

TIMELESS TORAH

LECH LECHA - The Power of Covenantal Commitment

The Three Covenants

Beneath the drama of Parshat Lech Lecha lies a theme that is, in many ways, central to the Torah and Judaism: the concept of a *brit*, or covenant, which is mentioned no less than three times throughout the parshah. This idea is clearly of immense significance and as we learn this parshah we must bear in mind what these *britot* teach us about the foundational principles of Jewish faith.

The first covenant, between Avraham and Aner, Eshkol and Mamre, is mentioned only in passing (14:13). We are told that Avraham was informed about the battle between the four kings and the five kings and about Lot's capture, and at that time, Avraham was sitting together with his *baalei brit*, his confederates. In this enigmatic verse, which teaches that Avraham had made a covenant with other individuals, Avraham is for the first time in the Torah referred to by the moniker *Avraham Halvri*. The Sages offer various explanations as to why Avraham was called *Ivri*, but here Rashi connects the epithet to the word 'ever – the other side': Avraham had travelled at the command of Hashem from the *other side* of the Euphrates River and had stood himself on the *other side* of the prevailing view of the rest of the world.

Placed in such close juxtaposition to the mention of Avraham's *baalei brit*, it is possible to suggest that Rashi deliberately chose this interpretation to shed light on why Avraham made this *brit* with these people. We find in various places that these three friends of Avraham were not simply companions but they provided support to Avraham through many of his trials. It was Mamre,

for example, who encouraged Avraham to perform the *brit milah* (Rashi 18:1), and it was to these people that Avraham turned in this instance for assistance in battling the four kings (Midrash Aggadah). The reference here to *Ivri*, representing Avraham's idealism and his spiritual mission to spread the light of Hashem, suggests that Aner, Eshkol and Mamre were men of principle who wanted to be associated with Avraham and the values that he embodied.

Crucially, this is the essence of a covenant. As Rabbi Sacks explains in a number of his works (see, in particular, *The Politics of Hope* (1997)), whereas a social contract protects the interests of the parties involved, a covenant is about identity; it is a bond of loyalty designed to help two parties achieve together what neither would be able to do alone. This first *brit* of Avraham was a covenant between people seeking to share the same ideals and values in life.

Reciprocal Relationship

The second covenant in the parshah is the *Brit Bein HaBetarim* – the Covenant Between the Parts (chapter 15). In this *brit*, replete with powerful symbolism, Hashem promised Avraham that his progeny would exist forever as the Jewish nation and that, after the Egyptian exile, they would inherit the Land of Israel. In this passage, Avraham refers to Hashem several times as *Ad-nay Elokim*, and in fact, the Gemara points out that this is the first time that anyone called Hashem by this name, which is related to the word 'adon – master'. Interestingly, however, although this expression is already used in verse 2, the Gemara picks up on this only in reference to verse 8, where Avraham asked how he could be assured that he would indeed



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merit descendants who would inherit him. What is the specific connection between this question and the notion that Hashem is our Master?

Although the name Adon had never been used before, mankind had always been familiar with the notion that Hashem is the *Melech* – the King. There is, however, a substantial difference between the two concepts. Rav Shimon Schwab (New York, d. 1995) explains that a king's relationship with his subjects is distant and general; a king, almost by definition, cannot personally be familiar with all those under his jurisdiction. A master, on the other hand, knows his servants on an individual basis because each one serves a specific function necessary for him. Whereas until now Hashem had been known as a King, it was Avraham who came to the realisation that he had an individual mission and that his relationship with Hashem was personal. Thus, Avraham's use of the Name Adon is especially nuanced in the context of his enquiry about his heirs, because it was his personal relationship with Hashem embodied by this title which set the scene for the eternal covenantal promise granted by Hashem in the *Brit Bein HaBetarim*.

The Challenge of Living a Unique Existence

The final covenant of this parshah, the *brit milah*, was an ordeal that is considered one of the ten tests given to Avraham. This requires some understanding. Certainly, the prospect of a ninety-year-old man going through this procedure would have been daunting, especially bearing in mind its unfamiliarity. Nevertheless, it is difficult to understand why a mitzvah that is so cherished among the Jewish people, carried out

countless times by his descendants, should be listed among the ten unique tests of Avraham.

Rav Moshe Feinstein (d.1986) suggests that the *brit milah* challenged Avraham's entire approach to his life's mission. Throughout his life, Avraham had attempted to persuade and explain to other people the truth of Hashem's existence. In order to be successful in influencing others, it was important for him to blend in with his disciples. Had he stood apart and aloof, there would be little motivation for others to follow in his footsteps. Here, he was commanded not only to establish his personal relationship with Hashem as substantially different from other people, but he was also commanded to express that with a permanent mark on his body. The trial here was to set aside the philosophy that dictated that Avraham was no different to anyone else and to proclaim his unique role in the world.

In fact, Avraham was richly rewarded for passing this test. Through this challenge, Avraham was rewarded with *temimut*, the wholeness that comes from unquestioning obedience to Hashem's voice. The nations whom Avraham would have liked to influence surely ridiculed the notion that they should follow him once he had set himself on a pedestal of closeness to Hashem. Avraham's potent response, however, was that he had not doubted Hashem's word and had not hesitated to fulfil it - a message that was perhaps more compelling than any other he had taught through his words alone.

Next Week - VAYERA: The Strength to Climb the Mountain