

# Eikev: The Covenants

- Shlomo Riskin.

The two Covenants, one with Avraham, one with Sinai; the National and Religious emphasis. How Jerusalem differs from all the rest of the land of Israel.

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By Shlomo Riskin

Efrat, Israel - This week's Torah portion centers around the land of Israel: the necessity and guarantee that we conquer it, its natural beauty and resources, replete with rivers, wells, mountains and valleys, its luscious fruits, vegetables and grains, and its impressive stone quarries and copper mines. Indeed, even when the Biblical text directs us to recite the blessing after a meal, our blessing does not relate to the food but rather to the land: "You shall eat, you shall be satisfied and you shall bless the Lord your G-d for the good land which He has given you (Deuteronomy 8:10)" – the land and not the food! Why?

Secondly, the Talmud maintains that there are three blessings, Biblically ordained, (from our Torah portion of Eikev) which comprise the Grace over meals: the first for the food as a divine gift, derived from the message of the manna which descended from heaven (Deuteronomy 8:3-6); the second for the land; and the third for the restoration of Jerusalem. Why is Jerusalem a separate blessing? And wherein does the uniqueness of our capital city differ from the uniqueness of the land in general? Ought Jerusalem not be included in the general blessing for the land?

And finally, the Biblical text goes on to describe the Torah covenant which G-d gave to Moses and to Israel, the subsequent sin of the golden calf, the Divine forgiveness and re-confirmation of Israel's election, but all in the backdrop of the importance of the land, the universal nature of our G-d who is above all powers (Deuteronomy 10:17-21), and the universal nature of our covenant, which, if obeyed, will bring universal fructification of the fields, prosperity and well-being to the world (Deuteronomy 11:12 following). How is all of this connected?

I have written in the past of the two Biblical covenants which G-d made with Israel, the first (with Abraham) known as the "covenant between the pieces" (Genesis 15), and the second (with the entire nation) at Sinai with the Divine Revelation (Exodus 20,24: 6-8). These two covenants are generally interpreted as the national covenant - in the "covenant between the pieces", G-d promised Abraham children and delineated the borders of the land of Israel, population and homeland being two essential prerequisites of a nation - and the religious covenant, since the Revelation at Sinai expressed the Divine laws, ritual, ethical and moral - which G-d obligated the Israelites to observe.

And indeed the Jewish people are uniquely both a nation as well as a religion, with Rav Abraham Isaac HaKohen Kook seeing the national covenant as being most significant (Epistles,455) and Rav Joseph B. Soloveichik seeing the religious covenant as reflecting our true destiny (Kol Dodi Dofek).

In light of the questions I have asked, I would like to add a dimension to the interpretation of these two covenants. Yes, the first covenant with Abraham expresses Israel as a nation-state. But the second covenant at Sinai was not only a religious covenant, creating Israel as a faith community with a unique relationship with G-d; it was also a covenant with the world, expecting all of the nations to at least accept the seven laws of morality initially given to Noah: not to engage in the evil practices of idolatry, not to blaspheme G-d, not to steal, not to commit adultery, not to murder, not to eat the limb of living animal, and to establish courts of law to enforce these laws.

Maimonides, the great Jewish philosopher and jurist of the twelfth century, codifies the fact that G-d commanded Moses at Sinai to teach Israel the 613 commandments and all of the nations of the world these seven commandments of morality and peace (Laws of Kings 8,10). Even the ten commandments themselves are very universal in their message, the first announcing G-d as the Lord of freedom (His basic message to the totalitarian despot Pharaoh), the next two denouncing all forms of idolatry, the fourth invoking the Sabbath as a symbol of G-d the universal creator of all life (even our Gentile servants must rest on the Sabbath like us), the fifth demanding that we respect our parents and the next five dealing with moral issues of inter-personal relationships (three of which are included in the Noahide seven).

The land of Israel is the special gift of G-d to the Jewish people; it is the one land which is meant to supply Israel with sustenance and security, food and borders. Given the fact that we live in an unfriendly world which often attempts to destroy us- perhaps because of the lessons of morality we are commanded to import to a world which is more interested in control and conquest- it is crucial that there be at least one land to feed and protect us. Hence our blessing for a meal harks back to the one land which provides us with the food over the long haul of history.

Jerusalem, however, is much more than the capital city of Israel; Jerusalem is the home of the Holy Temple, a sanctuary with a message of peace for all the nations of the world (Isaiah 2, Micha 4, Zechariah 7,8,9). Indeed the very name Jerusalem means the City of Peace. Both covenants are inter-related. Only from the back-drop of a nation-state ruled democratically with justice and compassion will we be able to influence a world of nation-states. But the true goal of Israel, the land as well as the people, is centered around Jerusalem, with its moral message to the world. Hence, the blessing following Israel the land in our Grace after Meals is the blessing for Jerusalem and our Bible portion continues its description of the land with the Revelation at Sinai, the universal G-d of the world, and the ultimate well-being of the world once fundamental morality is accepted.

Post Script: I recently took my grandchildren to see “Matrix Revisited”. How surprised I was to find a movie which describes a world in between humans and machines (enslaved humans become unfeeling machines, devoid of free will); the humans are protecting Zion (Jerusalem), which has a Divine promise that it will never fall. Victory will come when hope (HaTikvah) and love (You shall love your neighbor like yourself) will enable the Master of the Keys to enter the chamber of the “One” who is the true source. This is precisely the message of our Torah.

Shabbat Shalom. Rabbi S. Riskin

