



RABBI AARON

Editor, Torah Tidbits

GOLDSCHIEDER

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik: *Brit Avot* and *Brit Sinai*

One of Rabbi Soloveitchik's most profound teachings addressed the critical question of what qualifies a Jew to be counted among the nation of Israel.

The Rav identified two epic events in the Torah which help answer this question. He employed two terms - *Brit Avot* and *Brit Sinai* - to describe two distinct junctures in the emergence of the Jewish people.

Brit Avot: In the story of Avraham, the first Jew, we are introduced to the notion of *brit* in three places: *Brit Mila* (*Bereshit* 17:9-10), *Brit Ben Habetarim* (*Bereshit* 15:1-21), and a *Brit* associated with the Land of Israel (*Bereshit* 17:7).

The Rav taught that *Brit Avot* constitutes the unique relationship that the Jew maintains with one another and with God. It represents a distinct fate or historical path that the nation of Israel will travel and, oftentimes, endure, together. It should be noted that *Brit Avot* is also unique in that "it does not tell a Jew what to do (i.e. observe mitzvot) but rather how to feel and what to aspire to and long for." (Man

of Faith in the Modern World, p. 68).

Brit Sinai: In contrast to *Brit Avot*, *Brit Sinai* is characterized by a clear and straightforward mandate. The Jewish people individually and collectively committed themselves and all future generations to the observance of the Commandments, taryag mitzvot, to which no other people was obligated. This notion is stated in unambiguous terms: "Not with you alone do I seal this covenant (*brit*)...and with whoever is not here with us today" (Devarim 29:13-14). A Jew and Jewish peoplehood is anchored in the commitment to Torah and mitzvot. (*Ibid.*, p. 66) Twice in the description of *Matan Torah* the term *brit* is employed (*Shemot* 24:7-8)

Expanding on this same theme the Rav took note of two similar terms which are employed to describe the communities that appear identical but have profoundly different meanings. A verse in the Torah that is easily passed over, the Rav took pause and noticed a glaring question.

"The Lord spoke to Moshe, saying: 'Make two trumpets of silver; make them of hammered work. They shall serve you to summon the congregation [*edah*], and cause the camps [*machanot*] to journey'" (*Bamidbar* 10:1-2). This simple passage became a springboard for a deep teaching of the Rav. Namely, *Machaneh*, is a group or society that is formed when individuals face a common enemy. They band together for mutual protection, knowing that only

by doing so can they survive. This kind of comraderie is not very different from the way animals herd together to defend themselves against predators.

However, there is quite a different form of association. People come together because they share a particular vision, aspiration, and a set of ideals. This is the meaning of *edah*, a congregation. *Edah* is related to the word “*ed*,” witness. *Edot* (as opposed to *chukim* and *mishpatim*) are the commands that testify to Jewish belief - as Shabbat testifies to creation, Pesach to the divine involvement in history, and so on. *Edah* represents a society built around a shared project and a vision.

The story of Patriarchs and Matriarchs, their family, and their descent to Egypt is paradigmatic of the *Machane* experience. They suffered together. There was a palpable sense that they were part of a single story. They were bound together in this shared experience. The Rav cited the verse from the Scroll of Esther that spotlights the notion that every Jew is intertwined with the fate of the nation: “Do not think that you, of all Jews, will escape with your life by being in the king’s palace” (Esther 4:13). (The Covenant of Faith and Destiny, Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, JewishPress.com, June 4, 2015)

A religious Jew places strong emphasis on *Brit Sinai* and the fact that we define our community as an *Edah*. However, the fact that the roots of our peoplehood are to be found in *Brit Avot* and that we also possess the character trait of *machane*, should give rise to a powerful sense that every Jew, no matter one’s level of commitment, is part of a single story. In a word, what we have in common

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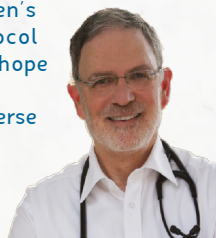
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is stronger than the things that separate us.

The Rav identified four areas of Jewish life that emerge from the fact that we recognize the *Brit Avot* (Majesty and Humility, Zielgler p. 284-285):

No matter the social station or land of residence, we as Jews share a common history and fate; all will rise and fall together.

Since we share a common circumstance, we must share in one another's suffering as well. Wherever in the world a Jew is in pain a fellow Jew feels their pain.

Feeling another's suffering means that there is shared responsibility. This idea is plainly seen in the Halachic principle - "All Jews are guarantors for one another" (*Shevuot* 39a).

Finally, the charity and aid that we offer others in need is given not only as a fulfillment of requirement but from a sense of compassion and connection.

In sum, the Rav posited there are two components of Jewish identity. Both facets play an integral role regarding our relationship to our fellow Jew and speak to the very nature of what is required to live an authentic Jewish life.

The Rav applied the above teaching when called on to clarify the Orthodox communities' stance regarding participating with the other movements in the U.S. Jewish landscape. In 1956, in an article that appeared in a prominent Jewish newspaper (*Tog Morgen Journal*) the Rav set guidelines. He applied the two principles established above of *Macheneh* and *Edah*: "When we are faced with a problem for Jews and Jewish interests toward the world without, regarding the defense of Jewish rights in the non-Jewish world, then all groups and

movements must be united. In this area, there may not be division, because any friction in the Jewish camp may be disastrous for the entire people...With regard to our problem within [the Jewish community], however, - our spiritual-religious interests such as Jewish education, synagogues, council of rabbis - whereby unity is expressed through spiritual-ideological collectivism as a Torah community, it is my opinion that orthodoxy cannot and should not unite with such groups which deny the fundamentals of our *weltanschauung* (Community, Covenant and Commitment, pp. 144-145).

Brit Avot's Bond with the Land

The first Rashi on the Torah famously asks why the Almighty did not opt to begin His Torah enumerating the mitzvot. Perhaps, if we rephrase Rashi's question slightly, the issue is why *Brit Avot* is necessary to recount; is not *Brit Sinai* the defining character of Jewishness and the nation of Israel? Rashi's well known answer is quite important for this discussion. Rashi says that the opening chapters of the story establish a foundational principle that, to some degree, stands separate from the commandments. Namely, the promise of the Land of Israel to the Jew. (See Rav Dr. Judah Goldberg, *Components of Berit Avot*, VBM)

A trusted student of the Rav, Rabbi Walter Wurzberger understood his teacher to be expressing the notion that *Brit Avot* 'acknowledges the unique and preeminent position of the Land of Israel as the central arena for the fulfillment of Jewish destiny.' (*Ethics of Responsibility*, Wurzberger, p. 15)

The Rav hammered home this very point

in a memorable addresses to the Mizrahi movement:

“The Jew who lives in Eretz Yisrael is endowed with two sanctities: the sanctity of Abraham (Brit Avot) and the sanctity of Sinai (Brit Sinai); while one living abroad must be satisfied of that of Sinai alone, since he lacks the sanctity of Abraham which is indivisibly bound up with the Land.” (Five Addresses, p. 143)

The Rav brilliantly elucidated a Talmudic statement that is seemingly very troubling. “The Rabbis taught in a Baraita: a person should ever dwell in Eretz Yisrael even in a city with a majority of non-Jews, but not outside Eretz Yisrael even in a city with a Jewish majority, since one who lives in Eretz Yisrael is as if he has a God, and whoever lives outside Eretz Yisrael is as if he does not have a God” (Ketubot 110b). The question is obvious: How could the Talmud assert that living outside of Israel is like living bereft of God?

The Rav draws our attention to another statement that makes an identical claim, however, the proof-text that is cited in this passage offers the key to understanding this challenging statement. In the Tosefta (Avodah Zarah Chapter 5) it quotes the verse which describes Yaakov’s unfailing efforts to return home, “So that I come back to father’s house in peace” (Bereshit 28:21).

In the Tosefta the verse cited emphasizes the fact that the Jew’s relationship is rooted in Brit Avot, and the Land in particular. The forefathers resided in the Land and they were promised by the Almighty that this was where their descendants would also make their homes. The sharp statement made in the Talmud which states that

living outside Israel is compared to being disconnected from God, refers specifically to a Jew distancing himself from Brit Avot. The Jew who fulfills all the mitzvot is loyal to Brit Sinai but if he chooses to live outside the Land of Israel, willy nilly, compromises their fealty to the unique Brit Avot. (The Rav Speaks, pp. 140-143)

The Torah, in the infamous words of the tochacha, speaks of a future time of destruction and suffering within the nation of Israel. And yet, even within the curses, the Torah conveys words of solace. It harkens back to Brit Avot that remains in tact: “I will remember My covenant (briti) with Yaakov and also My covenant with Yitzchak, and also My covenant with Abraham will I remember, and I will remember the Land” (Vayikra 26:42).

Rabbi Yaakov Moshe Charlop explained this verse to mean that even if the Jewish people reach the lowest rung when they no longer are characterized by the traits of the Avot, the people’s attachment to the Land will be a merit and with that the people of Israel will be lifted by the Almighty and be forgiven (Mei Marom, Vayikra 26:42). The Rav expressed a somewhat different perspective and explained that the Torah is saying that although Jews may stray from a religious life, the Land of Israel will inevitably remind him of his connection to his roots and his people. Ultimately this fact will awaken the Jew to fully return to a committed Jewish life. ■

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