

# COVENANT AND CONVERSATION

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THOUGHTS ON THE WEEKLY PARSHA FROM THE CHIEF RABBI



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Bo

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ה שבט תשס"ח

## The Covenant of Fate

### Freedom needs three institutions: parenthood, education and memory

duties to their children. Even before they have left Egypt, he instructs them to hand on the future generations the story of the events though which they were living.

There has never been a more profound understanding of freedom. It is not difficult, Moses was saying, to gain liberty, but to sustain it is the work of a hundred generations. Forget it and you lose it.

Freedom needs three institutions: parenthood, education and memory. You must tell your children about slavery and the long journey to liberation. They must annually taste the bread of affliction and the bitter herbs of slave labour. They must know what oppression feels like if they are to fight against it in every age.

Freedom is not, as so many have thought, a matter of political or military victories alone. It involves "habits of the heart." Unless children know about Egypt and the exodus, they will not understand the entire structure of Jewish law. They will not grasp the fact that Judaism is an infinitely subtle set of laws designed to create a society of free individuals serving the free G-d in and through the responsible exercise of freedom. The American judge Learned Hand put it well:

I often wonder whether we do not rest our hopes too much upon constitutions, upon laws and upon courts. These are false hopes; believe me, these are false hopes. Liberty lies in the hearts of men and women; when it dies there, no constitution, no law, no court can save it; no constitution, no law, no court can even do much to help it. And what is this liberty which must lie in the hearts of men and women? It is not the ruthless, the unbridled will; it is not freedom to do as one likes. That is the denial of liberty, and leads straight to its overthrow. A society in which men recognize no check upon their freedom soon becomes a society where freedom is the possession of only a savage few; as we have learned to our sorrow.

Freedom lies in what we teach our children. That is what Moses told the Israelites on the brink of their release.

Three times Moses spoke about this subject in Bo:

When you enter the land that the LORD will give you as he promised, observe this ceremony. And when your children say to you, 'What does this ceremony mean to you?' then tell them, 'It is the Passover sacrifice to the LORD, who passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt and spared our homes when he struck down the Egyptians.'

On that day tell your son, 'I do this because of what the LORD did for me when I came out of Egypt'.

"In days to come, when your son asks you, 'What does this mean?' say to him, 'With a mighty hand the LORD brought us out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.'

There is a further passage in Va-etchanan:

In the future, when your son asks you, "What is the meaning of the stipulations, decrees and laws the LORD our G-d has commanded you?" tell him: "We were slaves of Pharaoh in Egypt, but the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand.

Famously, these four passages became the basis of the four sons of the Haggadah. I want to focus in this study on one of those sons: rasha, the wicked or rebellious child. This is how the Haggadah portrays him:

"What does the wicked son say? "What does this ceremony mean to you?" To you, not to him. Because he excludes himself from the community and denies a fundamental principle of faith, so you shall set his teeth on edge and say to him, "I do this because of what the Lord did for me when I came out of Egypt" -- for me, not for him. If he had been there he would not have been saved."

What is going on in this passage? What was it in the nature of the question that led the sages to conclude that the child was rebellious? On the face of it, the query seems innocent. The child is presumably not yet bar mitzvah. He does not yet have obligations in Jewish law. He is therefore asking, rightly, "What does this law, to which you are obligated but I am not, mean?"

There are other perplexing features. What is the fundamental principle of faith the child denies? What, in any case, is wrong with asking? Judaism embodies the profound insight that it is only through the questions we ask, that we learn. How then can it be right to condemn a child for merely making a query, even if it is badly phrased? And how can any parent be so heartless as to say to a child: "if you had been there you would not have been saved?" Clearly, there is more going on in this passage than a superficial reading would suggest.

Rabbi Meir Simcha of Dvinsk, in his commentary Meshekh Chokhmah, makes a profound observation. What is significant, he says, is not so much the question as the verb with which it is introduced. In the other cases, the child is described as asking. In this case he is described as saying. You ask a question, you do not say one. It is therefore clear that the child does not wish to know. Instead he wishes not to know. His question is rhetorical. He is not asking, but expressing cynicism. "What is

## **Avodah has a range of meanings.** **Slavery -- what the Israelites were forced to do for the Egyptians** **Service -- what we are commanded to do for G-d**

this strange and meaningless ritual?" R. Meir Simcha's close reading of the text helps us understand why the sages - in attributing this verse to the rebellious child - were in fact listening carefully to the nuances of the verse itself.

The Talmud Yerushalmi offers another approach. It translates the question, "What does this ceremony mean to you?" as "What is this burdensome effort that you impose on us each year?" I suspect that the sages were responding to yet another word in the verse, namely avodah, "ceremony." Avodah has a range of meanings often lost in translation. On the one hand it means service -- what we are commanded to do for G-d. On the other, it means slavery -- what the Israelites were forced to do for the Egyptians. Avodah is a key word in the opening chapter of Shemot.

So they, Egypt, made the children of Israel subservient with crushing labour. They embittered their lives with hard servitude in loam and in bricks and with all kinds of servitude in the field -- all their service in which they made them subservient with crushing labour.

In these two verses alone, the word avodah, in noun or verb form, appears no less than five times (seven times in all in Shemot 1-2; a sevenfold repetition is always a sign that the text is signalling a key term). It is what robbed the Israelites of their freedom. Yet the same word is also cited as the key to their liberation:

And G-d said, "I will be with you. And this will be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship G-d on this mountain."

And again:

Then say to Pharaoh, "This is what the LORD says: Israel is my firstborn son, and I told you, "Let my son go, so he may worship me."

In both cases the term used for "worship" is avodah. The meaning of the Yerushalmi is now clear. The son is saying: "What advantage did we gain by the exodus? In Egypt we were avadim, slaves. Leaving Egypt we became avadim, servants. The only difference is a change of master. Then we served Pharaoh. Now we serve G-d. But that is a distinction without a difference. Either way, we are not free. Either way, we carry the weight of burdensome effort. Then we were subject to Pharaoh's law, now we are subject to G-d's law. But do not tell me that avodah means freedom. It means the opposite."

This too is a profound insight. The word avodah in the child's question is significant (especially in contrast to the "wise" son's terms, "stipulations, decrees and laws," which focus on the positive aspects of Jewish law in its several varieties). Moreover the Yerushalmi is placing in the mouth of the rebellious child the classic argument that leads, eventually, to the downfall of societies, namely that the only freedom that counts is the freedom to do what you like. Judge Learned Hand was right when he said, "That is the denial of

## There are two components of Jewish belonging - the acceptance of Jewish law and the acceptance of Jewish identity

liberty, and leads straight to its overthrow." Freud said much the same in his *Civilization and its Discontents*. Civilization, he argued, is the capacity to defer the gratification of instinct. That is one of the central features of a life lived according to halakhah.

There is however one source which sheds a new light on the whole passage. It occurs in the Mekhilta, a midrashic commentary on Shemot dating from the period of the Mishnah:

"I do this because of what the Lord did for me . . ." Why is this said? Because it says, "What does this ceremony mean to you?" This refers to a wicked child who excludes himself from the community, and because he excludes himself from the community, you too should exclude him from the community by saying "I do this because of what the Lord did for me when I came out of Egypt." Me, not you. And because you have excluded yourself from the community, had you been there [in Egypt] you would not have been saved.

What is striking about this passage is that it only mentions the rebellious child, not the other three. The fact that the source is a very early one suggests that there was a time when the passage relating to the wicked son stood on its own, and was only later incorporated into a larger passage, dealing with four sons, as it appears in the Haggadah.

If so, we can place the text in a highly specific historical and halakhic context. There was a time, under both the Greeks and the Romans, during which Hellenistic culture had an enormous appeal for many Jews. They assimilated. They were drawn to Greek art and drama. They took part in athletic competitions. For them Hellenism was cosmopolitan, Judaism merely parochial. Both periods (the Greek in the second century BCE, the Roman in the first century CE) represented crises of Jewish identity, not unlike the one Diaspora Jewry is going through today.

What principle was at stake? During the medieval periods of forced conversions, under Christianity and Islam, the principle was clear. It was apostasy, changing one's religion. By contrast, Greek and Roman culture - like secular culture today - were not religions (to be sure, they had gods and religious rites, but these did not appeal to Jews. On the contrary, many Romans admired Judaism and adopted aspects of it themselves). What was at stake were styles of behaviour, not modes of belief: assimilation, not apostasy. The individuals concerned were not so much giving up Jewish practice, though doubtless they did that as well, but abandoning Jewish identity. They no longer saw themselves as Jews but as Greek or Roman citizens, Hellenes.

This explains a remarkable ruling of Maimonides. In the course of listing the various categories of sinners, heretics and apostates who "have no share in the world to come" he adds the following:

One who separates himself from the community, even if he does not commit a transgression, but only holds aloof from the congregation of Israel, does not fulfil religious precepts in common with his people, shows himself indifferent when they are in distress, does not observe their fasts, but goes his own way as if you were one of the Gentiles and did not belong to the Jewish people -- such a person has no share in the world to come.

Almost certainly, this ruling and the passage from the Mekhilta refer to the same phenomenon, namely assimilation as the abandonment of Jewish identity.

Both should be read in the context of yet another passage, this time from the Talmud. The context is conversion -- a would-be proselyte who comes to the Beth Din wishing to become a Jew:

לא עליך  
המלאכה  
לגמך  
ולא אתה  
בן חורין  
להבטל  
ממנה

Our rabbis taught: if the present time a person desires to become a proselyte, he is to be addressed as follows: "What reason have you for desiring to become a proselyte? Do you not know that Israel at the present time are persecuted and oppressed, despised, harassed and overcome by afflictions?" If he replies, "I know and yet am unworthy," he is accepted immediately . . . He is also to be addressed thus: do you not know that before you came to this condition, if you had eaten suet you would not have been punishable with karet; if you had profaned the sabbath you would not have been punishable with stoning. But now, were you to eat suet you would be punished with karet, and were you to profane the Sabbath, you would be punished with stoning."

**To be sure, not all Jews today obey Jewish law.  
But many who do not, nevertheless identify  
with Israel and the Jewish people.**

**They plead its case. They support its cause.  
When Israel suffers, they too feel pain.  
They are implicated in the fate of the people.**

What is clear from this passage is that there are two components of Jewish belonging, not one. There is the acceptance of Jewish law (forbidden foods, the Sabbath and so on). There is also, separately, the acceptance of Jewish identity, namely a willingness to be part of the often tragic terms of Jewish history ("persecuted and oppressed"). The late Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik called these, respectively, brit ye'ud (the covenant of destiny) and

brit goral (the covenant of fate). Destiny is what we do. Fate is what happens to us. One is a code of action, halakhah. The other is a form of imagination, the story we tell ourselves as to who we are and where we belong.

There is an abandonment of Judaism that consists in giving up its laws of conduct. But there is another kind of abandonment - no longer seeing oneself as part of the Jewish people, sharing its fate and hope or identifying with the plight of other Jews. That is what Maimonides means by "separating oneself from the community" and its classic source is the passage in the Mekhilta about the "wicked child." When this passage was incorporated into the Haggadah and became part of an exposition about four kinds of children sitting around the seder table, it became less easy to understand. The children of the Haggadah are, after all, young. They are participating in a religious event. It becomes difficult to understand why one should be singled out for such rebuke. But once we recover the original context - a mature individual who has abandoned his people and become no longer a Jew but a Roman - the text makes sense. It also tells us something profound about Jewish identity.

Judaism is a communal faith. This is the "principle" that the rebellious child denies. Judaism is not addressed to individuals. Nor is it addressed to humanity as a whole. G-d chose a people, a nation, and asked them at Mount Sinai to pledge themselves, not only to Him but also to one another. Emunah, that key word of Judaism, usually translated as "faith," more properly means loyalty - to G-d, but also to the people He has chosen as the carriers of His mission, the witnesses to His presence. To be sure, Jews are sometimes exasperating. Rashi, commenting on Moses' charge to his successor Joshua, says that he told him: "Know that they [the people you are about to lead] are troublesome and contentious." But he also told him: "You are fortunate for you will have the privilege of leading the children of G-d Himself."

In this fundamental idea there is a measure of hope. To be sure, not all Jews today obey Jewish law. But many who do not, nevertheless identify with Israel and the Jewish people. They plead its case. They support its cause. When Israel suffers, they too feel pain. They are implicated in the fate of the people. They know only too well that "Israel at the present time are persecuted and oppressed, despised, harassed and overcome by afflictions" but they do not walk away. They may not be religiously observant, but they are loyal - and loyalty is an essential part (if only a part) of what Jewish faith is.

From the negative, therefore, we can infer the positive: that a Jew who does not say "You" when Jews or Israel are under attack, but "Me," has made a fundamental affirmation - to be part of a people, sharing in its responsibilities, identifying with its hopes and fears, celebrations and griefs. That is the covenant of fate and it still summons us today.

**A Jew who does not say "You" but "Me,"  
has made a fundamental affirmation  
– to be part of a people.**

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Sourcesמקורות

<p><b>[1]Shemot Chapter 12 Verse 26</b> And when your children say to you, 'What does this ceremony mean to you?'</p> <p><b>Shemot Chapter 12 Verse 26</b> then tell them, 'It is the Passover sacrifice to the LORD , who passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt and spared our homes when he struck down the Egyptians</p>	<p><u>שמות פרק יב</u> (כו) והיה כי יאמרו אליכם בניכם מה העבדה הזאת לכם:  (כז) ואמרתם זבח פסח הוא לידוד אשר פסח על בתי בני ישראל במצרים בנגפו את מצרים ואת בתינו הציל ויקד העם וישתחוו:</p>
<p><b>[2]Shemot Chapter 13 Verse 8</b> On that day tell your son, 'I do this because of what the LORD did for me when I came out of Egypt.'</p>	<p><u>שמות פרק יג</u> (ח) והגדת לבנך ביום ההוא לאמר בעבור זה עשה ידוד לי בצאתי ממצרים:</p>
<p><b>[3]Shemot Chapter 13 Verse 14</b> "In days to come, when your son asks you, 'What does this mean?' say to him, 'With a mighty hand the LORD brought us out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.</p>	<p><u>שמות פרק יג</u> (יד) והיה כי ישאלך בנך מחר לאמר מה זאת ואמרת אליו בחזק יד הוציאנו ידוד ממצרים מבית עבדים:</p>
<p><b>[4]Devarim Chapter 6 Verse 20</b> In the future, when your son asks you, "What is the meaning of the stipulations, decrees and laws the LORD our God has commanded you?"</p> <p><b>Devarim Chapter 6 Verse 21</b> tell him: "We were slaves of Pharaoh in Egypt, but the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand.</p>	<p><u>דברים פרק ו</u> (כ) כי ישאלך בנך מחר לאמר מה העדת והחקים והמשפטים אשר צוה ידוד אלקינו אתכם:  (כא) ואמרת לבנך עבדים היינו לפרעה במצרים ויוציאנו ידוד ממצרים ביד חזקה:</p>

Bo cont...

<p><b>[5]Hagadah</b> What does the wicked son say? "What does this ceremony mean to you?" To <i>you</i>, not to him. Because he excludes himself from the community and denies a fundamental principle of faith, so you shall set his teeth on edge and say to him, "I do this because of what the Lord did for me when I came out of Egypt" -- for <i>me</i>, not for him. If he had been there he would not have been saved.</p>	<p><b><u>הגדה</u></b> רשע מה הוא אומר: מה העבודה הזאת לכם ולא לא ולפי שהוציא את עצמו מן הכלל כפר בעקר ואף אתה הקהה את שניו ואמר לו בעבור זה עשה ה' לי בצאתי ממצרים לי ולא לו אלו היה שם לא היה נגאל</p>
<p><b>[6]Shemot Chapter 1 Verse 13</b> So they, Egypt, made the children of Israel <i>subservient</i> with crushing labour.</p> <p><b>Shemot Chapter 1 Verse 14</b> They embittered their lives with hard <i>servitude</i> in loam and in bricks and with all kinds of <i>servitude</i> in the field -- all their <i>service</i> in which they made them <i>subservient</i> with crushing labour.</p>	<p><b><u>שמות פרק א</u></b> (יג) ויעבדו מצרים את בני ישראל בפרך: (יד) וימררו את חייהם בעבדה קשה בחמר ובלבנים ובכל עבדה בשדה את כל עבדתם אשר עבדו בהם בפרך:</p>
<p><b>[7]Shemot Chapter 3 Verse 12</b> And God said, "I will be with you. And this will be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will <i>worship</i> God on this mountain."</p>	<p><b><u>שמות פרק ג</u></b> (יב) ויאמר כי אהיה עמך וזה לך האות כי אנכי שלחתיך בהוציאך את העם ממצרים תעבדון את האלקים על ההר הזה:</p>
<p><b>[8]Shemot Chapter 4 Verse 22</b> Then say to Pharaoh, 'This is what the LORD says: Israel is my firstborn son,</p> <p><b>Shemot Chapter 4 Verse 23</b> and I told you, "Let my son go, so he may <i>worship</i> me."</p>	<p><b><u>שמות פרק ד</u></b> (כב) ואמרת אל פרעה כה אמר ידוד בני בכרי ישראל: (כג) ואמר אליך שלח את בני ויעבדני ותמאן לשלחו הנה אנכי הרג את בנך בכרך:</p>

<p><b>[9]Mechilta Darchei Ishmael Bo</b> "I do this because of what the Lord did for me . . ." Why is this said? Because it says, "What does this ceremony mean to you?" This refers to a wicked child who excludes himself from the community, and because he excludes himself from the community, you too should exclude him from the community by saying "I do this because of what the Lord did for me when I came out of Egypt." Me, not you. And because you have excluded yourself from the community, had you been there [in Egypt] you would not have been saved.</p>	<p><b>מכילתא דרבי ישמעאל בא - מס' דפסחא בא</b> <b>פרשה יז ד"ה והגדת לבנך</b> והגדת לבנך. שומע אני מראש חדש ת"ל ביום ההוא אי ביום ההוא יכול מבעוד יום ת"ל בעבור זה בשעה שיש מצה ומרור מונחים לפניך על שולחנך: בעבור זה עשה ה' לי למה נאמר לפי שהוא אומר מה העבודה הזאת לכם אלא זה בן רשע הוא שהוציא את עצמו מן הכלל ולפי שהוציא את עצמו מן הכלל אף אתה הוציאהו מן הכלל בעבור זה עשה יי' לי בצאתי ממצרים לי ולא לך ולפי שהוצאת את עצמך מן הכלל אלו היית שם לא היית נגאל.</p>
<p><b>[10]Rambam Hilchot Teshuvah Chapter 3 Halacha 11</b> One who separates himself from the community, even if he does not commit a transgression, but only holds aloof from the congregation of Israel, does not fulfil religious precepts in common with his people, shows himself indifferent when they are in distress, does not observe their fasts, but goes his own way as if you were one of the Gentiles and did not belong to the Jewish people -- such a person has no share in the world to come.</p>	<p><b>רמב"ם הלכות תשובה פרק ג</b> הלכה יא הפורש מדרכי צבור ואף על פי שלא עבר עבירות אלא נבדל מעדת ישראל ואינו עושה מצות בכללן ולא נכנס בצרתן ולא מתענה בתעניתן אלא הולך בדרכו כאחד מגויי הארץ וכאילו אינו מהן אין לו חלק לעולם הבא.</p>

<p><b>[11]Talmud Bavli Yevamot 47a</b>          Our rabbis taught: if the present time a person desires to become a proselyte, he is to be addressed as follows: "What reason have you for desiring to become a proselyte? Do you not know that Israel at the present time are persecuted and oppressed, despised, harassed and overcome by afflictions?" If he replies, "I know and yet am unworthy," he is accepted immediately . . . He is also to be addressed thus: do you not know that before you came to this condition, if you had eaten suet you would not have been punishable with <i>karet</i>; if you had profaned the sabbath you would not have been punishable with stoning. But now, were you to eat suet you would be punished with <i>karet</i>, and were you to profane the Sabbath, you would be punished with stoning."</p>	<p><b>תלמוד בבלי מסכת יבמות דף מז עמוד א</b>          תנו רבנן: גר שבא להתגייר בזמן הזה, אומרים לו: מה ראית שבאת להתגייר? אי אתה יודע שישראל בזמן הזה דוויים, דחופים, סחופים ומטורפין, ויסורין באין עליהם? אם אומר: יודע אני ואיני כדאי, מקבלין אותו מיד . . . ומודיעין אותו ענשן של מצות, אומרים לו: הוי יודע, שעד שלא באת למדה זו, אכלת חלב אי אתה ענוש כרת, חללת שבת אי אתה ענוש סקילה, ועכשיו, אכלת חלב ענוש כרת, חללת שבת ענוש סקילה.</p>
<p><b>[12]Rashi on Bemidbar Chapter 27 Verse 19</b>          Know that they [the people you are about to lead] are troublesome and contentious</p>	<p><b>רש"י במדבר פרק כז</b>          (יט) וצויתה אתו - על ישראל, דע שטרחנין הם סרבנים הם, על מנת שתקבל עליך:</p>
<p><b>[13]Rashi on Bemidbar Chapter 27 Verse 18</b>          You are fortunate for you will have the privilege of leading the children of G-d Himself</p>	<p><b>רש"י במדבר פרק כז</b>          (יח) קח לך - קחנו בדברים אשריך שזכית להנהיג בניו של מקום:</p>