

Parashat Lech Lecha 5778, 2017:

Abraham and the Covenantal Community

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzhak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, Shayna Yehudit bat Avraham Manes and Rivka, the *refuah shlaimah* of Devorah bat Chana, Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, Shoshana Elka bat Etel Dina and Chaya Mindel bat Leah Basha, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

Our *parasha* contains the sole instances of the specific phrase, “*lebrit olam*,” (“as an everlasting covenant,”) that appear in *Chamisha Chumshei Torah* (the Five Books of the Torah):

And I will establish My covenant between Me and between you and between your seed after you throughout their generations as an everlasting covenant, to be to you for a G-d and to your seed after you. (17:7)

Those born in the house and those purchased for money shall be circumcised, and My covenant shall be in your flesh as an everlasting covenant. (17:13)

And G-d said, “Indeed, your wife Sarah will bear you a son, and you shall name him Isaac, and I will establish My covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his seed after him.” (17:19, this and all Bible translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

A straightforward reading of these *pasukim* (verses) reveals three separate, yet inextricably interwoven covenants: The unalterable agreement between Hashem, Abraham and all Jews forevermore affirming that the Master of the Universe will always be our G-d, the physical covenant of *brit milah* (circumcision), and the statement that the covenant of Abraham will continue through his yet-to-be born son, Isaac, and his future offspring. My rebbe and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), known as “the Rav” by his students and followers, depicted the relationship between these *pasukim* in the following manner: “With circumcision, another mission was assigned to Abraham: the formation and education of a covenantal community that would be close to G-d and would follow a new way of life, an

enigmatic *modus existantiae* [existential mode of life], a special relationship to G-d.” (*Abraham’s Journey: Reflections on the Life of the Founding Patriarch*, page 158, brackets my own)

What are the constitutive elements of this “covenantal community that would be close to G-d and would follow a new way of life” that Abraham was charged with creating? According to the Rav in his deeply philosophical 1944 work, “*U’vikashtem Misham*” (“And From There You Shall Seek”), it is comprised of two complementary aspects, *Knesset Yisrael* and *Adat Yisrael*:

Knesset Yisrael (the Community of Israel) – its definition: the inextricable connection between the first and last generations of prophet and listener, of Torah scholar and student, of the Revelation of G-d’s Divine Presence in the earliest lights of dawn, and the eschatological vision on that day to come. The Community of Israel is also *Adat Yisrael* (the Congregation of Israel). It incorporates in its innermost being the ancient and true testimony of the myriad visions that have never been obliterated in the depths of the past, the continuity of history, and the unceasing transmission of the Revelation from generation to generation. (Page 66, translation, underlining and parentheses my own)

In sum, according to the Rav, the covenantal community that Abraham founded is transhistorical in nature, and definitionally links all Jews to one another for all time. As such, the prophets and their adherents (i.e. the entire Jewish nation), as well as Torah scholars and their students, are eternally bound together by both “the unceasing transmission of the Revelation” that took place on that lonely mountain in the midst of the wasteland of the Sinai Desert, and Judaism’s Messianic vision of enduring peace for all mankind.

The Rav has given us a far-reaching theological understanding of the fundamental nature of the covenantal community. We may now well ask: “How did Abraham establish it and ensure its continuation for all time?” I believe the Torah explicitly attests to the secret of his success: “For I [G-d] have known him because he commands his sons and his household after him, that they should keep the way of the L-rd to perform righteousness and justice (*la’asot tzedakah u’ mishpat*), in order that the L-rd bring upon Abraham that which He spoke concerning him.” (*Sefer Bereishit*

18:19) The extent to which *tzedakah u' mishpat* have shaped the collective persona of our people is underscored in *Talmud Bavli, Yevamot 79a*:

This nation [Israel] is distinguished by three characteristics: They are merciful (*harachmanim*), meek (*habaishanim*) and practitioners of loving-kindness (*gomlai chasadim*). “Merciful,” as it is written, “and grant you compassion, and be compassionate with you, and multiply you,” (*Sefer Devarim* 13:18) “Meek,” for it is written, “and in order that His awe shall be upon your faces,” (*Sefer Shemot* 18:17) “Practitioners of Loving-Kindness,” as it is written, “because he [Abraham] commands his sons and his household after him, that they should keep the way of the L-rd to perform righteousness and justice...” (*Sefer Bereishit* 18:19, passage translation, *The Soncino Talmud* with my extensive emendations)

Fascinatingly, while we might have thought this passage was merely extra-legal in nature, the Rambam (Maimonides, 1135-1204) teaches us otherwise by codifying it as a normative *halacha*:

“... the distinguishing signs of the holy nation of Israel is that they are meek, merciful, and kind.”

(*Mishneh Torah, Sefer Kedushah, Hilchot Issurei Biah* 19:17, translation, Rabbi Eliyahu Touger)

As such, Abraham’s legacy of *gemilut chasadim* emerges as one of the most prominent characteristics of our nation, and the foundation upon which the covenantal community is based.

As the prophet Michah declared: “He has told you, O man, what is good, and what the L-rd demands of you; but to do justice, to love loving-kindness, and to walk humbly with your G-d.”

(6:8) With Hashem’s help, may we, as a nation and as individuals, fulfill these stirring words and thereby become links in the great chain of being that began with Abraham and continues for evermore. *V’chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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They may also be found on <http://www.yutorah.org/> using the search criteria of Etengoff and the parasha’s name.

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

*** My audio *shiurim* for Women on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Megillat Esther* may be found at:
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*** I have posted 164 of [Rabbi Soloveitchik's](#) English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.