

Parashat Lech Lecha, 5779, 2018:

Understanding the Brit Avot

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 Yecheil, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, and Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, the *refuah shlaimah* of Yakir Ephraim ben Rachel Devorah, Mordechai ben Miriam Tovah and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

In addition to the well-known passages regarding *brit milah*, our *parasha* contains two other covenants (*britot*) with Abraham: the celebrated *berit bein ha-betarim* (Covenant of the Pieces, *Sefer Bereishit* 15:1-21), and the equally crucial, yet unnamed *brit* that is found in 17:7. In these three instances, Hashem is He who initiates and defines the terms of the contractual agreements that obtain between the other parties. Fascinatingly, however, even a cursory reading of the relevant introductory *pasukim* (verses) reveals that in the *berit bein ha-betarim*, Abraham, alone, is referenced, whereas, in verse 17:7, Abraham and all his future offspring are included as parties to the covenant:

Berit bein ha-betarim: After these incidents, the word of the L-rd came to Abram in a vision, saying, “Fear not, Abram; I am your Shield; your reward is exceedingly great.” (*Sefer Bereishit* 15:1, this and all Tanach and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

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

My rebbe and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), known as “the Rav” by his students and followers, helps us understand the essence of the *berit bein ha-betarim* by noting that its scope “was limited to our historical experience,” a position that is strongly supported by the famous verse that refers to our Egyptian bondage: “You shall surely know that your children will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, and they will

enslave them and oppress them, for four hundred years.” (15:13) In this case, the *brit* was enacted solely between Hashem and Abraham; Abraham was acting in the role of “the representative and father of a community, a people that makes history,” rather than as the forebear of specific individuals. (*Abraham’s Journey: Reflections on the Life of the Founding Patriarch*, page 157)

In contrast to the *berit bein ha-betarim*, the covenant found in *pasuk* 17:7 is very different in its emphasis. Instead of focusing upon the beginning of Jewish history and the Jewish people as history creators, this unnamed *brit* is future oriented, and assures us that the relationship between Hashem and the Jewish people is *l’dorotom l’brit olam* — eternal. As Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin (“the Netziv,” 1816-1893) explains:

[Hashem] promised Avraham that He would unceasingly exercise divine Providence (*hashgacha*) upon him and upon all his future children, even when we would be in the midst of many foreign nations — up to, and including, the fulfillment of our ultimate destiny. (*Ha’Amek Davar, Sefer Bereishit*, 17:7)

When viewed as a single entity, the three *britot* in our *parasha* emerge as the foundation of the *brit avot* (Patriarchal Covenant). Tosafot on *Talmud Bavli, Shabbat* 54a, s.v. *v’Shmuel amar* states in the name of Rabbeinu Tam (1100-1171) that, although the Talmudic sage Shmuel declared that *zechut avot* (the merit of the Patriarchs) had ended during the period of the Tanach, the *brit avot* is everlasting. As such, according to Tosafot, “we never refer to *zechut avot*, but, rather, to *brit avot*” in our prayers and in our times of need. How can we conceptualize the nature of *brit avot*? Once again we are fortunate in that we can turn to the Rav for guidance:

The Patriarchal Covenant apparently imparts teachings to the Jewish people by example rather than by prescription. While the Sinaitic Covenant tells the Jew what to do and how to act as a member of the covenantal community, the Patriarchal Covenant [*brit avot*] addresses the “I” awareness of the Jew, teaching him how to experience his Jewishness. It

sensitizes him in specifically Jewish ways; it expresses attitudes, ideals, and sentiments which still speak to us. It guides our feelings and consciousness rather than our physical acts, for we are duty-bound not only to act as Jews, but to feel as Jews. (*Man of Faith in the Modern World: Reflections of the Rav*, volume II, page 68, underlining and brackets my own)

I believe the Rav is teaching us a profound lesson regarding the depth-level significance of the *brit avot*. Far too often, we are tempted to think of Judaism solely as a religion that revolves around our rich and comprehensive halachic system. Rav Soloveitchik reminds us, however, that while this component of Judaism is absolutely necessary for the continuation of our people, it is equally vital for each of us to embrace the *brit avot*, so that “our feelings and consciousness” as Jews are as authentic as the *mitzvot* the Almighty commanded us on that desolate mountain in the Sinai desert so long ago. This, then, is the power and glory of the *brit avot*. With Hashem’s help and our fervent desire, may we make it our own. *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 *Tanach* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpvd>

*** 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.