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"BARTER, CONTRACT, OR COVENANT?"

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The dominant theme of this morning's Sidra, treated in two separate episodes, is expressed in one word: berit. It is one of the most important words in the whole of the Jewish religious vocabulary.

Berit, in essence, means - religion. For berit implies a relationship between G-d and man, a state of mutuality, a dialogue. For those for whom G-d is nothing but an ideal, a principle, or some abstraction, not a living reality, it is absurd even to speak about berit. You can discuss berit only in the context of the Jewish tradition in which G-d is taken in the theistic sense as Elohim Chayyim -- a living G-d, one who engages the heart and mind of men. Similarly, the word "religion" derives from the old French and that from the Latin "relegare" -- which, too, means to bind fast, to hold tight. Both words thus, berit and "religion," mean to forge a close bond between G-d and man. How an individual reacts to berit, how he conceives of it and approaches it, tells us all we need to know about the quality of his religious experience.

How then should we approach berit? In other words, how should we be religious? First, let us briefly say what berit should not come to mean to us. Berit should not mean merely, as it has come to mean for some people, a form of barter, a kind of religious bargain that one strikes with G-d. In this sense berit is merely a form of religious haggling or spiritual commerce, in which a man approaches G-d on a quid pro quo basis: I will give charity, You take care of my portfolio; I will fast on Yom Kippur, You provide me with health; I will recite the Yiskor, You take care of my family until the next such occasion. This is akin to paganism. Such a person acts as if Judaism and berit meant that in isolated moments and on rare occasions man comes to G-d and makes a "fast deal" with Him. This is a distortion of the concept of berit, a vulgarization of religion -- no matter how popular it is.

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For others, berit means not barter but contract. The contract interpretation of berit does not limit the meeting with G-d to rare occasions. It understands that the dialogue between G-d and man must be an on-going one -- but it is only an on-going contract. It shares the same misunderstandings, the same basic fallacies as does the barter or bargain interpretation of berit. Its underlying mood is a religious commercialism, a kind of trade. Its unspoken presupposition is that man acts in certain decent ways only because in this manner he will receive certain rewards from G-d. Now while it is true that we Jews believe in sakhar v'onesh, in reward for virtue and ultimate punishment for vice, still we have never based our religious experience squarely upon this concept. Our rabbis taught: al tihy^u K'avadim ha-meshamshemin et ha-Rav al menat le'Kabel peras, do not be like servants who serve the Master only on condition that ~~he~~^{they} receive reward. The contract interpretation is more advanced than the barter interpretation; but it is not good enough.

The true, the highest interpretation of berit is that of covenant. The covenant in the sense that I mean it here, does not deny reward and punishment. There are terms and conditions in the covenant -- but they are not its essence. The clauses are affirmed, but they are irrelevant to the major meaning of berit.

Exactly what is the nature of the covenant-berit? What should be the ideal Jewish religious experience? Let us turn to our Sidra of this morning and investigate, first, the two situations in which the Torah speaks of berit.

The first is the berit bein ha-betarim -- "the covenants between the pieces." As G-d was about to seal the covenant with Abraham, Abraham took three animals, a goat, a heifer, and a ram, and split them each in half,

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and separated the halves from each other, and then, in a prophetic vision, he beheld a flame passing between the pieces. At this occasion G-d gave Abraham havitachat ha-aretz, the promise that He would give him or his descendants a special land -- the land of Israel -- which would be his.

The second occasion in which our Sidra speaks of berit is berit milah, the covenant of circumcision. G-d commands Abraham to circumcize himself and all his children to be born thereafter on the eighth day of their life. At this occasion, G-d gives Abraham havitachat ha-zera, the promise that he will be survived by children and children's children who will become a great people.

These two episodes tell us a world about the whole Jewish conception of religion.

First, the berit bein ha-betarim. One of the most profound interpretations of this mysterious rite was provided by one of the last of the great Jewish medieval philosophers, Rabbi Joseph Albo, in his Sefer ha-Ikkarim. The cleaving of the animals' bodies, says Albo, was a profound symbol that just as one-half of a body cannot live without the other, so are the two parties to the covenant inextricably bound up with each other in an indissoluble bond, saying that henceforth, one will find existence impossible and unthinkable without the other. Man cannot exist without G-d, and while G-d can certainly exist without man, He needs man to fulfill the purpose of creation. Without man, the whole drama^a of G-d's creation is, in the words of Shakespeare, "full of sound and fury signifying nothing." So that the covenant between the pieces, the berit ha-betarim, taught man, and especially Israel, that the relationship with G-d must be intensely personal, intimate, one of deep communion, so bound together as to be indivisible. It is appropriate that at this sealing of the covenant, G-d should have given Abraham the havitachat ha-aretz. For

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G-d chose the Land and willed to have His spirit dwell therein and when Israel chooses to pioneer in this Land, to settle it and live in it and hope for it and dream for it, then the Land is a bridge uniting G-d and Israel. The first episode, then, teaches us that the dialogue between G-d and man, though it is one between subordinate and superior, must be one of deep indissoluble intimacy.

Only with this kind of covenant, with this kind of understanding of berit or religion can man survive in this lonely universe. Only thus will man not shrivel up in utter terrifying solitude. When the metaphysician or philosopher speaks of his "First Cause," or the "^{Pr}ime Mover," that is not the G-d of Abraham, the G-d of the covenant bein ha-betarim. When we intone "Father in Heaven" at an invocation, we are still far from the G-d of the berit. When, however, we recognize that G-d is not only in heaven, but that He is here and now, that our destinies are linked and our fates intertwined, then we are coming close to the G-d of the covenants of Abraham. Samson Raphael Hirsch correctly pointed out that one of the differences between the Greek and the Hebrew conception of G-d is that, while the Greeks had a sophisticated view of G-d, only Israel was able to use such expressions as Eloheinu or Eli -- "our G-d," "my G-d." The possessive case reflects the intimacy, the indivisibility of G-d and man. Perhaps even more expressive than the Hebrew is the Yiddish word Gottenyu -- that deeply affectionate yet reverent expression of the Jew's closeness to his G-d.

Allow me to read to you a brief prayer that I recently found, a prayer both simple and beautiful, naive and elegant, recited by the busy and harried mother of one of the greatest Jews of all times -- Rabbi Abraham Abele Gumbiner, the seventeenth century author of the commentary on the Jewish Code of Law, called Magen Avraham. Every morning his mother would recite the

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following words: Gut morgen, Gottenyu! Ich hab nisht kein tzeit lang tzu balamutchen, ich darf aheim gein geben essen mein Avreham'elen, er zal haben koach tzu lernen dein heilige Torah. A guten tag, Gottenyu! That means, approximately, "Good morning, my G-d! I have no time for long discussions, I must go home to feed my little Abraham, he should have enough strength to study ~~thy~~ Holy Torah. Good day, my G-d!"

Here you have that profoundly human intimacy with the deity, that is the G-d of the berit bein ha-betarim.

The second quality is revealed in the berit milah. The covenant must not only be one of closeness, of oneness of G-d and man, but it must also be eternally binding. Thus, circumcision became the ote berit -- the sign of the covenant. Just as the ote, the sign, is cut into the human flesh and is permanent, indelible and irrevocable, so the berit itself, the covenant, is eternally binding. Abraham's descendants are forever committed to G-d and Torah -- permanent, indelible and irrevocable. Berit milah tells us that G-d and Israel are forever pledged to each other, that there can be no commutation of the terms of the covenant and no change in the relationship of the parties to each other. That is why at this time G-d gave Abraham the havtachat ha-zera -- the promise that he would be survived through the ages by children and children's children. For if the covenant is eternal, there must be a Jewish people to continue as one of the parties of that berit.

That is why a father on the eighth day of his son's life, at the circumcision makes the blessing, "Blessed art Thou who hast commanded us, le'hakhniso bi'verito shel Avraham avinu -- to enter this child into the covenant of our father Abraham." Le'hakniso -- "to enter him" -- and not to seal a new covenant; for it is the old and ancient covenant of Abraham

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with G-d that pre-exists. We are only continuing the covenant with this child, as a sign of its permanent and irrevocable character.

It is this that separates Torah Judaism from all varieties. We cannot agree that every age is free to choose from the covenant what it wishes. We cannot agree that in every generation people may accept what they wish and reject what they wish. We cannot agree that man can at his own discretion and by his own whim deny what he wishes to deny of the covenant. The berit is indelible and unchangeable.

It is this that makes us gasp with astonishment when parents of a child will move heaven and earth to provide their child with berit milah, with a proper circumcision, and yet six or seven or eight years later, they will refuse to provide a proper Jewish education for that child, maintaining "let him choose for himself!" Here they affirmed the unchanging and irrevocable character of the covenant, and only a few years later they will let the precocious youngster choose for himself!

It is this that provides an analysis of the problem that plagues the new generation of Israelis -- as it does the new generation of American Jews. Only this past week the Prime Minister of Israel, in opening the new session of the Knesset, complained of the lack of idealism that prevailed among the new generation. They lack, he said, true patriotism for the Holy Land. They lack a sense of historical continuity with their people.

Mr. Ben Gurion has spoken well. But he has done nothing more than describe the symptoms. What is the cause? What is the pathogenesis of this disease?

Perhaps some day Mr. Ben Gurion will appreciate our diagnosis. And that is this: A generation or two ago many Jews rebelled, they denied the berit. And so the oneness of Israel with G-d began to fall apart.

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When we have denied the oneness of the covenant, the element of berit bein ha-betarim, then we must expect that there should be a weakening of havtachat ha-aretz -- the loyalty of both G-d and Israel to Eretz, the land of Israel. When we renege on our pledge, G-d reneges on His.

And secondly, when that generation rebelled against the berit they denied the eternally binding character of Torah, they rejected the principle of the continuation of the relationship of G-d and people. Therefore, they must expect that G-d is not bound to His havtachat ha-zera, to his commitment that our people will continue as a historical unit through the ages.

If the founders of modern Israel, including the Prime Minister, want to know why they have failed in matters of eret and zera, it is because of their own attitude to the berit, to the Jewish religion.

My dear friends, there is one last and third aspect that I wish to discuss with you. And that is, that as partners to the berit we are bound not as individuals, but as a people. In today's Sidra G-d tells Abraham that "I will make of thee nations." We are bound to each other as the zera of Abraham, the seed of our father. Therefore, one Jew is to another brother and sister, the children of Abraham. On this Federation Sabbath we must recall not only the first two aspects, but also the third: Our bond to our fellow Jews. This congregation knows of all Federation's work. We need not elaborate upon it. Whether it is medicine, child guidance, Jewish family work, or Jewish education, this work is sponsored in whole or in part by the Federation of Jewish Philanthropies of New York. I hope you will react, each of you, as a ben berit, a member of the covenant, when you are approached by Federation for your contribution. We are the people of the covenant. With our G-d we are linked indivisibly; our covenant with Him continues eternally; with our fellow Jews let us

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always act fraternally.

Va-ani zot berit; otam, amar ha-Shem, ruchy asher alekha u-devarai
asher samti be'fikha lo yamushu mi-fikha u-mi'pi zarakha u-mi'pi zera
zarakha, amar ha-Shem me-ata ve'ad olam. "And as for Me, this is My
covenant with them, sayeth the Lord. My spirit that is upon thee and
My words that I have placed in thy mouth, they shall not depart from thy
mouth and from the mouths of thy children, and from the mouths of thy
children's children, sayeth the Lord, from now and forever more."