



## עם קדוש Holy Nation

### ■ The Essential Stages

The process by which the Nation of Israel was formed and shaped was long and twisted. It began with Hashem's revelation to Avraham Avinu, continued at the Stand at Mt. Sinai, and ended with the entry into the Land of Israel.

Along the timeline of Israel's formation, three critical milestones stand out, all of which involve the forging of a *brit*, a covenant between G-d and the People:

1. The first stage was the covenant that Hashem made with our Patriarch Avraham: the Covenant of Circumcision, *Brit Milah*.
2. The second was the covenant Hashem made with the nation at Sinai when He gave them the Torah.
3. And the third stage was the covenantal stand at the Moav Plains immediately preceding Israel's entry into Eretz Yisrael. It was this stage that marked the conclusion of the shaping of Am Yisrael, as Moshe himself said to the people at that time:

... היום הזה גְּהֵייתָ לְעַם לַה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ.

... *This day you have become  
a nation unto Hashem your G-d.* (D'varim 27,9)

As we will see, each stage adds another dimension to Israel's developmental growth as a Divine nation, further rounding out and completing the bonds between Israel and Hashem.



## ■ The Sign of the Covenant

In the first stage, i.e., the covenant that Hashem forged with Avraham, he and his descendants were required to observe one commandment: ritual circumcision. G-d told him:

וְאַתָּה אֶת בְּרִיתִי תִשְׁמֹר...  
זֹאת בְּרִיתִי אֲשֶׁר תִּשְׁמְרוּ בֵּינִי וּבֵינֵיכֶם וּבֵין זֶרְעֵךְ אַחֲרֶיךָ: הַמּוּל לְכֶם כָּל זָכָר.

*And you shall observe My covenant...  
This is the covenant that you must keep,  
between Me and you and your descendants after you:  
Circumcise all your males.* (B'reshit 17,9-10)

To do the *brit milah* is actually the only requirement that is required at this point – but quite a fundamental obligation it is, as we see later when the Redemption from Egypt begins. After G-d sends Moshe back to Egypt to redeem Israel, an amazing incident occurs during his journey that could have changed all of history. Eliezer, Moshe's baby son, was not circumcised, and an angel of G-d arrives to make Moshe pay for this with his life - even at the expense of his mission to rescue the Jews from Egypt. Moshe's wife Tziporah jumps up to save her husband by taking a sharp rock and removing her baby's foreskin. As the Torah relates:

וַיְהִי בַדֶּרֶךְ בְּמִלּוֹן וַיִּפְגְּשׂהוּ ה' וַיִּבְקֶשׂ הַמִּיתוֹ.  
וַתִּקַּח צִפּוֹרָה צֶרֶב וַתְּכַרֵת אֶת עֶרְלַת בְּנֶהָ...  
*On his way, at the place where they slept,  
G-d confronted him and wanted to kill him.  
Tziporah then took a sharp stone  
and cut off her son's foreskin...* (Sh'mot 4,24-25)

Telling us this story, the Torah means to emphasize that if the fulfillment of the very first covenantal obligation, Brit Milah, is absent, Israel cannot advance to the next stage of its relationship with G-d.

## ■ Mount Sinai

Shortly afterwards, after the Nation of Israel has left Egypt amidst tremendous miracles, comes the second stage. The people camp opposite Mount Sinai, and they hear that which Hashem told Moshe:

... וַיִּקְרָא אֵלָיו ה' מִן הַהָר לֵאמֹר, כֹּה תֹאמַר לְבֵית יַעֲקֹב וְתִגִּיד לְבָנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל.

*G-d called to Moshe from the mountain, saying,  
"Thus shall you say to the House of Jacob,  
and tell the Children of Israel:*



... וְעַתָּה אִם שָׁמוּעַ תִּשְׁמְעוּ בְקוֹלִי וּשְׁמַרְתֶּם אֶת בְּרִיתִי...  
 ... וְאַתֶּם תִּהְיוּ לִי מְמַלְכֶת כְּהֹנִים וְגוֹי קָדוֹשׁ ...

*... If you hearken to My voice and preserve My covenant...  
 then you shall be unto Me a kingdom of priests  
 and a holy nation...*” (Sh’mot 19,3-5)

The covenant mentioned here is an upgrade of the previous single-mitzvah *brit*, adding another demand to Israel’s obligations in their covenantal relationship with Hashem. If before they only had to “*preserve My covenant*” via ritual circumcision, now is added also the obligation to “*hearken to My voice*” regarding an entire series of commandments, laws and statutes. This new proposal, outlined in the above verses, emphasizes two elements:

- a. Adhering to G-d’s word via the Prophets.
- b. Keeping the Covenant of Torah - G-d’s commandments and laws.

How can we ensure that we keep the Torah properly and not stray towards misunderstandings and distortions? We must hearken to the words of the Prophets in each generation. The true prophets, members of the Sanhedrin, were in constant contact with Hashem. They knew when the nation was beginning to stray from G-d’s will, and would warn them. When the nation did not abide by these warnings, the bitter truth was starkly placed before them:

וְהַכֹּהֲנִים לֹא אָמְרוּ אֵינִי ה', וְתַנְפְּשֵׁי הַתּוֹרָה לֹא יִדְעוּנִי וְהָרְעִים פְּשָׁעוּ בִּי  
 וְהַנְּבִיאִים נִבְּאוּ בַבַּעַל וְאַחֲרָי לֹא יוֹעִלוּ הֶלְכוּ.

*The Priests did not seek out G-d,  
 and those who studied Torah did not know Me,  
 and the shepherds sinned against Me;  
 the prophets prophesied in the name of Baal  
 and followed that which could give no aid.* (Jeremiah 2,8)

In other words, the very significant addition at Mt. Sinai is the acceptance of G-d’s word via His most trusted servant Moshe, followed by the other Prophets and the Sages of the Sanhedrin, throughout the generations. As is written:

נָבִיא מִקִּרְבְּךָ מֵאַחֶיךָ כְּמִנִּי יִקִּים לְךָ ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֵלָיו תִּשְׁמָעוּן.  
 כָּכֵל אֲשֶׁר שָׁאַלְתָּ מֵעַם ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּחֹרֵב...

*A prophet from your midst, from among your brothers,  
 like me, G-d will raise up for you; hearken to him – just as you  
 asked of Hashem at Horev [to hear the Divine word via  
 a Prophet and not directly from G-d].* (D’varim 18,15-16)



### ■ At the Plains of Moav

As the nation is about to enter the Promised Land of Israel, and with Moshe nearing the end of his life, he gathers them together for the third and final covenant. Once again, a new element is added:

אֵת ה' הָאֵמַרְתָּ הַיּוֹם לְהִיּוֹת לְךָ לֵאלֹהִים וּלְלַכֵּת בְּדַרְכָיו  
וּלְשַׁמֵּר חֻקָיו וּמִצְוֹתָיו וּמִשְׁפָּטָיו וּלְשָׁמַע בְּקוֹלוֹ.

*You have raised up G-d today,  
to be your G-d and to walk in His ways  
and to keep His laws, commandments and statutes,  
and to hearken to His voice.* (D'varim 26,17)

The new element mentioned here is “*to walk in His ways*” – to be like G-d: compassionate, merciful, etc. This verse lists all three of the elements of G-d’s covenants with Israel, beginning with the newest one: We must emulate His traits, such as those of mercy and compassion, by *walking in his ways*; we must *keep His laws, commandments and statutes*, i.e., observe not only the mitzvah of circumcision, but the entire covenant of Torah; and we must *hearken to His voice*, that is, to the voice of the Prophets speaking in His name (as Rashi states, D'varim 13,5).

### ■ Hashem’s Obligations

Corresponding to Israel’s three obligations towards Hashem, G-d also took upon Himself at Mt. Sinai three parallel obligations towards us (Sh'mot 19,5-6):

*You shall be a treasure unto  
Me among all the nations,  
for the entire earth is Mine.*

וְהִיִּיתֶם לִי סֻגְלָה מִכָּל הָעַמִּים  
כִּי לִי כָּל הָאָרֶץ.

*And you will be unto Me  
a kingdom of priests*

וְאַתֶּם תִּהְיוּ לִי מְמַלְכֵת כֹּהֲנִים

*and a holy nation...*

וְגוֹי קְדוֹשׁ...

Later, as Israel awaits entry to Eretz Yisrael from the Plains of Moav, Moshe repeats these three Divine commitments in his own words:

וְה' הָאֵמַרְתָּ הַיּוֹם לְהִיּוֹת לוֹ לְעַם סֻגְלָה ...

*G-d has also raised you up today,  
making you His treasured nation...*



וְלַתְתִּיךָ עֲלִיּוֹן עַל כָּל הַגּוֹיִם אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה לְתַהֲלָה וְלִשְׁמָה וְלִתְפָאֳרָתָה,  
*And to make you the highest of all the nations that he made,  
 to give you praise, fame and glory,*  
 וְלִהְיִתְךָ עִם קֹדֶשׁ לַה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ, כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר.  
*and that you should be a nation holy unto Hashem  
 your G-d, as He said. (D'varim 26,18-19)*

“*Treasured nation*,” in the first section of this passage, means that Israel is very beloved and delightful to G-d, as in the verse (Jeremiah 31,19), “*Is not Ephraim [Israel] my much-loved child, my child of delights?*” In the second part, “*the highest*” indicates that Israel will be venerated by the nations as a people to be emulated. Their admiration stems, at this point, from Israel’s economic and military success; this will be explained below.

And finally, the concept of a “*holy nation*” means a nation dedicated specially to G-d, separated from all the others, worthy of having G-d dwell in its midst. This highest level raises up a notch the Gentiles’ admiration of Israel. They no longer recognize us merely for our material accomplishments, but rather appreciate our very high level of Divine ethics. This is the Nation of G-d - the nation upon which the Name of G-d is permanently proclaimed.

What we must now clarify is how to arrange G-d’s and Israel’s respective commitments. Which is parallel to which, and what exactly is each side promising in exchange for what?

### ■ Matching the Pairs

Moshe Rabbeinu himself arranges the mutual commitments within the package of blessings he announces for Israel. He begins with the second stage:

וְהָיָה אִם שָׁמוּעַ תִּשְׁמַע בְּקוֹל ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ...  
 וְנִתְנָה ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ עֲלִיּוֹן עַל כָּל גּוֹיֵי הָאָרֶץ...  
 כִּי תִשְׁמַע בְּקוֹל ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ.

*If you hearken to G-d’s voice...  
 He will make you supreme over the nations  
 of the earth when you hearken to G-d’s voice. (D'varim 28,1-2)*

That is to say, our adherence to the words of Hashem’s prophets, guiding us to the true understanding of Torah, uplifts us to a level of blessing and success that arouses great admiration among the Gentiles. The reference is to economic and military success, as written here clearly:



ברוך פְּרִי בְטֹנָהּ וּפְרִי אֲדָמָתָהּ וּפְרִי בְהֵמָתָהּ ...  
 יִתֵּן ה' אֶת אֵיבֵיהֶם הַקָּמִים עָלֶיךָ נִגְפִים לְפָנֶיךָ...

*Blessed will be the fruit of your womb,  
 the fruit of your soil, the fruit of your livestock...  
 G-d will cause your enemies rising up against you  
 to be beaten before you... (verses 4-7)*

Moshe then continues with the third stage:

יְקִימָהּ ה' לֹוּ לְעַם קְדוֹשׁ כְּאֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּע לָךְ  
 כִּי תִשְׁמֹר אֶת מִצְוֹת ה' אֱ-לֹהֶיךָ וְהִלַּכְתָּ בְּדַרְכָּיו.

*G-d will establish you as His holy nation ...  
 for keeping His commandments  
 and walking in His ways. (verse 9)*

Moshe is telling Israel that if we want G-d's name and his Presence to permanently dwell in our midst, we must emulate His traits and walk in His ways, thus raising us up to the level of a holy and unique nation of high levels of ethics and morals. If so, then:

וְרָאוּ כָּל עַמֵּי הָאָרֶץ כִּי שֵׁם ה' נִקְרָא עָלֶיךָ וַיִּרְאוּ מִמֶּנּוּ.

*All the nations of the earth will see that  
 G-d's Name is called upon you,  
 and they will fear you. (verse 10)*

The Gentiles' excitement stems not from our material success, but from Israel's having adopted high moral standards and from its having been chosen as G-d's eternal Nation.

The manner in which Moshe Rabbeinu arranged these mutual commitments teaches us that the first stage – the Brit of Torah and all its commandments – will bring us the status of “*treasured nation*,” that is, a beloved and precious treasure in G-d's eyes.

Based on this, we can arrange all three of the matching sets of mutual commitments – Hashem's and ours – as follows:

1. Keeping G-d's covenant (the Torah's commandments) grants us the status of “*treasured nation*.”
2. Adhering to the word of G-d via His prophets will bring success that will attract the Gentiles' admiration.
3. Walking in G-d's path and emulating His attributes will raise us up to be a holy nation unto G-d, leading to deep respect on the part of the nations.



This series represents a gradual ascent from a beloved people, to one that is admired by the nations, and from there, to a “*holy nation unto Hashem.*”

At the same time, Israel’s gradually ascending commitment to Hashem begins with simply keeping the mitzvot, continues with consistent adherence to G-d’s prophets, and ends with our adherence to G-d’s traits and ways.

### ■ Holy Nation

The mitzvah of Tefillin illustrates the three steps. It is mentioned in four passages in the Torah (the four passages that are written in the Tefillin): twice in the context of the Exodus (*Kadesh* and *V’hayah ki y’viacha*), and twice in connection with the obligation to fulfill mitzvot (*Sh’ma* and *V’hayah im Shamo’a*).

In the first stage, the mitzvah of Tefillin is simply a means by which to remember the Exodus:

וְהָיָה לָּךְ לְאוֹת עַל יָדְךָ וּלְזִכְרוֹן בֵּין עֵינֶיךָ...  
כִּי בְיַד חֲזָקָה הוּצָאתָ מִמִּצְרַיִם.

*It shall be for you a sign on your arm  
and a remembrance between your eyes [on your head]...  
that G-d took you out of Egypt with a strong hand.* (Sh’mot 13,9)

In the second stage, we connect daily – via the Name of G-d tied to our arms and heads – with G-d’s word, with strong love and dedication:

וְאָהַבְתָּ אֶת ה' אֱ-לֹהֶיךָ בְּכָל לִבְבְּךָ...  
וְהָיוּ הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה אֲשֶׁר אֲנֹכִי מִצְוֶה הַיּוֹם עַל לִבְבְּךָ...  
וּקְשַׁרְתָּם לְאוֹת עַל יָדְךָ...

*Love Hashem your G-d with all your heart...  
and let these words that  
I command you today be upon your heart...  
and bind them as a sign on your arm...* (D’varim 6,5-8)

And finally, the third stage: the mitzvah of Tefillin raises us to maximal emulation of Hashem in all His ways, as in “*to walk in His ways and to cling to Him*” (D’varim 11,22). The Torah alludes to this third stage as follows:

וְרָאוּ כָּל עַמֵּי הָאָרֶץ כִּי שֵׁם ה' נִקְרָא עָלֶיךָ וַיִּרְאוּ מִמֶּךָ.  
*The nations of the land will all see that  
G-d’s Name is proclaimed upon you,  
and they will fear you.* (28,10)



This is referring to the Tefillin worn on the head, as R. Eliezer HaGadol teaches in the Gemara (B'rachot 6a). At this high level, Israel itself becomes the infinite Crown of the Creator – the Tefillin of the Master of the World, as the Gemara there states. This high level can only be manifest in the Land of Israel, dwelling-place of the Divine Presence.

This leads us to the reason for the following admonition:

בְּנִים אַתֶּם לַה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם,  
 לֹא תִתְגַּדְדוּ, וְלֹא תִשְׂיִמוּ קַרְחָה בֵּין עֵינֵיכֶם לְמֵת.  
 כִּי עַם קְדוֹשׁ אַתֶּה לַה' אֱלֹהֵיךָ...

*You are sons unto the Lord your G-d.  
 Do not cut yourselves or make a bald spot between  
 your eyes for the dead.  
 for you are a holy nation unto your G-d... (D'varim 14,1-2)*

It was the custom of the Gentile nations to pull out their hair as a sign of mourning over the loss of their loved ones. They felt that death was a total end, the beginning of nothingness. In total contrast to this, the Nation of Israel knows that the soul is forever, and is bound up with and sanctified to the living and eternal G-d. This is why the Torah forbids us to uproot our hair in mourning.

Thus, the very place on the head that the Gentiles displayed their belief in nothingness - above the middle of the forehead - that is the very same spot at which we display our bonds with the living G-d. For that is precisely where we place our Tefillin, in which is written the Name of G-d Who protects us. The Tefillin help link us to the world of eternal life, even as we live our earthly lives – and this is the level of a Holy Nation, described as follows:

וְאַתֶּם הַדְּבָקִים בִּה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם חַיִּים כָּלְכֶם הַיּוֹם.  
*And you who cleave to Hashem your G-d,  
 all live today. (D'varim 4,4)*

### ■ The Haftarah: Speeding Up the Redemption

Following the Three Weeks of Mourning over Jerusalem's destruction, which culminate with Tisha B'Av, we read seven weekly Haftarot known as the Seven Passages of Consolation. One of them is the Haftarah for Parashat Ki Tavo, which deals with the light of redemption that is to shine upon Zion:



קוּמִי אֲרִי כִּי בָא אֲרִיךְ וּכְבוֹד ה' עָלֶיךָ זָרַח.  
*Arise, shine, for your light has come,  
 and the glory of G-d has shone upon you.* (Yeshayahu 60,1)

Addressing Zion and Jerusalem, the Prophet is saying that the time has come for Zion to shine its own light. But this will happen only when the great Divine Light, not that of the sun or the moon, shines upon Zion. As the Haftarah continues:

לֹא יִהְיֶה לָךְ עוֹד הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ לְאֹר יוֹמָם וּלְנֶגַהּ הַיָּרֵחַ לַאֲרִי לָךְ,  
 וְהָיָה לָךְ ה' לְאֹר עוֹלָם...  
*The sun will no longer provide you light by day,  
 and the moon will no longer illuminate for you;  
 Hashem will be your everlasting light...* (verse 19)

When, finally, the wondrous light of Zion shines brightly, it will carry along with it the souls of the Jews exiled around the world, who will feel themselves powerfully drawn to make Aliyah to their Land. This shining light will magically gather up all of those souls, one by one wherever they are, and lead them to Eretz Yisrael. As we read in the Haftarah:

שְׂאֵי סָבִיב עֵינֶיךָ וּרְאֵי כָלֶם נִקְבְּצוּ בְּאוֹ לָךְ,  
 בְּנֵיךָ מֵרְחוֹק יָבִאוּ, וּבְנוֹתֶיךָ עַל צַד תֵּאֱמָנָה.  
*Lift your eyes around and see,  
 all of them have gathered and are coming to you,  
 your sons have come from far,  
 and your daughters will be carried.* (verse 4)

At that time, when the hidden light of Zion shines, it will bring about wondrous changes in all areas of life. The strength of its illumination upon Bnei Yisrael will light up even those who until then had been in the dark:

וְעַמְּךָ כָּלֶם צְדִיקִים לְעוֹלָם יִרְשׁוּ אֶרֶץ...  
*Your people are all righteous,  
 they will inherit the earth forever...* (verse 21)

The entire Nation of Israel will become tzaddikim, righteous people, who will have the right to inherit the Land of Israel forever. Israel's tremendous hidden potential will be manifest in practice, and everything having to do with the Land and the Nation will be raised up to a higher level. Everything that was ever taken from the Nation of Israel over the generations will be returned and restored to us many times over, in quality and quantity. As the Haftarah says:



תַּחַת הַנְּחֹשֶׁת אָבִיא זָהָב, וְתַחַת הַבְּרָזֶל אָבִיא כֶּסֶף...  
*In place of brass, I will bring gold; in place of metal,  
I will bring silver...* (verse 17)

We will also once again grow and multiply in tremendous proportions, and the Nation of Israel that had become so tiny will once again miraculously flower and increase:

הַקָּטָן יִהְיֶה לְאֶלֶף, וְהַצָּעִיר לְגוֹי עָצוּם...  
*The little one will increase one thousand-fold,  
and the young one will become  
a tremendous nation.* (verse 22)

And in the wake of this amazing illumination, the Redemption, too, will be hurried, as the Haftarah concludes:

אֲנִי ה' בְּעֵתָהּ אַחֲיִשְׁנָהּ.  
*I am G-d: in its set time, I will hasten it.* (verse 22)

Though it was to have waited for “*its set time*,” it will be replaced by a Redemption that will occur quickly and immediately. G-d will advance and hasten the “*set time*” of the coming of the Redemption, and turn it into “*I will hasten it*,” may it come speedily in our times, Amen!

