



The Covenant

The Extraordinary Relationship Between a People and a Land

Is there another people on earth who has a deeper relationship with and stronger claim to a tract of land, than the Jewish people's claim to the Land of Israel? This relationship is a deeply spiritual one and expresses itself in four convincing claims – religious, historical, moral and legal.

All are rooted in a powerful paradigm, in one of the most transformational and revolutionary concepts in all of religious history – בְּרִית, covenant.

Covenant

From a spiritual point of view, the relationship between the Jewish people and the Land is unique in that it is presented in the form of a Divine Covenant. It is quite remarkable that G-d initiates and enters into covenants with his creations.

The first such covenant G-d makes with humanity is after the flood – a Divine commitment never to destroy the world again. Then with Avraham Avinu, He makes two covenants, both about granting the Land of Israel to his (and His) children. The first one is known as בְּרִית בֵּין הַבְּתָרִים, the Covenant of the Pieces, which is exclusively about this: “On that day, G-d made a covenant with Abram saying, to your descendants have I given this Land...”¹ The second

one is the בְּרִית מִלָּה, the Covenant of Circumcision, where G-d commits himself to a number of things: to make Abram's progeny into a great people, to change his name to Avraham, meaning a father of many nations, and then two everlasting pledges – to be a G-d to him and his people and to grant them the Land as an eternal inheritance.²

To understand the meaning of this connection, we need to understand what a covenant is. Let us first distinguish between two similar yet very different types of agreements, a covenant and a contract.

Contract or Covenant

A contract is when both sides enter into an agreement because it is mutually beneficial. When the agendas align to the extent that the agreement can serve both parties, a contract is signed.

A covenant goes much deeper. It is not based on interests but on shared values. It is not built on what each party can get but on what each party ought to give. It is not based on personal gain but on a greater good, where the goal is best served by the sum total of the parties entering into the agreement.

A contract is about Me and You, a covenant is about Us and We.

As Rabbi Sacks zt”l defines it:

“Covenant occurs when two individuals or groups, differing perhaps in power, but each acknowledging the integrity and sovereignty of the other, pledge themselves in mutual loyalty to achieve together what neither can achieve alone... A covenant is not a contract. It differs in three respects. It is not limited to specific conditions and circumstances. It is open-ended and long-lasting. And it is not based on the idea of two individuals, otherwise unconnected, pursuing personal advantage. It is about the ‘we’ that gives identity to the ‘I’. There is a place for contracts, but covenants are prior and more fundamental. They form the matrix of mutuality within which contractual relationships can exist.”³

The Religious Claim

It is this type of relationship which G-d created between the Jewish people and the Land. A covenant not dependent on any conditions or circumstances. A covenant unlimited by time and one which is built on a fundamental relationship rooted in the spiritual mission and destiny of the world and of the Jewish people in particular. It is for this reason our Sages have framed the relationship

Continued on page 4

Continued from page 3

between *Am Yisrael* and *Eretz Yisrael* as a marriage between husband and wife.⁴

Indeed, marriage is the one human relationship which most closely resembles a covenant. It is the hope and prayer of bride and groom that their union will not be dependent on conditions and circumstances, it will last forever and that it will be built on a mutual vision and values, in which the me and you become us and we. The core of this relationship is a commitment to the vision of a greater good and a better future together. So too the connection between the Jewish people and its Land.

This covenantal relationship between G-d and *Am Yisrael* has created an extraordinary bond unlike the people-land connection of any other nation. That is why the Jewish claim to Israel is first and foremost a religious one, rooted in our primal spiritual mission and based on an unshakable eternal covenant between us and G-d.

The Historical Claim

Secondly, from a historical point of view, it is clear the Jewish People and Judaism have been tied to the Land since the very dawn of Jewish history. The very first time G-d spoke to the first Jew, Avraham, it was for him to journey with his family to the Land that G-d would show him, Canaan, which would become *Eretz Yisrael*. This began a now more than 4,000-year connection to the Land unrivalled by any other nation on earth. The only other living people with such a lengthy historical connection to a land are the Chinese. However, the Chinese have never been exiled from their country.

Despite the long, dark exile and persecution over millennia, Jews never forgot their connection to their Land, dreaming to return to it and mentioning

it at every wedding, praying about returning to it three times a day and facing towards it in every prayer from all corners of the globe.

The Moral Claim

Jewish suffering and persecution throughout history gives birth to a strong moral claim to the Land. They have even produced new words in the English Language – ghetto, pogrom, inquisition, Holocaust. During the Second World War, immigration restrictions remained in place in British-ruled Palestine and in many other western countries. Borders were locked and ships carrying Jewish refugees were mercilessly sent back to Nazi Germany.

Israel, the one country and the one Land Jews have always called their own, is the one place they are safe from discrimination and persecution. It is here and only here, under Jewish sovereignty, that there have never been restrictions on Jewish immigration. All Jews are welcomed with open arms, granted immediate citizenship and absorbed into the country, no matter their age, circumstances and utility to society. There is a strong and just moral imperative for creating a safe haven for arguably the world's most persecuted people.

The Legal Claim

2020 marked the 100th anniversary of the pivotal San Remo Conference in Italy. In April 1920, the world's major powers agreed to designate *Eretz Yisrael* as the place where Jews from around the world could settle. All of Arabia, Syria and Mesopotamia were granted to the Arab nations with Palestine/*Eretz Yisrael* granted to the Jews. So significant was this decision that the English diplomat Lord Curzon called the San

Remo Conference “the Magna Carta of the Jewish people,” in terms of the legal recognition of their rights to the Land. This recognition would be enshrined in international law and subsequently reinforced by the League of Nations and again by the United Nations in November 1947.

The Tu BiShvat Connection

Tu BiShvat is a time of appreciation for the remarkable relationship between a people and its Land.

Tu BiShvat is a time to savor the fruits of the Land, which – according to our Sages – are the ultimate sign of this unshakable covenantal bond.⁵

And Tu BiShvat is a wonderful opportunity to reflect on and commit to our Covenant with *Elokei Yisrael*.

Tu BiShvat Sameach!

1 Bereishit 15:18.

2 See Bereishit 17:1–14. The root word ברית appears 10 times in these 14 verses. The Covenant of Circumcision has, of course, been accepted throughout the generations and across the Jewish spectrum, regardless of levels of observance.

3 The Dignity of Difference, p. 202.

4 For example, in the *sheva berachot* recited under the chuppah, the blessing of שוש תשיש juxtaposes the unique connection between the Jewish people and the Land and that between bride and groom. Just as they are unified in a covenant of marriage, so too on a collective level is there such a relationship between the Jewish people and the Land.

5 See for example Sanhedrin 98a, where Rabbi Abba sees this in the verse in Yechezkel 36:8.

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