



## ברית עולם

# The Eternal Covenant

### ■ The Covenant of the Heavens and Earth

Parashat Mishpatim, following directly after the Stand at Mt. Sinai, tells us of the forging of the Covenant of the Torah between Hashem and His Nation Israel:

וַיִּקַּח סֵפֶר הַבְּרִית וַיִּקְרָא בְּאָזְנֵי הָעָם וַיֹּאמְרוּ:  
כָּל אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר ה' נַעֲשֶׂה וְנִשְׁמָע.

*Moshe took the Book of the Covenant and read it to the people, and they said: "Whatever G-d has said, we will do and we will listen."*

וַיִּקַּח מֹשֶׁה אֶת הַדָּם וַיִּזְרֹק עַל הָעָם. וַיֹּאמֶר:  
הִנֵּה דַם הַבְּרִית אֲשֶׁר כָּרַת ה' עִמָּכֶם עַל כָּל הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה.

*Moshe then took the blood [of the sacrifice-offerings] and sprinkled it on Israel, and said: "This is the blood of the covenant that Hashem has forged with you regarding these words [of the Torah]." (Sh'mot 24,7-8)*

This covenant, or *Brit*, forged between G-d and Israel, is the pinnacle of the three covenants forged between them. The incredible significance of these covenants is almost beyond our imagination. Simply put, it is in their merit that the world is not destroyed and continues to exist, as we will see.

Let us begin with the following pair of verses in the prophecies of Yirmiyahu:

כֹּה אָמַר ה', אִם תִּפְרוּ אֶת בְּרִיתֵי הַיּוֹם וְאֶת בְּרִיתֵי הַלַּיְלָה  
וּלְבַלְתֵּי הֵיּוֹת יוֹמָם וַלַּיְלָה בְּעֵתָם -

*So said G-d: If you violate My covenant with the day and My covenant with the night, not to have day and night in their time -*

גַּם בְּרִיתִי תִפָּר אֶת דָּוִד עַבְדִּי מֵהִיּוֹת לוֹ בֶּן מֶלֶךְ עַל כְּסֵאוֹ  
וְאֶת הַלְוִיִּם הַכֹּהֲנִים מִשְׁרָתִי.

*then My covenant with My servant David will also be broken,  
that he will not have a son reigning on his throne, and  
[the same] with the Levite priests, My servants.* (Jeremiah 33,20-21)

These two verses express one idea: If, and only if, it would be possible to stop the world from spinning on its axis, thus nullifying the phenomenon of “day and night,” it would also be possible to annul G-d’s commitment to the Kingdom of the House of David and to the Priesthood of the Tribe of Levi. Hashem thus declares that just as the laws of nature are absolute and unconditional, so too are his promises to Israel.

The Prophet then continues with another pair of verses:

כֹּה אָמַר ה'. אִם לֹא בְרִיתִי יוֹמָם וְלַיְלָה, חֻקֹּת שָׁמַיִם וְאָרֶץ לֹא שָׁמַתִּי -  
*So said G-d: If not for My Covenant with day and night,  
[and if] I would not maintain the presence of the heavens  
and the earth,*

גַּם זֶרַע יַעֲקֹב וְדָוִד עַבְדִּי אֶמְאַס מִקַּחַת מִזְרְעוֹ מִשְׁלִים אֶל זֶרַע אַבְרָהָם...  
*[then] I will also reject the seed of Yaakov,  
and David My servant, not to take from his seed  
rulers over the seed of Avraham...* (verses 25-26)

The plain meaning of these two verses seems to be more of the same: If ever the pact that determines natural law is broken – which will never be – the pacts with the seed of the House of David and the Tribe of Levi will similarly be shattered.

Curiously, the Sages of the Talmud noted only the first of these verses, punctuated it differently, and learned from it something different: “If it were not for Hashem’s covenant, natural law would be annulled and the world would cease to exist.” This is a sublime concept, to be sure, but not at all what we understood previously! Instead of the message that G-d’s commitment to Beit David and the Levites is as unshakeable as His commitment to the laws of nature, we are now to understand that the world would not exist were it not for G-d’s covenant!

How can Chazal take two connected verses, break the link between them, and come up with an understanding totally different than their plain meaning?

Something else about these Talmudic passages is puzzling: When the Sages teach that Hashem's covenant keeps the world going, to which covenant are they referring? In answer to this question, R. Ami says in the Gemara that it refers to the covenant of the sacrifices in the Holy Temple:

**If it were not for the maamadot [a reference to the sacrifices], the heavens and earth would not be able to stand, as is written: *If not for My brit (Covenant) day and night, the presence of the heavens and the earth I would not maintain.*** (Megillah 31b)

R. Yehuda (Rebbe) says elsewhere that the reference is to the Covenant of Circumcision:

**Rebbe teaches: Great is circumcision, because if it were not for circumcision, the heavens and earth would not be able to stand, as is written: *If not for My Covenant day and night, the presence of the heavens and the earth I would not maintain.*** (Nedarim 32a)

R. Elazar teaches there that it refers to G-d's covenant with Israel regarding the Torah:

**R. Elazar says: Great is Torah, because if it were not for the Torah, the heavens and earth would not be able to stand, as is written: *If not for My Covenant day and night, the presence of the heavens and the earth I would not maintain.***

None of the Sages provide sources for their words, though we know that the Torah uses the word "covenant" to refer to both circumcision (B'reshit 17,11), as R. Yehuda said, and to Torah (Sh'mot 24,7), as per R. Elazar. What is R. Ami's source for positing that the covenant referred to by the Prophet Jeremiah means "sacrifices"?

We thus have three covenants – sacrifices, circumcision, Torah – and two questions:

1. Why does R. Ami say that G-d's covenant refers to the sacrificial offerings?
2. Why do all three Sages appear to overlook the fact that the verse in Jeremiah should be understood in conjunction with the verse that follows it, and should not stand on its own?

### ■ **The Covenant of the Sacrifices**

Let us begin with the source for the "covenant of sacrifices" and its special value as a guarantor for the world's continued existence. Immediately

after the Great Flood, which only Noah and his family survived, Hashem informs him of a bilateral agreement - a Covenant - that He was making with the entire world. G-d promises to never again bring such a flood that would destroy the world: *“I hereby establish My covenant with you and with your descendants after you... There will never again be a flood to destroy the world.”* (B'reshit 9,9-11)

G-d's commitment in this agreement is clear, but what does Noah bring to this pact? What are mankind's obligations in this Covenant? The answer, provided two verses earlier, is that man must keep the seven Noahide Commandments, crowned by the charge to populate the earth: *“And you [plural], be fruitful and multiply, and populate the earth”* (verse 7). This mitzvah includes within it all the Noahide Commandments, such as not to murder, steal, or worship idols, and to institute a system of courts and law.

What is the connection between the command to *“populate the earth”* and the other Noahide commandments? The answer is that all seven of them are summed up in *“be fruitful and multiply:”* Be partners with G-d in the proper building and development of a functioning society with positive interpersonal and societal relations. This is the core of the Noahide commands. The pact is, therefore, that G-d promises not to destroy the world, and man promises to manage and develop it efficiently and ethically.

But here we must ask: Not only human beings, but also animals were included in the Covenant made with G-d after the Great Flood:

וְאֲנִי הִנְנִי מְקִיִּם אֶת בְּרִיתִי אִתְּכֶם...  
וְאֵת כָּל נֶפֶשׁ הַחַיָּה אֲשֶׁר אִתְּכֶם בְּעוֹף בְּבִהֵמָה...

*And I hereby establish My covenant with you...  
and with every living animal with you, birds and beasts...* (verses 9-10)

How can there be a covenant with beasts? They clearly do not have *daat*, the necessary awareness and responsibility to make commitments and take upon themselves obligations. What can they promise G-d in return for His commitment? The answer is provided a few verses earlier (verse 20): Noah leaves the Ark and builds an altar and offers up a sacrifice to Hashem from among the pure animals and birds.

How does G-d respond?

...וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל לִבּוֹ, לֹא אֶסַף לְקַלֵּל עוֹד אֶת הָאֲדָמָה בְּעִבּוֹר הָאָדָם,  
כִּי יִצֹר לִב הָאָדָם רַע מִנְעֻרָיו  
וְלֹא אֶסַף עוֹד לְהַכּוֹת אֶת כָּל חַי בְּאֶשֶׁר עָשִׂיתִי.

*“Never again will I curse the earth on account of man,  
for his heart’s inclination is evil from his youth.*

*And I will never again smite down all life as I have just done.”* (8,21)

We thus learn that the pure-animal sacrifices offered by man are the guarantee that the world of the living will not be again destroyed. When a man brings an animal sacrifice, it is a substitute for sacrificing his own soul to Hashem – as he senses very shockingly when he sees the animal’s blood spilt and scattered on the altar. True, it is man, and not animals, who makes the Covenant with G-d and who obligates himself - but the animals are actually sacrificed, and therefore it is as if G-d made His Covenant with the animals as well.

The above Verse 9 will thus be explained as follows: *“And I hereby establish My covenant with you... together with every living animal with you...”* That is, Hashem forges the covenant with man, who brings the animals with him.

### ■ Man’s Inclination

Let us return to the above-quoted Verse 21: *“Never again will I curse the earth on account of man, for his inclination of heart is evil from his youth.”* Why was the earth cursed? Because of man; G-d clearly told Adam (3,17), *“Cursed is the land because of you!”* That is, since the entire world was created only for man, who must now be punished with death, there appears to be no further purpose for the earth.

This new Covenant, however, changes the rules. The world is no longer threatened with obliteration because of man’s sinful deeds, as happened in the Flood. Instead, G-d will intervene *before* man reaches the full extent of his capacity to sin, and will punish him moderately in accordance with his sins at that point. In addition, Hashem will shorten man’s lifetime, so that he simply will not live long enough to sin past the point of no return.

This means that man’s Free Will is to be reduced, to ensure that he never reaches the extreme limit of his sins, which would lead to the destruction of the world. Since mankind is no longer to be threatened with destruction, the earth, as well, will not be destroyed on his account.

In accordance with these new rules, we know that in the end, when he “grows up,” man will certainly rectify his ways – thus again rendering valid the purpose for which the world was created. We now understand differently what G-d said in Verse 21, by putting a comma after the word “evil,” as follows: “*No longer will I curse the earth because of man, for his inclination of heart is evil, from – i.e., because of – his youth.*” Man’s evil is only a result of his youth, but as he matures, he will improve his ways – and so there is no reason to consider destroying the earth on his account.

We can apply this to the entire human race throughout history: The first generations, in the time of Noah, sinned grievously – but this was only their “childhood” stage; later on, as they developed, they improved and came closer to the goal for which they were created. Hashem thus says: “I will no longer curse the earth on account of the evil that man produces in his youth, or because of mankind that sinned in *its* youth – because I see that both mankind and individuals improve as they go along.”

For proof, let us compare what happened before and after the Flood. The generation of the Flood was very evil, and “*every impulse of [their] thoughts is only for evil, all day long*” (B’reshit 6,5). That is, all the thoughts each man produces all day are only evil. But Noah, the representative of the post-Flood world, was different. He showed gratefulness to G-d for having saved him, and sacrificed animals at the urging of his own heart! This is certainly a far cry from mankind’s behavior when it was “younger.”

And it was not only Noah. G-d knows that the future holds in store a righteous man named Avraham, who is to sanctify G-d’s Name in many ways. Hashem also knows of the Nation of Israel, which will similarly sanctify G-d’s Name. For their sake, G-d says (8,21), “*I will no longer curse... all the living; mankind will improve, and the earth need not be cursed again.*”

G-d thus said to Noah:

עַד כָּל יְמֵי הָאָרֶץ זֶרַע וְקָצִיר וְחֹם וְקֹיץ וְחֹרֶף וַיּוֹם וְלַיְלָה לֹא יִשְׁבְּתוּ.

*As long as the earth lasts, seedtime and harvest,  
cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night  
[all] shall never again cease.* (8,22)

Hashem promises that the laws of nature shall be maintained forever and ever, and the world will not return to nothingness and chaos. This is a clear allusion to the covenant alluded to by our original verse: “*If not for My*

***Covenant day and night, the presence of the heavens and the earth I would not maintain.***

This then explains our first question: How did Rav Ami in the Gemara know that the verse promising the continued existence of the world was referring to the sacrificial offerings? The answer is: Hashem stated clearly that He would maintain the laws of nature forever – and all in the merit of the sacrifices that Noah brought and because of the commitment of gratefulness they symbolized. As such, the “covenant of the sacrifices” actually refers to the Covenant of the Rainbow with Noah.

### ■ **Avraham’s Covenant: The Second Tier**

G-d’s *Brit* with Noah, symbolized by the rainbow in the sky, is later “upgraded” to a *Brit Milah*, the Covenant of Ritual Circumcision, which G-d forged with Avraham Avinu. Hashem bolsters His commitment and ties with Avraham, telling him:

וְהִקְמַתִּי אֶת בְּרִיתִי בֵּינִי וּבֵינְךָ... לְהִיּוֹת לְךָ לְאֵל-לְהִיִּם...

*I will establish My Covenant between Me and you...  
to be your G-d.* (B’reshit 17,7)

In this covenant, G-d strengthens His original promise not to destroy the world, and adds another one: to have Avraham father a great nation, which will inherit the Land of Israel and to which Hashem will be G-d. Accordingly, *Brit Milah*, too, is included in our verse, “*If not for My Covenant day and night, the presence of the heavens and the earth I would not maintain.*”

And from here, we climb up yet another level, to the third tier.

### ■ **The National Covenant**

Before they left Egypt, all the males of the Nation of Israel were circumcised at once (Sh’mot, end of Chapter 12), in preparation for an even deeper and more sublime *Brit*: The Covenant of the Torah at Mount Sinai – not only between G-d and an individual, but between G-d and an entire nation. This is the Covenant that is mentioned in Parashat Mishpatim, and with which we began this lesson: “*This is the blood of the covenant that G-d has forged with you regarding these words [of the Torah].*” (Sh’mot 24,8)

This Covenant of the Torah is a “third-tier upgrade” of the original promise given to Noah – and it, too, is included in our starting-point verse: “*If not for My Covenant day and night, the presence of the heavens and the earth I would not maintain.*”

In short, we see that we have three levels of covenants for which the world exists: The Covenant of Sacrifices, the Covenant of Brit Milah, and the Covenant of the Torah.

But still to be answered is that which we asked above, regarding Jeremiah 33,25-26: The Sages' message seems to be based only on one verse, namely, that the entire world will cease to exist if G-d's covenant is not followed. But the plain meaning of the entire context of the two verses together is that G-d's commitment to the House of David and the Levites is as unshakeable as is His commitment to the laws of nature. Why did the Sages focus only on one verse and ignore the second?

The answer is that Chazal, delving deeply into the meaning of both verses, understood their core message as follows: The Nation of Israel will return to its land and will grow into a great nation, the Holy Temple will be built, Mashiach ben David will appear, and the Priests will once again serve in the Beit HaMikdash. This is a promise that will come true and will never be abrogated, just as the laws of nature are eternal.

The Sages wished to emphasize that the Covenant forged with Israel at Mt. Sinai was based on the earlier stages: Sacrifices (for mankind), Circumcision (for the children of Avraham), and Torah (for the nation of Israel). To highlight the three covenantal stages that begin the process, Chazal set their sights on the first verse and turned it into the focal point. They thus retained the depth of the meaning of both verses by concentrating on a "memory aid," that is, the first verse.

### ■ The Four Signs

Each of the three covenants mentioned above comes with a sign. The function of the sign is to preserve the mutual pact forever. What is the sign for the covenant between Hashem and mankind? From Hashem's standpoint, the **rainbow** was chosen as the sign that He would never again destroy the world:

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים אֶל נֹחַ זֶאת אֹת הַבְּרִית אֲשֶׁר הִקְמַתִּי בֵּינִי  
וּבֵין כָּל בֶּשֶׂר אֲשֶׁר עַל הָאָרֶץ.

*G-d said to Noah: "This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between Myself and all flesh on the earth."* (B'reshit 9,17)

Let us briefly review the essence of the rainbow as a sign.<sup>2</sup> A rainbow in the sky means that the sun's rays are being reflected in water droplets, and its white light is refracted into what we see as the seven primary colors. At the time of the Great Flood, clouds covered the sky, preventing contact between the sun's rays and water drops – and thus there was no rainbow. Hashem now promises to disperse the clouds, allowing the sun's rays to appear and form a rainbow – reminding humans of their parallel obligation vis-à-vis the world, namely, to be fruitful and multiply, and to build and develop the world.

What sign was chosen for the covenant between G-d and Israel? There were three:

1. For the Torah covenant with Israel, which upholds the special relationship between Hashem and His nation, the chosen sign is the **Sabbath Day**: *“Keep My Sabbaths, for it is a sign between Me and you for generations... between Me and the Children of Israel, an everlasting sign.”* (Sh'mot 31,13-17)
2. Regarding the *Milah* covenant between G-d and each individual descendant of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov, the chosen sign is the **double circumcision action**, namely, removing the foreskin and uncovering the flesh (as we learn in Medrash D'varim Rabba 6,1, based on the double appearance of the word *'circumcise'* in B'reshit 17,13).
3. The covenant of the sacrifices between G-d and Noah's sons for the existence of the world was later upgraded to a covenant between Hashem and Israel – and from this Covenant of the Rainbow, Hashem chose salt as its sign, as is written: *“You shall salt all of your meal-offering sacrifices, and you shall not omit the salt of your God's covenant from upon your meal offerings. On all your sacrifices, offer salt.”* (Vayikra 2,13)

Let us elaborate on this last point. Salt is generally mentioned in the Bible as a sign of destruction and stunted growth, as we read of *“land of salt that cannot be settled”* (Jeremiah 17,6). Similarly, regarding the evil cities of S'dom and its neighbors, the Torah tells us: *“Sulfur and salt have burned up its entire land, it cannot be sown, nor can it grow anything... Like the overturning of S'dom and Amora...”* (D'varim 29,22)

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2. see Vol. I, Parashat Noach, “The Covenant, Rainbow and Tzitzit”

This is why Lot's wife became a pillar of salt – because she disobeyed and made eye-and-heart contact with the evil city that had become a concentration of salt. The decree that was visited upon the city was thus visited upon her as well. Salt on our sacrifices indicates what would happen without the offerings: There would be no covenant with G-d and the world would not be able to exist, as if it were turned into salt.

Today, since we cannot bring sacrifices because the Holy Temple is still destroyed, prayers take their place, as is written: “*We will pay bull-offerings with our mouths*” (Hoshea 14,3). This is why the most fundamental Covenant today, the one on which the entire world is founded, is the bond between man and his Creator, via **prayer**. Above it is the Covenant with each Jew, via **circumcision** – and above all is the Covenant between the Nation of Israel and the G-d of Israel, via **the Torah**.

