

## Covenantal Pluralism

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### Parashat Lekh Lekha 5781

In *parashat Noah*, the Torah revealed a dramatically transformative understanding of the interaction between the divine and the human. Before Noah, God, operating as a universal unlimited Force (called Elohim in the Torah) had appeared to humans as a Ruler, instructing them to live good lives and repair the world (*tikkun olam*). These commands were enforced by harsh, sometimes overwhelming, punishments. In the new understanding, God (called YHWH/Adonai in the Torah) *self-limits out of love*, renouncing coercive tactics such as future floods. God establishes objective natural processes and laws to govern reality. Out of respect for human dignity—and desire that human beings become responsible moral agents—God engages with humans in partnership (*brit*), so that they will act morally and repair the world out of free will. In the Noahide covenant, in recognition of human nature and habits, God “reduces” expectations (allowing meat, for example), compromising to ask humans to act the best possible way rather than at the ideal level.<sup>1</sup>

In *parashat Lekh Lekha*, the next divine step toward accommodating human nature and emotions is revealed. Human beings are more energized by, and cling more tightly to, a covenant that is more intimate, more related to them and their distinctive memories and

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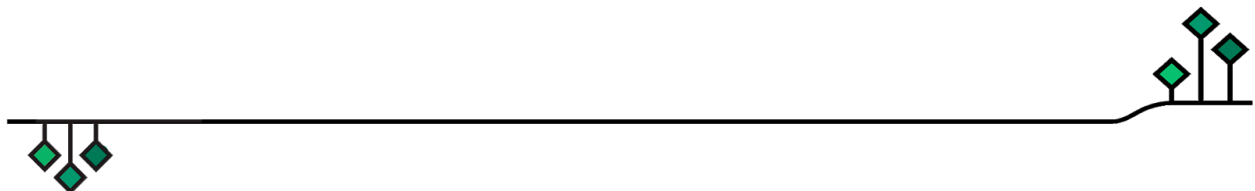
<sup>1</sup> See my essay, “Covenant: Parashat Noah,” available here: <https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/covenant>.



experiences. On the foundation of the universal Noahide covenant, God now enters into a particular covenant with one family, Abraham and Sarah. This sets up a paradigm of (future) multiple partnerships, each with distinctive practices, models, and emotional associations, with the same goal of overall *tikkun olam*.

Some commentators believe that the motivation for this development is the emergence of a dictatorial centralized government after the Flood (Genesis 11). Humankind grows into multiple families and nations; however, one unitary covenant turns into a centralizing force, allowing those who wield authority to concentrate power in one government and one focused project. The government turns unified control into a tyrannical, overwhelming mobilization to build a gigantic Tower of Babel—either to storm heaven or to dominate the landscape, to monitor and bring all the families under one controlling order. The midrashic imagination portrays the Tower project as pure totalitarianism: conscripting everybody to labor, imposing exaggerated quotas for construction, and mercilessly punishing failure to meet the requirement. The only way to stop totalitarianism is to break up humankind into multiple units, independent in language and practices from each other. Pluralism—political, economic, cultural, religious—is the best prophylactic against dictatorial centralization. God proceeds to do that culturally—but also, no less importantly, by entering into covenant with multiple communities. The first pluralist partnership is a particular, distinctive covenant with Abraham.

Covenant is a relationship based on committed love. The beauty of this revelation is that God can enter into relationship with more than one community. Were the central revelation a Truth, then it would be difficult for more than one community to wield that single truth in distinctive and different cultures. The possessors of *the Truth* would easily turn to war on those who modify or change it in any way that differs from theirs. Even with multiple



covenants, in actual history, the individual communities have tended to claim monopoly and act to suppress any variant communities.

There are other more positive reasons for the Divine turn to covenantal pluralism. By breaking up the project of world repair into smaller operating units, the improvement projects are reduced to *a human scale*. People can handle such undertakings more easily, without being overwhelmed by the vastness of the task. This minimizes the descent into tyranny which modern revolutionaries have been prone to (see under: Nazism, Communism, Maoism, Khmer Rouge), being driven to draconian tactics by the sheer scope of problems and the magnitude of the changes needed. Furthermore, when there is only one universal theater of operations, failures and flaws that emerge spread through the entire system. If there are multiple projects, then defects can be contained in one community, while others learn from this experience *what not to do*. Conversely, there can be multiple experiments, done on a limited scale, where one would hesitate to bet the whole ranch on such an attempt. Any breakthrough can be copied by others.

Finally, the single best way of raising standards and inspiring progress, without coercion or intimidation, is by setting up a parallel human community that strives harder and performs at a higher level. Other communities can see the example and imitate it because they see the better quality of life in the experimental model. There is a danger that entering into a particular covenant will turn a nation inward, to become more focused on its own society's performances. Still, the purpose and the benefit here is to enrich the rest of humanity. This is what Abraham is promised. "Through you all the families of the earth will be blessed" (Genesis 12:3). This is what Isaiah meant when he says that "I (God) made you into a covenant people, a light to the nations" (Isaiah 42:6).

The question is: **why Abraham?** What was distinctive in Abraham that he was chosen to create the pioneer redemptive covenant community? What did God see in him that was so



special as to conclude that he had the intestinal fortitude to carry and transmit a world-transforming covenant alone?

The first answer is that Abraham was not alone. The covenantal task was handed to a couple: Abraham and Sarah. As Soloveitchik points out,<sup>2</sup> Abram's name is changed to Abraham, i.e. the father of many nations (Genesis 17:4-6), because the covenant will be extended to many nations beyond the people Israel. But his partner in covenant, his wife Sarai's name is also changed to Sarah for the same reason. She will be the mother of the child, Isaac, who will carry the covenant forward. She will be no less the mother of nations (Genesis 17:16) because the covenant will be a source of inspiration and blessing far beyond her family.

Some argue that Abraham's qualification is defined in a later chapter. "I have known him," says God (to know in this context is to love, to choose, to single out) "for he will command his children and household after him, to *keep the way of the Lord to do justice and lawfulness (tzedakah u'mishpat, Genesis 18:19)*. Maybe the pattern of justice and conscience was already visible in the couple's household. The pattern was so strong that later Abraham confronted God, asking for merciful justice for the people of Sodom.

Maimonides and Yehudah Ha-Levi in the Kuzari suggest that Abraham, on his own, had broken with idolatry and discovered the single God/Creator. That is why he was chosen.

Over the decades, my favorite explanation was offered by a student. God spoke to many people. Only Abraham and Sarah responded.

Personally, I have always felt that being singled out and chosen for a world-redeeming mission is such an enormous gift that it should be attributed to God's overflowing covenantal

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<sup>2</sup> See Joseph B. Soloveitchik, "The Covenantal Role of Sarah", in *Man of Faith in the Modern World*, Abraham J. Besdin, editor, volume 2, pp. 83-90.

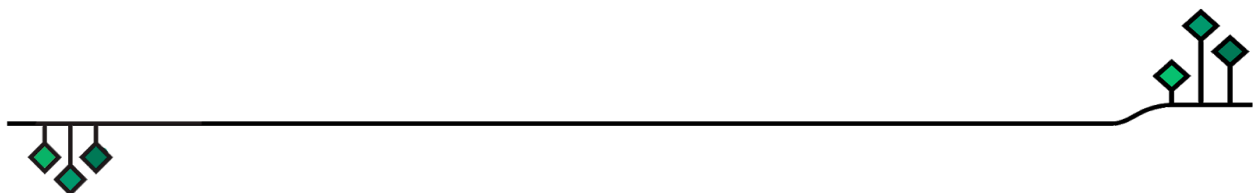


love and not to some virtue or achievement of the recipient. Moses confirms this in Deuteronomy. “The Lord *desired your ancestors and loved them*—so He chose their seed after them...” (Deuteronomy 10:15). Or Moses again: “You are a holy people to the Lord, your God... It was not because you are more numerous than other nations [you are not] but because *God loved you* and because He kept the oath (covenant commitment) made to your ancestors...” (Deuteronomy 7:5, 7, 8).

Love is not dependent on special qualities or the merits of the beloved. It is at once an overflowing emotion and without reason. Abraham and Sarah being chosen—or the Jewish people being chosen—is the outcome of an infinite love embracing them. Feeling chosen means: I experienced the love. Chosenness says nothing about any superiority or special quality in the chosen one; it simply means that Abraham and Sarah and Jewry, feeling the love, took on the partnership role. They were faithful to it for thousands of years and carried on the mission, through endless struggle and in the face of unbelievable suffering. That shows a lot after the fact—but that is another story.

During the long trek through history, there were important Jews who claimed that we are exclusive possessors of a monopoly of God’s love and revelation, including a Torah of exclusive truth. However, now that we are out of the ghetto, embedded in a global culture and understand our place among the nations, we recognize that our being singled out was for the sake of bringing redemption to the whole earth. Then we are proud that our vision of *tikkun olam* has been internalized and pursued, especially by Christianity and by modern civilization, each in their own way. We are not diminished by others taking up the task.

We see the enormity of the unfinished task of *tikkun olam*: of overcoming poverty, hunger, oppression, war, sickness, as well as spiritual blindness and entrenched immorality. Then we are grateful that Abraham is accepted as father by Islam and others as well. We will need the



help of everybody and of every religion and way of life to lift the planet and transform it into a paradise.

We understand that, out of love, God has chosen us, yet subsequently entered into covenantal community with others. We understand that God is Infinite Love. That divine love is not exhausted by the endless love that we receive. We understand there is enough love in God to choose again and again. God is the God of multiple choice. Then we bless God for the process of covenantal pluralism that was set in motion with Abraham and Sarah.

