

The Abraham Arbesfeld
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*THE
COVENANT AT
SINAI & THE
COVENANT IN
EGYPT*



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Kol Dodi Dofek – Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik

When we probe the nature of our historical existence we arrive at a very important insight, one that constitutes a fundamental element of our world view. The Torah relates that God made two covenants with the Israelites. The first covenant He made in Egypt: "And I will take you to Me for a people, and I will be to you a God" (Exodus 6:7); the second covenant; at Mount Sinai: "And he took the book of the covenant ... and said: 'Behold the blood of the covenant, which the Lord hath made with you in agreement with all these words'" (Exodus 24:7-8). (The third covenant, "These are the words of the covenant ... beside the covenant which He made with them in Horeb" [Deuteronomy 28:69], is identical in content and goals with the covenant at Sinai. What is the nature of these two covenants? It seems to me that this question is implicitly answered at the beginning of our essay. For just as, Judaism distinguishes between fate and destiny in the personal-individual realm, so it differentiates between these two ideas in the sphere of our national historical existence. The individual is tied to his people both with the chains of fate and with the bonds of destiny. In the light of this premise, it may be stated that the covenant in Egypt was a covenant of fate, while the covenant at Sinai was a covenant of destiny.

THE COVENANT OF FATE

What is the nature of a covenant of fate? Fate in the life of a people, as in the life of an individual, signifies an existence of compulsion. A strange necessity binds the particulars into one whole. The individual, against his will, is subjected and subjugated to the national, fate-laden, reality. He cannot evade this reality and become assimilated into some other, different reality. The environment spits out the Jew who flees from the presence of the Lord, and he is bestirred from his slumber in the same manner as the prophet Jonah, who awoke upon hearing the voice of the ship's captain demanding that he identify himself in both personal and national-religious terms. This sense of a fate-laden existence of necessity gives rise to the historical loneliness of the Jew. He is alone both in life and in death. The concept of a Jewish burial plot emphasizes the Jew's strange isolation from the world. Let the sociologists and psychologists say what they may about the incomprehensible alienation of the Jew. All their explanations are naught but vain and empty speculations which do not shed any intelligible light on this phenomenon. Jewish loneliness belongs to, is part of the framework of the covenant of fate that was made in Egypt. In truth, Judaism and separation from the world are identical ideas. Even before the exile in Egypt, with the appearance of the first Jew-our father, Abraham-loneliness entered our world. Abraham was lonely. He was called Abraham the Hebrew. *Avraham ha-Ivri*, for "all the world was to one side (*ever ehad*) while he was to the other side (*ever ehad*). When Balaam saw the Jewish people dwelling tribe by tribe, he apprehended the mystery of the solitary mode of Jewish existence and proclaimed in a state of amazement: "Lo, it is a people that shall dwell alone, and shall not be reckoned among the nations" (Numbers 23:9). Even if a person achieves the pinnacle of social or political success, he will still not be able to free himself from the chains of isolation. This paradoxical fate has preserved both the separateness and the uniqueness of the Jew despite his supposed integration into his foreign, "non-Jewish environment. Even as politically powerful a person as Joseph, who ranked next to the king of Egypt, lived separately from Egyptian society and dwelled alone in his tent "And they set on for him by himself ... and for the Egyptians that did eat with him, by themselves" (Genesis 43 :32). Before his death, he pleaded with his brothers: "God will surely remember you, and ye shall carry up my bones from hence" (Genesis 50:25). Despite my greatness and glory, I am bound up with you and with your survival, both in my life and in my death. This special, incomprehensible reality of the individual clinging to the community and feeling alienated from the foreign, outside world became crystallized in Egypt. It was there that the Israelites raised themselves up to the rank of a people, peoplehood signifying both togetherness (the Hebrew word for "people," *am*, is related to the Hebrew word *im*, meaning "with," "togetherness" and the uniqueness that derives from togetherness. This consciousness of a covenant of fate in all of its manifestations is an integral part of our historical-metaphysical being.

When the Jew, with this sense of his special, unique fate, confronts God face to face, he encounters the God of the Hebrews, who reveals himself to man from out of the very midst of the experience of loneliness and necessity, from out of the very midst of the consciousness of the fate which seizes hold of an individual and overcomes him. The God of the Hebrews does not wait for man to search for Him, to freely invite Him into his presence. He imposes His rule over man, against his will. A Jew cannot expel the God of the Hebrews from, his private domain. Even if he violates the Sabbath, defiles his table and bed, and strives to deny his own Jewishness, his membership in the Jewish people, he will still not be able to escape the dominion of the God of the Hebrews, who pursues him like a shadow. So long as a person's nose testifies to his origins, so long as a drop of Jewish blood courses through his veins, so long as physically he is still a Jew, he serves the God of the Hebrews against his will. Neither counsel nor understanding can prevail against Him, Yea, if the Jew who rejects his people ascends heavenward, yea, if he takes the wings of the morning, there would the hand of the God of the Hebrews take hold of him. Whither shall the Jew go from the spirit of the God of the Hebrews, and whither shall he flee from His presence? "And they said: 'The God of the Hebrews hath met with us. Let us go, we pray thee, three days' journey into the wilderness, and sacrifice unto the Lord our God; lest He fall upon us with pestilence, or with the sword.'" (Exodus 5:3). To disregard the commands of the God of the Hebrews will, in the end, result in calamity and destruction.

The covenant of fate expresses itself as well in positive categories which derive from the consciousness of a shared fate. There are four aspects to this rare mode of consciousness.

First, the consciousness of a shared fate manifests itself as a consciousness of shared circumstances. We all find ourselves in the realm of a common fate which binds together all of the people's different strata, its various units and groups, a fate which does not discriminate between one group and another group or between one person and his fellow. Our fate does not distinguish between aristocrats and common folk, between rich and poor, between a prince garbed in the royal purple and a pauper begging from door to door, between a pietist and an assimilationist. Even though we speak a plethora of languages, even though we are inhabitants of different lands, even though we look different- one may be short and dark, the other tall and blond - even though we live in varying and unequal social and economic conditions-one may dwell in a magnificent palace, the other in a miserable hovel-we still share the same fate. If the Jew in the hovel is beaten, then the security of the Jew in the palace is endangered. "Think not with thyself that thou shalt escape in the king's house, more than all the Jews" (Esther 4: 13). Both Queen Esther, garbed in royal apparel, and Mordecai the Jew, clad in sackcloth, were caught in the same web of historical circumstances. *Haverim kol Yisrael*, "All Israel are knit together – We will all be pursued unto death or we will all be redeemed with an eternal salvation.

Second, the consciousness of shared historical circumstances results in the experience of shared suffering. The feeling of sympathy is a fundamental feature of the consciousness of the unifying fate of the Jewish people. The suffering of one part of the people affects the people as a whole. The scattered and dispersed people mourn together and are comforted together. *Tefillah*, prayer, *ze'akah*, the human outcry, and *nehamah*, comfort, are all formulated, as I emphasized above, in the plural. The pleas that ascend from the abyss of affliction are not restricted to the suffering and pain of the individual supplicant. They include the needs of the entire community. When a person has a sick relative, he cannot pray for him alone but has to pray for all the sick of Israel. If one enters into a mourner's home to comfort him and wipe away a tear from his grieving face, one directs one's words of comfort to all who mourn for Zion and Jerusalem. The slightest disturbance in the condition of a single individual or group ought to grieve all the various segments of the people in all of their dispersions. It is both forbidden and impossible for the "I" to isolate himself from his fellow and not share in his suffering. If the premise of shared historical circumstances is correct, then the experience of shared suffering is the direct conclusion of that premise.

Third, shared suffering finds its expression in the awareness of 'shared responsibility and liability.' When Israel went forth from Egypt, Moses and Aaron fell down upon their faces, pleaded with God" and said: O God, the God of the spirits of all flesh, shall one man sin, and will Thou be wroth with all the congregation?" (Numbers 16:22). This prayer accomplished the aim intended for it by Moses and Aaron, the shepherds of their people, Israel; God agreed that they had acted properly in setting forth their plea and punished only the congregation of Korach. However, God's display of this particular mode of *chesed* was only temporary. On a permanent basis, the "I" is held responsible for the sin of his fellow, if it was in his power to rebuke him, to protest against his behavior and induce him to repent. A collective ethico-halakhic responsibility devolves upon the entire Jewish people. The individuals coalesce into one ethico-halakhic unit, possessed of one conscience and an all encompassing normative consciousness. The halakhah has already declared that all Jews are guarantors for one another. Consequently, the halakhic ruling is that a person who has already discharged his obligation to fulfill a commandment can still perform the commandment for his fellow Jew who has not as yet performed it and thereby enable him to discharge his obligation. The fact that the first person has already performed the commandment does not result in his being included in the category of those who are exempt from a particular obligation, who cannot enable the many to discharge their obligation. The "I" is not himself exempt as long as his fellow has not performed the commandment required of him. A special covenant was made in order to effect the mutual *arevut* (suretyship) of all Jews for one another. This covenant received its expression in the blessings and curses on Mounts Gerizim and Ebal. It is based on the idea of peoplehood that God revealed to Moses in Egypt. From the idea of peoplehood the covenant of mutual *arevut* directly followed. Moses, the master of the prophets, in referring to this covenant of *arevut*, emphatically proclaimed: "that He may establish thee this day unto Himself for a people and that He may be unto thee a God" (Deuteronomy 29:12). In speaking thus, he used the same phrases employed to describe the covenant in Egypt, "And I will take you to Me for a people, and I will be to you a God" (Exodus 6: 7). Here the concept of shared fate has risen from the plane of socio-political suffering to the plane of ethico-halakhic *arevut*. We are all mutually responsible for one another, we are all each other's guarantors, as the verse states: "but the things that are revealed belong unto us and our children for ever, that we may do all the words of (his Law" (Deuteronomy 29:28)

The commandment of the sanctification the divine Name and the prohibition against the desecration of the divine Name can be explained very well in the light of this principle of shared responsibility and liability. The actions of the individual are charged to the account of the community. Any sin he commits besmirches the name of Israel in the world. The individual, therefore, must answer not only to his own personal conscience but also to the collective conscience of the people. If he behaves properly, he sanctifies the name of Israel and the Name of the God of Israel; if he sins, he casts shame and disgrace on the people and desecrates the Name of its God.

Fourth, shared historical circumstances give rise to shared activity. The obligation to give charity and perform deeds of loving kindness derives its force from the all-penetrating and all-encompassing experience of brotherhood. The Torah, in laying down these commandments, uses the term *ah*, "brother," instead of *re'a*, "fellow." "And if thy brother be waxen poor ... then thou shalt uphold him ... and he shall live with thee" (Leviticus 25 :35). "Thou shalt not harden thy heart, nor shut thy hand from thy needy brother. Thou shalt surely open thy hand unto thy poor and needy brother in thy land" (Deuteronomy 15:7, 11). The confrontation with the people's strange and unusual fate-laden existence endows the Jew with a unifying consciousness in the field of social action. The common situation of all Jews without distinction-whether manifested on the objective level as shared historical circumstances or on the subjective level as shared suffering – opens up fountains of mercy and loving-kindness in the heart of the individual on behalf of his brethren in trouble, which indirectly affects him as well. Maimonides formulated this idea in his unique style, at once highly concise and overflowing with ideas:

All Israelites and those who have attached themselves to them are to each other like brothers, as it is said, "Ye are the children of the Lord your God" (Deuteronomy 14:1). If brother shows no

compassion to brother, who will show compassion to him? And Unto whom shall the poor of Israel raise their eyes? Unto the heathens, who halt' them and persecute them? Their eyes are therefore uplifted solely 10 their brethren.

We have stated that it is the consciousness of the fate imposed upon the people against their will and of their terrible isolation that is the source of the people's unity, of their togetherness. It is precisely this consciousness as the source of the people's togetherness that gives rise to the attribute of *hesed*, which summons and stirs the community of fate to achieve a positive mode of togetherness through ongoing, joint participation in its own historical circumstances, in its suffering, conscience, and acts of mutual aid. The lonely Jew finds consolation in breaking down the existential barriers of egoism and alienation, joining himself to his fellow and actively connecting himself with the community. The oppressive sense of fate undergoes a positive transformation when individual personal existences blend together to form a new unit—a people. The obligation to love one another stems from the consciousness of this people of fate, this lonely people that inquires into the meaning of its own uniqueness. It is this obligation of love that stands at the very heart of the covenant made in Egypt.

THE COVENANT OF DESTINY

What is the nature of the covenant of destiny? Destiny in the life of a people, as in the life of an individual, signifies a deliberate and conscious existence that the people has chosen out of its own free will and in which it finds the full realization of its historical being. Its existence, in place of simply being (the experience of an unalterable reality into which the people has been thrust, now appears as the experience of an act possessing teleological dimensions, replete with movement, ascent, striving, and attaining. The people is embedded in its destiny as a result of its longing for a refined, substantive, and purposeful existence. Destiny is the flowing spring of the people's unique exaltation: it is the unceasing stream of supernal influence that will never dry up as long as the people charts its path in accordance with the divine Law. A life of destiny is a life with direction; it is the fruit of cognitive readiness and free choice.

The covenant in Egypt was made against the Israelites' will. God took them unto Himself for a people without consulting them beforehand, as the verse states: "And I will take you to Me for a people" (Exodus 6:7). The covenant at Sinai, in contrast, was first presented to the Israelites before it was made. God sent Moses to the Israelites to bring them His word, and Moses returned to God with their response. The halakhah views the covenant at Sinai as a contract that can only be drawn up with the knowledge and consent of the party assuming obligations for the future) in this instance the community of Israel. The proclamation "'We will do and obey" (Exodus 24:7) constitutes the foundation of the acceptance of the Torah.

What is the content of the covenant at Sinai? It consists in a special way of life which directs man's existence toward attaining a single goal, a goal beyond the reach of the man of fate, namely, man's imitation of his Creator through an act of self-transcendence. The creative activity which suffuses (the covenant of destiny flows from a source unknown to the man of fate. It derives from man's rebellion against a life of sheer facticity, from the desire pulsating within him for more exalted, *more* supernal modes of being. The deeds of loving kindness and brotherhood which are interwoven into the covenant at Sinai have as their motivating force not the Jew's strange sense of isolation, but rather his experience of the unity of a people forever betrothed to the one true God. The absolute unity of God is reflected in the unity of the people bound to Him eternally. "Thou art One and Thy Name is One, and who is like unto Thy people, Israel, one nation on earth?" Jewish fellowship in this dimension is a result of the special filial relationship the members of this people enjoy with God. "We are Thy children and Thou art our Father." (Maimonides emphasized this motif in the passage we cited earlier.) At Sinai, God raised on high the covenant of fate which He made with a community which, against its will, finds itself alone, a community the members of which perform deeds of loving kindness on behalf of one another as a result of this externally imposed isolation and separateness, and transformed the covenant of fate into a

covenant of destiny which He made with a community possessing will and desire, a community sanctifying itself and directing itself toward encountering God. The "people," lacking direction and purpose (the Hebrew word for "people," *am*, as we have already noted, is related to the word *im*, "with", became a "nation," which signifies a community possessing a distinct communal countenance and collective physiognomy (the Hebrew word for "nation" is *goy*, which is related to the word *geviyah* - "body". The *am-hesed*, the people of loving kindness, was raised on high and became a *goy kadosh*, a holy nation. Holiness, which expresses itself in the form of an authentic mode of being, is the very foundation of the shared destiny of the nation.

When the man of destiny confronts God he beholds the God of Israel, who reveals Himself to man only with His consent and at His invitation. The God of Israel enters into a relationship with finite, creaturely man only after the latter has sanctified himself and purified himself from all uncleanness and pollution, and awaits, with passion and longing, this wondrous encounter. The revelation of the God of Israel does not take place under all circumstances and conditions. Such a revelation demands a special spiritual state, as set forth in the divine command, "Be ready for the third day" (Exodus 19: 11). Without such preparation, such readiness on the part of man, the God of Israel will not just randomly and casually reveal Himself. The God of Israel does not take man by surprise. Rather, He responds to man's fervid plea. However, the God of Israel takes no interest in the person who does not passionately yearn for Him with a longing that expresses itself in and takes the form of concrete actions. While the God of the Hebrews pursues man against his will and takes no heed of his opinions or wishes, the God of Israel consults with man prior to the encounter. Already in Egypt the Almighty revealed Himself to Moses not only as the God of the Hebrews but also as the God of Israel, who awaits man and invites him to serve Him. "Thus saith the Lord God of Israel: Let My people go, that they may hold a feast unto Me in the wilderness" {Exodus 5:1).