

Beshallah 5770 Covenant

Rabbi David Lerner

Shabbat Shalom.

This is quite a special Shabbat. We are excited to be celebrating Max's Bar-Mitzvah. What else do we have today?

Shabbat Shirah – the Shabbat of Song: whenever we read *Parashat Beshallah*, which contains the song of the sea, that Shabbat is filled with song. We read and stood for the song of the sea during the Torah reading and we also sang it toward the beginning of the service during *Pesukei D'Zimra*.

What else is it? Tu B'Shvat! What is Tu B'Shvat? It is the fifteenth of the month of Shvat, which the rabbis list as the new year for trees. Now it is a bit cold for trees, but in Israel, things are starting to warm up a bit and certain trees are starting to wake up from the winter and even blossom. The new year for trees helped people determine the age of a tree (trees planted before this date were part of the previous year's crop), it helped them figure out how old the tree was and if its fruit could be used (fruit was not eaten during the first three years of a tree's life). It also became a good day to plant trees (since they were credited to the new year's tally) and we still have the custom of planting trees on Tu B'Shvat in Israel.

The last time *Tu B'Shvat* and *Shabbat Shirah* fell on the same day was three years ago and it was a Shabbat that I will not forget, as our youngest son Matan was born on it! The confluence of a day of song and rejoicing as well as a day of focusing our concern on nature and life all came together for me watching the birth of my son. While we did not name him tree (Elan, Alon or Oren – popular Hebrew names that mean tree, but already appropriated by my cousins), we did name him Matan – a gift, something he truly is.

So for me, this day is not only about planting, but about birth. So, let me ask another question: when are the Jewish people born? Or another way: when do the Israelites become a people?

Now, there are many answers. We could say standing at Sinai, which we will read about next Shabbat. Or perhaps in last week's reading: when the Israelites actually left Egypt.

Aviva Zornberg, a wonderful modern biblical scholar, writes that it is in this morning's reading that the people are "born." When is the exact moment? It is the crossing of the sea – Zornberg sees a perfect parallel – the Israelites pass through a narrow channel as a baby comes through the birth canal; the waters on the sides are parallel to the waters of birth. Even the emotions are similar: fear and the risk of death in the case of the Israelites and the same for the mother and child during birth (don't forget how dangerous birth was, for both mother and child, up until quite recently and still is in parts of the world). We also feel similarly: the sense of redemption, salvation for the Israelites and relief, joy and exultation for the parents of new child.

While that moment must have felt truly miraculous and may be the closest moment to a birth for the Jewish people, we are left with another question: if the Jewish people are born when they cross the sea, then when is their bris? When is their brit? When are they brought into the covenant? That seems obvious – at Sinai (next week’s reading), when they are taught some of the details of this covenant that they are accepting. And of course, it’s quite a moment: there is thunder, lightning, and an overwhelming feeling of awe.

And while that is clearly, the moment when God and the Jewish people have their relationship sanctified there are other moments. In fact, Rabbi Yitz Greenberg at Hebrew College’s Oraita institute this week in Georgia mentioned Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch’s, the founder of Modern Orthodoxy in the 19th Century, teaching that the covenantal moment actually occurs in this morning’s reading during the crossing of the sea. Now, at first, this might seem somewhat strange – so let me take a step back and explain a bit.

First of all, what is a covenant? A covenant is an agreement between two parties to do certain things for each other. For example, a parent and child might set up a covenant about their responsibilities toward each other: the child might agree to clean his room, take out the garbage and clean up dinner each day and then parent might help with homework, provide an allowance and other benefits. The covenant implies love and respect that each party has for the other and a deep sense of commitment – it is usually and hopefully a long-term arrangement. Finally, the covenant begins with a ceremony that seals the deal.

In Hebrew, the word for covenant is *brit* – *likhrot brit* – literally, to make or cut a covenant – like our English expression to cut a deal. What is the first covenant in the Torah? Noah – after the flood, God promises Noah never again to destroy the earth – Noah brings a sacrifice to God and God brings a sign – the rainbow, as an eternal reminder of God’s promise to all humanity. God continues, and the rabbis understand the Almighty as enumerating seven universal laws for all humanity – not to murder, steal, eat a limb from an animal while it is alive, be involved in idolatry, blaspheme God, indulge in sexual immorality and, positively, to establish courts of justice.

While this is understood to be a covenant for all humanity, later Abraham enters into his own covenant with God in Genesis, chapter 15. This is a mysterious and much less well-known narrative. After Abram has saved his nephew Lot, he is still childless in the land of Canaan, but the Holy One appears to him in a vision and reassures him: “Fear not, Abram, I am a shield to you; Your reward shall be very great.” (Gen 15:1) When Abram protests that he has no child, God takes him outside, shows him the stars and tells him to count them, informing him that his offspring shall be like the stars of the sky. By the way - since not only Jews, but also Christians and Muslims, are Abraham’s spiritual children, it’s clear that this promise has come true.

God also promised Abram the land of Israel. When Abram wants to be reassured, God commands him to bring several animals which he cuts in half. Then Abram falls into a deep sleep where God tells him of the future travails and successes of his offspring. Once the sun has set and it was quite dark, “there appeared a smoking

oven, and a flaming torch which passed between all the pieces. On that day, (the Torah states) Adonai made a covenant with Abram, saying 'To you offspring I assign this land.....'" (Gen. 15:17-18) That is why this is known as the *Brit bein Hebetarim*, the Covenant Between the Pieces.

What do we make of this strange ceremony? In the ancient world, cutting something was a sign a deep commitment of a covenant. But cutting the animals was also a warning. Do not violate this covenant lest the same fate come to you. Apparently, in ancient Mesopotamia, criminals were cut in half and this ceremony served as a clear warning.

But there is a deeper meaning as well. The parties need to pass through the animal halves – they need to pass through a narrow place together. This resonates with me strongly – when someone makes a covenant with someone, they are committing to be there for the other in good times and in bad – to journey together through all the roads, even the narrow ones.

Rabbi Hirsch's understanding makes sense – just as the first covenant between God and the Jewish people was a traditional covenant ceremony – passing through the pieces, in this morning's Torah reading, we find the Israelites passing between the two halves of the sea – standing in a narrow, dangerous place, accepting their covenant with God.

Thus, we are a covenantal people – a people who have entered into a relationship with God thousands of years ago and we reaffirm that covenant, even today. We are called, as the Torah states: "*mamlekheth kohanim v'goi kadosh* – a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." We are supposed to bring the Torah's teachings of God, meaning, justice, holiness and rituals into our lives and into the world.

Let me also remind us all that while our covenant with God is special, we are not unique, nor are we necessarily better than any other people or faiths – they too, may enter into a relationship with God.

But in order for a covenant to work, we need to feel it – we need to experience it and even reenact it. For it to stick, we need many ceremonies and moments of reaffirmation. Think of a husband and wife, two partners, they get engaged, they get married in a ceremony (which by the way has the breaking of a glass like the covenant between the pieces!), and they ideally reaffirm their love through concrete actions and reminders. Every day, I see my wedding band and am reminded of my commitment to my wife.

So, how do we do this as Jews, as individuals and as a people? How do we continue to remind ourselves of this covenant between Abraham and God thousands of years ago? Well, it begins after birth with *brit milah*, entering into the covenant through the cutting of circumcision on the eighth day of life, infusing boys and men right from the start with a concrete covenant of the flesh that reminds them each day to aspire towards God's ideals and how to live one's life. Similarly, we should have a covenantal

ceremony for girls on their eighth day of life, bringing our daughters into the covenant in a significant and meaningful manner.

As Sharon and I entered our sons, Ari and Matan, into the covenant – the brit with milah, circumcision, we arranged a brit bat, a covenantal rite for our daughter Talya on the eighth day of her life. We wrapped her in a tallit so she was placed in the channel between its sides, echoing God's covenant with Israel at the sea. Thus, we affirmed that she and all Jewish women are equal partners with Jewish men in our covenant with God.

But while these moments are quite significant and need to be told and retold to our children, it is around the age of Bar and Bat-Mitzvah that the covenant truly takes hold. Now a child has learned some of what this covenant and this tradition is all about and is ready, as a Jewish adult, to follow in the footsteps of Abraham and the Israelites and hundreds of generations to accept this great privilege and responsibility and to move forward – to take this gift of our heritage and all it offers us and the world, carrying its light into the world.

We, as a community, affirm this covenant when we take the Torah out, as Max led us this morning and then as we stand for the song as we did this morning and as we will next Shabbat when we hear the Ten Commandments. And we will on Shavuot, when we reenact the revelation at Sinai in our yearly ceremony of accepting God covenant's at Sinai.

That's what this Shabbat is all about – remembering what our ancestors experienced thousands of years ago as they crossed the sea, ready to embrace God's covenant.

Let us recommit ourselves to the challenge of the covenant which we, too, have accepted, connecting with the land of Israel and its natural blessing on Tu B'shvat, and singing to God in joy and thanksgiving, on this Shabbat Shirah, this Sabbath of song.

Shabbat Shalom.