the walls that surround Jerusalem's Old City to this very day. And much later, during the early 1900's, in the neighborhoods of Jerusalem, Eliezer ben Yehudah transformed the ancient Hebrew language into the spoken language that is used today.

In the 1940's thousands of Jewish immigrants came here seeking refuge - struggling to rebuild their lives in the aftermath of the Holocaust. And if you stand outside the Old City's Zion Gate you can see hundreds of bullet holes around the entrance from Israeli and Jordanian gun fire during the 1948 War of Independence.

The legacy of the Jewish people spans thousands of years...having touched the lives of countless men, women, and children...families and communities. It has born witness to moments of extraordinary joy and light...and of untold suffering and pain. But for the Jewish people, history has never been about a series of past events...It has been about a PROMISE.

Standing at the base of Mount Sinai, the Children of Israel made an eternal promise – to G-d...and to each other. It was a promise that had first been made with Abraham. But this time, through Moses, G-d spoke to an entire people.

Living according to the covenant, the Israelites learned, meant becoming a light to the nations – a people dedicated to holy living...a blessing to others. Through covenant, the Jewish people would work to transform this world for the better – bringing compassion and healing...justice and hope. Every chapter of the long history of the Jewish people has been about our people's striving and struggle to live up to that commitment. And, through it all, the essence of the Jewish journey has always been about understanding our responsibilities – both as communities and as individuals.

The poet, Robert Frost, once penned the famous words: 'The woods are lovely, dark, and deep. But I have promises to keep. And miles to go before I sleep.' When asked what promises he was referring to, Frost replied: "Oh, promises that I make to myself...and those that my ancestors made for me."

The long chain of Jewish history has been made by those who claimed the promises of our ancestors as their own. They acted upon them. They shared their conviction and their love for Judaism with their children – and, in doing so, nurtured a new generation of promise. Over the centuries, this commitment to covenant has not only helped make our world better, it has brought meaning, purpose, and a connection to something far greater than ourselves.

The great modern Jewish sage, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik has written that there are, in fact, not one, but two different kinds of covenant that G-d made with the Jewish people. The first, he teaches, was made by G-d when while the Israelites were still enslaved in Egypt.

The text in the book of Exodus recounts G-d saying: "I will take you to Me for a people." This covenant, according to Soloveitchik is called the "*Brit Goral*" – or the "Covenant of Fate." It was

made with the people without their consent and so this covenant was a matter of circumstance – ultimately a decision made by G-d, not them.

The second kind of covenant, Soloveitchik tells us, was the kind of covenant made at Sinai. There, Moses first brought Torah before the entire people and asked them whether or not they would accept it as their own. As the text describes, the Children of Israel responded as if in a single voice: “*Naaseh v’nishma*” – ‘We will.’

This covenant is called the “*Brit Ye’ud*” – coming from the Hebrew word “*ayd*” – meaning “witness.” Through this kind of covenant the people bear witness – making an active choice to embrace the legacy of promise.

According to Soloveitchik, the Jewish people were never intended to live by the Covenant of Fate alone. To be Jewish by birth, for example – a circumstance that is beyond one’s choosing – is not enough. It is essential, he said, for Jews to make their own active choice regarding the covenant – and, in doing so, to transform the Covenant of Fate into one of Free Will.

Though Rabbi Soloveitchik wrote in 1950’s, it is the Hebrew Bible itself that makes this point most clearly. When the covenant at Sinai was sealed, it was described as a moment for all eternity – an everlasting bond that would never be broken. However, we read that covenant renewal was still necessary. Several times in the Biblical text we read of the importance of the Jewish people being called by their leaders to participate in elaborate ceremonies and rituals.

Perhaps the most compelling of these stories of covenant renewal is one described in the Book of Joshua. According to the text, towards the end of Joshua’s life, he gathers all of the people together at a place called Shechem. He begins by recalling for them – and linking them to - their long history.

And then, Joshua says something curious. He offers the people a choice. He says: “Now, therefore revere Adonai and serve G-d with undivided loyalty..... However – he continues - if you are not interested in serving G-d, choose this day which gods of other peoples you are going to serve.’ He concludes his speech by saying: “But I and my household.....We are going to serve G-d.”

The scene is almost humorous. Joshua speaks to the entire community and lays out their options: “Serve G-d. But only if you want.....As for me and my family: We’re sticking with G-d. Choose.”

Perhaps not surprisingly, the people reply to Joshua that they will most certainly follow G-d. But then, in a fascinating twist in the narrative, Joshua does not accept their affirmation. Instead, he tries to dissuade the people from continuing with the covenant.

‘You don’t really want this life for yourself,’ Joshua says. ‘Serving G-d is filled with far too much burden and difficulty.’ The people, however, once again reassure Joshua saying: ‘No, even

despite the challenges, we will serve.’ To this, Joshua then replies: ‘Remember what you have said this day....You are my ‘witnesses’ - my *‘aydim’* – and that you have freely chosen.’

Covenant affirmation and renewal is, in fact, a regular part of the rhythm of Jewish life. Every child who becomes a Bar or Bat Mitzvah – formally takes Torah from parents and grandparents – moving that child from holding Covenant of Fate alone to both Fate and Free Will. Indeed Yom Kippur itself is our people’s annual rite of covenant renewal. Similar to the ceremony in Joshua’s time, we too are gathered together – our legacy and history are recalled through both Torah reading and special readings in our liturgy – particularly during the Afternoon Service. And then covenant itself is presented to us for our consideration. Again, this formally happens in the afternoon, when we read a Torah text known as the Holiness Code. Taken from the book of Leviticus, it is a series of commandments that, in effect, summarizes what it means to live by the promises of our people’s past.

Upon hearing this call...each of us is then called upon to ask ourselves: “Does this covenant – this great legacy- have any claim on my? On my life? On how I live?

Throughout the centuries, it has been through community that the Jewish people have sought to fulfill our responsibilities in the world. These communities are special however, in their understanding that the very same covenant that binds the people to G-d, also binds the people to one another. More than merely an association of individuals or of families who happen to belong to the same organization, sacred communities are built upon a foundation of shared values, hopes, and purpose.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, the current Chief Rabbi of Great Britain, writes eloquently about the difference between the contracts that bind people in business and in organizational life and the covenant that is shared with G-d and within community.

He notes: “What was transacted at Sinai was not a contract. It was a covenant. In a contract, two or more individuals, each pursuing their own interest, come together to make an exchange for mutual benefit. So there are commercial contracts that create the market, and there is the social contract that creates the state. A covenant is something different, more like a marriage than a deal. In a covenant, two or more individuals, each respecting the dignity and integrity of the other, come together in a bond of love and trust, to share their interests, sometimes their lives, by pledging their faithfulness to one another, to do together what neither can achieve alone.”

“A contract,” Sacks continues, “is a transaction. A covenant is a relationship. A contract is about interests. A covenant is about identity. It is about two or more ‘I’s’ coming together to form a ‘We.’ A covenant binds the parties in – especially in – difficult times. That is because a covenant is not about interests, but loyalty...fidelity...holding together when everything else is driving you apart. That,” Rabbi Sacks concludes, “is why contracts benefit.....but covenants TRANSFORM.”

Indeed, the very purpose of a sacred community – including our own – is to be transformative: to engage people in the work of helping and repairing our broken world – to learn together from our people’s wisdom so that we might better to navigate the uncertainties of life – to nurture the souls of our children – to link our lives to the generations that came before us – and, in doing all of these things: being a part of a sacred community should, over time, transform **us**...helping us to grow into better people. This is what covenantal living is all about.

Once again highlighting the difference between the institutions in society and covenantal communities such as ours, Rabbi Sacks introduces one other important concept for us to consider.

He points out that, in the marketplace, we deal most essentially with things that, when they are divided amongst others, leave us with less. Power – for example - if divided amongst ten people leaves each with 1/10 of the total. The same, he says, can be said of money which is earned and distributed.

Sacred communities however, operate on a completely different level. While material goods are needed to operate and to succeed, ours is not a venture of either profit or power. Instead, we most essentially work in what Sacks calls “covenantal goods.” These, he explains, are things that exist only by virtue of our sharing them: love...friendship...influence to help. They are what bind us to one another. They are in our in-between-ness. And, unlike goods of the market place, with these things, the more we share....the more we have.

In this way, our community is not measured by the number of activities that we offer, but rather by the number of lives that we touch.

This Yom Kippur, the shofar sounds to ask each of us whether we will claim our people’s covenant as our own. Will we choose to link our lives to something much greater than ourselves – a legacy of 2300 years of Jewish life? And, if we do, what responsibility does that place upon us? How does that impact the way that we live?

On this Holy Day morning...as we consider our response....a prayer for us all:

Mi Shebeirach Avoteinu v’Imoteinu...

May the G-d of our Fathers and Mothers before us...
bless us as we journey together into the new year.

May we be inspired to embrace the promises of our people.

And, as we renew our commitment to Your covenantal call, O G-d,
may we be renewed as well –

finding the strength and guidance that we need
to become a source of radiant light – a blessing to all.

Amen.

