

Parshat Lech Lecha: Two Covenants

The notion of "Covenant" plays a central role in the Torah. Even at this early stage of the Torah, we have witnessed the appearance of covenant twice; first with Noach (6:18) and then, the famous "rainbow" covenant between God and the world (9:9-15). Now in our Parsha we are to read of two further covenantal ceremonies: Brit bein Habetarim (covenant between the pieces), and Brit Mila.

For most Jewish children raised on a Jewish tradition and a weekly diet of parshat hashavua, the notion of a "brit", a God-man covenant, is quite natural. But on second thought, the concept is rather revolutionary. After all, what is a covenant? In modern terminology we would talk about a treaty, a pact or a contract between two parties. When God makes a covenant with the world, or with Avraham or with Am Yisrael, he is signing a treaty with us. He is binding Himself in certain commitments to man. And this is certainly remarkable, radical! The all-powerful, all-knowing God decides to commit himself contractually to man. Why?

This week, we are going to take an in-depth look at these two covenants. We will attempt to understand the cryptic description of the Brit Bein Habetarim, and the eternal power of the Brit Mila. We will also talk about the notion of covenant in the conceptual sense. Why would God want to make a treaty with a human being? What was it that God promised in these formal agreements? And why was there a need not just for one, but for two treaties? We shall study the parshiot of the britot and try to unravel their secrets.

Chavruta study

The best place to begin is to read Bereshit Ch.15 and 17 which describe the two covenants.

1. Ch.15 - Brit bein habetarim:

First, work on understanding the perek itself. The following questions might be useful:

i - Our perek describes Avraham as giving voice to a series of worries about the future. What are these worries? (a clue: passuk 2,3, 8)
- How does God answer these concerns (does He answer them?) Does he answer each concern in the same way?

ii - What does the imagery of the Brit bein habetarim (9-11,19) represent? See Rashi on passuk 10
What is the content of the covenant that God makes with Avraham here?

2. Ch.17 - Brit Mila

i- What is the nature of the covenant in this chapter?

What other promises are given to Avraham in this chapter?

ii- Here the covenantal promises are not accompanied by the imagery of a vision. What does accompany the covenantal promises in this chapter?

3. Compare and Contrast the two covenants. - How do they differ? Compare/contrast for example:

- the impetus for God's appearance and covenantal message,
- what (exactly) each covenant promises,
- the atmosphere that pervades the covenantal revelation or vision,
- is the covenant two-sided or one-sided?

4. Why are two covenants necessary?

Further Reading

For an interesting (if incomplete) contrast between Noah and Avraham as regards their covenantal connection with God, see David Hartman's, A living Covenant (Free Press) pg. 27-32.

Shiur

1. THE BRIT BEIN HABETARIM

This chapter is a somewhat cryptic text. It contains images and symbols which baffle commentators, both ancient and modern, and provide fertile ground for mystical interpretation. But that will not be our approach. (see Nechama Leibowitz- Studies in Bereshit - "The Covenant"). We will look at this text and try to begin by identifying the essential elements of the story as far as we are concerned.

We begin with an Avraham who is experiencing anxiety about the future. He is plagued by a mood of instability about the future, of self-doubt. The heart of his worry is rooted in two areas which are vital to his relationship with God. He expresses these concerns in the two questions that he poses to God in our text:
Question one: Who will be my heir? (Verse 2-3)
Question two: How do I know that your promise of possession of the land is a real promise? (verse 8)

If we have read the parsha well, we will notice that there are two things that God repeatedly promises Avraham. The first relates to progeny. The second relates to the land of Canaan. Time after time we hear:

"To your seed will I give this land" (see 12:7, 13:14-15).

Now, for some reason, maybe because of his advancing old age, Avraham begins to worry about the future and he turns to God for reassurance. He has no children! How can God continue to make promises which regard seed or descendants while Avraham and Sarah have not even a single child? Even their nephew (and heir) - Lot - has deserted them. The prospect of "offspring" looks somewhat bleak. As for promises of "future ownership in the Land of Canaan,"

the Torah explicitly tells us that Canaan is already most densely populated (see 12:6, 13:7). Is Canaan really a land which can be given to Avraham's progeny?

Avraham has only promises from God. And those promises appear rather fragile at this point.

How does God respond to Avraham's inner fears? How is God depicted in this text? He is portrayed as responsive and caring. God acts with utmost immediacy, almost, if we can talk of God in such terms, seemingly to rush to Avraham's side and allay his fears. There is an atmosphere of intimacy and closeness, of care and love between God and Avraham. But what does God say? How does he calm Avraham?

ASSURANCE

Two visions are offered. The first takes Avraham outside to look at the spectacle of the nighttime sky. The stars here are used as a metaphor for Avraham's progeny. His descendants are to be as numerous as the stars that fill the heavens. This would apparently be an answer to the question of whether Abraham will have children. Now, we should realise that Avraham has not been given a view of the future. God has simply shown him the stars, and demonstrated His care. Avraham still must take God at his word, hence the text states: "He trusted in God, and it was considered to his merit." (see the mepharshim on this phrase)

But the second vision which comes in response to promises of future land ownership, is much more complex, darker, and yet, in some way, more reassuring. Avraham sees a vision (the text is somewhat vague and leaves us wondering as to what occurs within Avraham's prophetic state of being and what is reality; Is the entire chapter a prophetic vision or do only certain sections -v.1,12-16- refer to Avraham in a prophetic state?) whereby he takes certain animals and slaughters them, dividing each carcass into two and arranging them in two rows. God makes certain statements and promises about the future and we subsequently see smoke and fire passing between the pieces. This is an act of covenant.

(The imagery of smoke and fire are well familiar to us as symbols of Hashem's presence. The pillar of fire, pillar of cloud in the midbar - See Exodus 13:21. At Mount Sinai there was fire and smoke, see Ex 19:16-18. At the mishkan, both these elements are present Ex. 40:34,38. and see also the mysterious verse at the Reed Sea 14:20. All this amounts to telling us that the smoke and fire passing between the rows of pieces, was a tangible symbol of the divine presence.)

JEWISH HISTORY

Let us explain. The notion of covenant or treaty was well known throughout the ancient world. Contracting

parties would sever animals and pass through the pieces. By doing this, they accepted the conditions of the treaty and "invoked upon themselves the fate of the animals if the terms of the pact were violated." (See Rashi 15:10 and likewise by a modern academic - Nahum Sarna. Understanding Genesis pg.126). It would seem that God used this familiar ritual from the world of humans to express the sincerity of his commitment to Avraham. Interestingly, in this treaty, Avraham is a passive party to the agreement, and God is making all the promises.

God first outlines a pattern of 400 years of History in which Avraham's offspring shall be enslaved and oppressed, yet will emerge from the slavery with great wealth to great fortune. God however, assures Avraham that his offspring will inherit the land "From the river of Egypt to the Euphrates", even though it is currently in the hands of seven nations (Kenites, Kennizites ... Amorites etc. see verse 21.) Indeed the entire promise of land is a promise for a distant future, certainly not to be realised in Abraham's lifetime.

Does this epiphany signal a positive prognosis or a negative one? Is this covenant one of blessing or its opposite? This covenant is certainly somewhat ambivalent. It promises pain as well as reward; suffering and blessing. Indeed, the "great dark dread" that overcomes Avraham is a response to the prediction of enslavement and persecution (Rashi). History is not going to be simple for the great nation of Avraham. (Maybe this is also the symbolism behind the birds of prey which attempt to eat the covenantal meat, only to be driven away by Avraham himself.)

So, let us summarise. God has promised; no - he has done much more; he has made a covenantal vow - that there WILL be a nation of Avraham, and that this nation WILL inherit the land which lies between Egypt and Mesopotamia; the land of Canaan.

THE COVENANT REMEMBERED

Is this covenant remembered? Does it form part of the national collective consciousness? The answer is a most affirmative yes! This covenantal promise of nation and land is repeated over and over to Isaac (26:3,4) and Jacob (28:3-4, 13-15, 35:12). Even in the mind of Joseph, the great Egyptian Diaspora Jew, it is a fact which he emphasises in his final will and testament. This covenant becomes a fundamental formative element in the national memory. Maybe the greatest proof of its power is the fact that when God needs to be identified by Moses to the enslaved Israelites in Egypt he chooses to be identified in the following way:

"The Lord, God of your fathers, the God of Avraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob has appeared to me and said I have taken note of you and what is being done to you in Egypt, and I have declared:

I will take you out of the misery of Egypt to the Land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, Perizzite, Hivites and Jebusites ... " (Exodus 3:16-17)

The frame of reference here is patriarchal. The phraseology is strongly reminiscent of the wording of the Brit bein Habetarim - especially the detailed list of the Canaanite nations. What we can see is that the covenant worked. It was handed down from parent to child as part of the folklore of a nation in the making. God knows that this message will be well received by the Israelites because the legend of a covenantal deity, a covenantal nation and a covenantal land are alive in the hearts of every son and daughter of Avraham. But similarly, in the same way that the Hebrews remember their covenant, it is God who acts here in his capacity of covenantal partner (see especially Ex. 6:2-7) choosing to redeem Israel in order to fulfill his covenantal promise. God too, is bound by the terms of the covenant.

BRIT MILA

Let us return, however, to Parshat Lech Lekha and to our Parsha's second covenant; Brit Mila. On examination of the passage which describes Brit Mila, we will note that it is very different from Brit bein Habetarim. The two covenantal visions are united by God's direct revelation and by the classic patriarchal promise of offspring (zera) and land (eretz). Indeed, this promise is the focus of both covenants. However, more than the common ground that these visions share, the differences between the visions stand out.

1. In Brit Mila, the vision is initiated by God Himself. God appears to Avraham without any prompt.
2. The Brit Mila vision is a straight verbal Nevua. No hidden symbolic visions.
3. In this covenant, Avraham is an ACTIVE partner to the covenant. He has to circumcise himself and his household. (Despite the fact that Abraham would seem to take a part in the vision of the Brit bein haBetarim, this is an active role in the vision, not the covenant itself. Avraham is not required to take any sort of active role in the 400 years of slavery, for instance.)
4. More than that; in this covenant, Avraham is transformed! He emerges with a new name and he transforms his very flesh in the form of his circumcision.
5. Not only Abraham, but Sarah is included in this vision. (She is also transformed physically, now being able to conceive. See the process 11:30, 18:12 and 21:7))
6. God's name: Elokim rather than Hashem (the tetragrammaton).
7. Rather than promises for the long-term future of the Jewish people, Abraham here receives the news that he will have his long-awaited son and heir. This promise will be fulfilled within the year.

TWO BRITOT

Why are two covenants, two britot, necessary? Rav Menachem Leibtag has suggested that each covenant represents a different dimension of the land-Israel promise. Whereas Brit Mila has a more personal, or private, familial focus, Brit bein Habetarim has a wider scope; a national-historical perspective.

This difference is expressed in many ways by the differences between the Parshiot. We will mention two textual indicators.

The term used for Israel's future control of the land is carefully chosen. In Brit Bein Habetarim, the land is promised as YERUSHA (see 15:7-8) whereas Brit Mila talks of the land as an ACHUZA (17:8). In addition, the land chosen as Abraham's inheritance in Brit Mila is "The land of your sojournings" (178), but in Brit Bein Habetarim, the land is defined in reference to the 10 nations who were resident in the land (Kenites, Kenizites etc. see 15:20,21).

The term "Achuza" refers to a family holding. The term "Lehorish" indicates an active military conquest. The focus of Brit Mila refers to Avraham as an individual and emphasizes his family around him. Thus, the land is an "Achuza" and it is given as "the land in which you sojourned". All references to the land are couched in phraseology that relates to family and Abraham's personal history. In a similar vein, the Brit Mila, as well as being forged on the very body of Abraham, is deliberately placed upon the reproductive organ. This emphasizes the Brit which is one of family linkage. It is not surprising then, that this Brit heralds the arrival of Isaac.

Let us add that this Brit is the moment that Avraham and Sarah receive new names which in a certain way "transform" them to a new personal existential reality. Once again, the focus of the entire Brit is on the personal familial dimension and it is in this context that the Land of Abraham's wandering is promised to Abraham's offspring. In addition, it is this blessing which is "passed down" the family to Isaac and Jacob (see 22:26:2-3 and 35:9-12 and note the repeated use of God's name "e-l sha-dai" and the phrase "vehakimotee at briti")

But the Brit Bein Habetarim discusses a different view. This Brit traces a panoramic landscape of Jewish History. As regards Eretz Yisrael it is a land which will need military conquest ("Ierishta") due to the nations currently living in the land. Am Yisrael will reach the land only after a long historical process of enslavement and redemption. We might also note that these national promises are unconditional. They are not conditioned upon Am Yisrael's conduct or faithfulness. The promise of Brit Bein Habetarim is absolute.

The nation's relationship with its land and with its God, exists then on two planes, two dimensions. We have connections To Eretz Yisrael as individuals. As individual Jews irrespective of any national

significance, we find a deep spiritual connection with Israel. But this is only half of the picture. The national consciousness connects with the land in its unique way too, at a collective, sovereign level. This is the dynamic traced by these two covenants.

(Indeed, traces of the two covenants come through most clearly later on in Tanach. Compare Shemot 3:7-8 to 6:2-5)

THE STORY IN BETWEEN

Despite Rav Leibtag's explanation, the need for a second covenant is indeed puzzling. Why are there two totally different ceremonies, two prophetic visions? And we should note that these two covenants take place at least 14 years apart from each other! Are these covenants just two sides of a single coin, or is there a need for two distinct separate covenants?

On a simple reading of the Parsha, we cannot fail to note that the story which interrupts the two covenantal episodes is the story in which Sarah recommends that Avraham marry Hagar. He takes up Sarah's recommendation and Yishmael is born. Let us remember that this child is Avraham's first child, his first "offspring". Avraham's marriage to Hagar and their child clearly raises the option that Sarah is not Avraham's covenantal partner and that Yishmael is possible the "seed" or "offspring" which God had spoken of in his covenantal promise. It is almost obvious that Avraham had assumed for 13 years that Yishmael was the son he had waited for. THE son! (see also 17:8) (In the text, Hagar also sees her own revelation of angels in this story raising a possibility that she is the chosen one.)

In retrospect, it is clear to us that Hagar was never "in the running" to become the first matriarch, however, at the time, things might not have seemed that clear. May we possibly suggest that the second covenant of Brit Mila (which specifically affects the reproductive organ, and) which includes a Avraham and Sarah **together**, comes to reaffirm and state with absolute clarity that it is Isaac rather than Yishmael who will be Avraham's heir and that Sarah rather than Hagar is Avraham's true covenantal partner.

This second Brit with its emphasis on the family, on Isaac, on Avraham and Sarah as a covenantal unit reaffirms Sarah's place in the hierarchy of Am Yisrael.

Shabbat Shalom.