

A Muse: Lech Lecha

“And he said ‘O Lord God how shall I know that I am to possess it? He answered bring me a three year old heifer, a three year old she goat, a three year old ram a turtle dove and a young bird.’ He brought Him all these and cut them into two, placing each half opposite the other, but he did not cut up the bird...” (Genesis 15: 8-10)

Hitherto we have understood Avraham to be a believer, a man of faith, not asking God for signs and proofs of His intentions, so why does he now ask God for a sign or proof? Prior to the Covenant of the Pieces Avraham sees himself in a unique and personal relationship with God and understands this relationship to be contractual. Whatever God demands of him he will do, and by so doing God will be true to Avraham. All Avraham has to do is live up to his side of the contract. However with the onset of the Covenant of the Pieces the relationship is no longer between God and Avraham, but also added into the equation is the progeny of Avraham. While Avraham can assure his own loyalty how can he assure the fealty of those who haven't even been born yet? It's at this intersection that the relationship has changed. It is no longer defined as a contractual relationship but rather a covenantal relationship.

This covenant focuses on our national roots as a people, as a nation. All those who emanate from Avraham are to be considered on family, one extended family evolving into a tribe and ultimately into nationhood. The Covenant of Pieces is buttressed with another covenant that made at Horeb, at Sinai, but its dimension is spiritual/religious. The Covenant at Sinai places flesh on the structure effected through the Covenant of the Pieces, in that we are bound to each other as a people even when not in Israel, even when there was no Israel.

The question that has evolved over the centuries is which of these two covenants are more central to the Jewish people and has been debated by some of the greats. Harav Avraham Isaac Hacoen Kook and Harav Joseph Ber Soloveitchik represent two of the greatest 20th century minds to grapple with this issue.

Soloveitchik believes that the Covenant made with Avraham is our destiny, with no choice left to the individual, the Brit Milah symbolizing this. If the Covenant of Avraham is our destiny then the Covenant at Sinai is our choice, and thus the central one. We accept it upon ourselves and by doing so we become “bnei mitzvah”, thus altering destiny into challenges and purposefulness. Kook, on the other hand believes that the central covenant is the Covenant of Avraham. This is the internal covenant and can't be broken. The covenant at Sinai being external can be broken.

These two positions reflect the classic difference of opinion between Maimonides and Yehuda Halevi, which will be presented later.