

Parshat Ki Tisa: The Covenantal Relationship

Mark A. Livingston

Exodus 34:10 *Artscroll translation*

10 He said, “Behold! I seal a covenant: Before your entire people I shall make distinctions such as have never been created in the entire world and among all the nations; and the entire people among whom you are will see the work of Hashem – which is awesome – that I am about to do with you.”

וַיֹּאמֶר הִנֵּה אֲנִי כֹרֵת בְּרִית
נֶגֶד כָּל-עַמֶּךָ אֶעֱשֶׂה נִפְלְאוֹת אֲשֶׁר לֹא-נִבְרְאוּ בְכָל-הָאָרֶץ וּבְכָל-
הַגּוֹיִם וְרָאָה כָּל-הָעָם אֲשֶׁר-אִתָּה בְקִרְבּוֹ אֶת-מַעֲשֵׂה ה' כִּי-נִוְרָא
הוּא אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי עֹשֶׂה עִמָּךְ:

Exodus 34:27–28

27 Hashem said to Moses, “Write these words for yourself, for according to these words have I sealed a covenant with you and [with] Israel.”
28 He remained there with Hashem forty days and forty nights – he did not eat bread and he did not drink water – and He wrote on the Tablets the words of the covenant, the Ten Commandments.

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל-מֹשֶׁה פְתַב-לְךָ אֶת-הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה כִּי עַל-פִּי
כֹּה הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה כָּרַתִּי אִתְּךָ בְּרִית וְאֶת-יִשְׂרָאֵל: וַיְהִי-שֵׁם עִם ה'
אֲרַבְעִים יוֹם וְאֲרַבְעִים לַיְלָה לֶחֶם לֹא אָכַל וּמַיִם לֹא שָׁתָה וַיִּכְתֹּב עַל-
הַלְּחָת אֶת דְּבָרֵי הַבְּרִית עֲשֶׂרֶת הַדְּבָרִים:

Ramban to Shmot 34:27

Translation and annotation by R' Dr. Charles B. Chavel

God commanded Moses that he write a book of covenant and read it in the hearing of the people, and they should accept it upon themselves by saying, we will do and we will obey, as they had done at first [24:7]; for He wanted that the whole procedure with the first Tablets should now be repeated with the second Tablets....

The correct interpretation appears to me to be, that since Israel had sinned and violated the [first] covenant, the Holy One, blessed be He, had to renew the covenant with them, so that He should not nullify His covenant with them, and so He told Moses to write the conditions [of the renewed covenant]. This is the sense of the verse, “for after the tenor of these words I have made a covenant with thee and with Israel.” The meaning of “with thee” is that for your sake I have done it with them, and it will not be necessary for them to bring themselves into the bond of this covenant. However, God, blessed be He, had to make with them a covenant on the forgiveness that He extended to them [for their sin with the calf], and so [Moses] wrote the forgiveness, and the conditions [of the new covenant].

Laws of the Covenant

Verse(s) Law

12–17	Do not make a covenant with inhabitants of the land; break their altars, smash their pillars, cut down their sacred trees; you shall not pray to an alien god.
17	Do not make molten gods.
18	Observe Passover: eat matzah for seven days “in the month of spring.”
19–20	Redeem first-born sons (human and animal).
21	Work for six days and rest on the seventh; do not plow or harvest on Shabbat.
22	Observe Shavuot: first fruits of the wheat harvest.
22	Observe Sukkot: festival of the ingathering.
23–24	Make three pilgrimages to Jerusalem each year on the festivals.
25	Separate the Paschal lamb (Passover sacrifice) from leavened food. Do not let any remain until morning.
26	Sacrifice first produce in the Temple to God.
26	Do not cook a kid in its mother’s milk.

Dr. Nahum Sarna*from "JPS Torah Commentary," 1991***Inauthentic and Authentic Worship**

This section concentrates on two fundamental issues that flow directly from the apostasy: inauthentic modes of worship (vv. 10-17) and the legitimate festivals and ritual obligations to God (vv. 18-26).

Apostasy Mindful of the people's sin, the renewed covenant contains stricter admonitions than those given before [23:23-24] regarding the incursions of foreign cults into the religion of Israel. Pacts with the indigenous people of Canaan are prohibited because of their deleterious consequences – religious corruption, intermarriage, and the resultant undermining of national religious integrity. If Israel is to be "... distinguished from every people on the face of the earth [33:16]", then it must make itself distinctive by unswerving and exclusive loyalty to its covenantal relationship to God.

Festivals and Related Religious Obligations The topics in this section are associated with those of the preceding because the narrative about the golden calf recounts that a "festival of the Lord" was proclaimed and burnt offerings and sacrifices were brought [32:5-6]. Similarly, when Jeroboam set up golden calves at Dan and Beth-El, he too invented a special festival [I Kings 12:28-33]. Hence the need to recapitulate the list of the legitimate festivals of Israel. These have previously been set forth in 23:12-19.

R' Samson Raphael Hirsch*Translation by Gertrude Hirschler*

17 This law and all the laws that follow refute this delusion. They set up the personality of man in direct proximity to God and show that it is neither nature, nor anything else in the world around him, that brings man near to God, but that it is in fact through man that nature and all the world around him are to be elevated to a covenantal relationship with God.

26 This whole section, again, closes with two verses of all-embracing significance: Every ear of grain in the fields, every fruit on the trees of your land, ripens for the Law of God in the Temple. Even when you eat, your godly human qualities shall not descend to the physical and sensual aspects of your being. Rather, you shall elevate all the physical and sensual aspects of your life so that you will become truly human. Nature is not the intermediary between God and yourself; it is you who are the intermediary between nature and God...

כנגד מחשבת־הבל זו באות המצוות שבפסוק שלנו
ושבפסוקים הבאים. הן מעמידות את אישיות האדם
בקירבתו הבלתי־אמצעית אל ה', והן מראות לאדם
שהוא עשוי להתרומם לקירבת־ברית אל ה' — לא
על־ידי הטבע, ולא על־ידי דבר כלשהו השייך לעולמו
החיצוני, אלא הטבע, וכל עולמו החיצוני של האדם,
עשויים להתרומם אל ה' — על־ידי האדם.

(כו) בסיום כל פרשת המצוות האלה חוזר הכתוב
ומזכיר את שני הדינים החשובים, המעמידים
את הכל על עיקרון אחד: כל שיבולת שבשדה וכל
פרי שעל העץ — אל עבר תורת ה' שבמקדש הם
גדלים ומבשילים על אדמתך. גם בשעה שאתה נהנה
מהם — לא תרד רוחך האנושית־האלוהית למטה אל
התחום הפיסי־החושני, אלא כל דבר פיסי־חושני
יתעלה על ירך מעלה מעלה, ואז תהיה ראוי לשם
אדם. הטבע הפיסי איננו המתווך שבינך לבין אלוהיך,
אלא אתה הנך המתווך בין הטבע לבין ה'! (עי' פי'
לעיל כג, יט.)

R' Ezra Bick*Virtual Beit Midrash, <http://www.vbm-torah.org>, 1997*

We must try to understand the contents of the *brit* [covenant]. What is the common theme of these disparate *mitzvot* [commandments]?

I would like to suggest the following explanation. These mitzvot impart the message that the effect is not completely determined by the cause, and the future is not only the development of the past. In other words, although the people have indeed been corrupted by sin, this does not prevent the possibility of *kedusha* [holiness] resting in their midst, of their constituting an abode for God. These mitzvot warn the people not to perceive themselves as bound by their environment, by the ground from which they grow, but always to attempt to detach themselves from it and aspire upward. The Torah is warning against the genetic fallacy - that a thing is no more than the sum of its causes. Against the genetic fallacy stands the *kedusha* principle. Wherever there is *kedusha*, the fruit can transcend the ground from which it grows.