



RABBI SHALOM ROSNER

Rav Kehilla, Ohel Ephraim in Nofei HaShemesh

Maggid Shiur, Daf Yomi, OU.org

Rosh Bais Medrash English Speaking Program JCT Machon Lev

How is Brit Truly Defined?

Rabbi Norman Lamm¹ delivered a remarkable drasha on Shabbat Lech Lecha in October 1960, and over sixty-five years later, his message remains remarkably relevant.

Rabbi Lamm begins with a striking observation: our parsha contains two britot, two covenants between Hashem and Avraham. The first is Brit Bein HaBetarim, the Covenant Between the Pieces. The second is Brit Milah, the covenant of circumcision. Why does the Torah describe both of these experiences as a brit? Rabbi Lamm suggests that the answer takes us to the very heart of what it means to be Jewish.

WHAT IS A BRIT?

The word brit implies a relationship between God and man. It is a relationship of mutuality, dialogue, and connection. If God is merely an abstract idea or philosophical principle, it is almost meaningless to speak about a brit. A covenant requires a relationship

with a living being. Rabbi Lamm points out that the very idea of religion implies a bond or a connection that brings two parties together. The essence of Judaism, therefore, is not simply believing certain things about God. It is entering into a relationship with Him. But what kind of relationship is it?

Rabbi Lamm offers three possibilities.

1. BRIT IS NOT BARTER

The first possibility is barter. This is a religious quid pro quo: "I will do something for You, God, if You do something for me." "I'll give charity; You take care of my investment portfolio." "I'll fast on Yom Kippur; You give me good health." "I'll say Yizkor; You take care of my family." That is not a covenant. It is a transaction. The problem with this approach is that it turns Judaism into a form of spiritual commerce. We perform mitzvot because we expect something in return. This is a distortion of the very concept of brit.

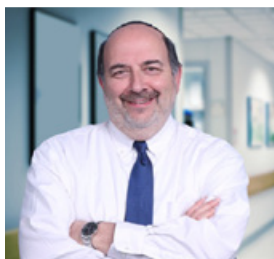
2. BRIT IS NOT MERELY A CONTRACT

The second possibility is more sophisticated. Perhaps brit means an ongoing contract. I don't serve Hashem only when I need something. I understand that there is an ongoing relationship. I follow the Torah, and Hashem rewards me. I violate the Torah, and I am punished. Certainly, Judaism believes in skhar va'onesh, reward and punishment.

Reward and punishment are part of Judaism, but they are not the essence of Judaism. Hazal make this point in Pirkei Avot: אֵל תְּהִי

1. Rabbi Norman Lamm, Drashot L'Dorot

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פְּרָס - בְּעֶבְדִּים הַמְשִׁמְשִׁין אֶת הָרֵב עַל מִנַּת לְקַבֵּל פְּרָס - Do not be like servants who serve their master in order to receive a reward.² The contract model is certainly better than barter, but it is still not the highest conception of our relationship with Hashem.

3. BRIT MEANS COVENANT

The highest conception is covenant. A covenant is fundamentally different from a transaction or a contract. A transaction says: I give something to you, and you give something to me. A contract says: We have obligations to one another. A covenant says: We belong to one another. That is a radically different relationship. Rabbi Lamm turns to the two britot in our parsha to explain exactly what this means.

BRIT BEIN HABETARIM: WE ARE BOUND TOGETHER

At the Brit Bein HaBetarim, Avraham takes animals and divides them into two. Why? As Rabbi Yosef Albo, in the *Sefer HaIkkarim*, explains, the symbolism of this brit is profound. A living organism is a unified whole. When it is divided into two, each half can no longer exist independently. The two halves therefore symbolize the two parties to a covenant: they have become bound together in an inseparable relationship. That is the first dimension of brit: Closeness. God and Israel are not two unrelated entities. We are bound to Hashem, and Hashem has chosen to enter into a relationship with us.

Hashem does not need us in any physical sense. Yet, He has chosen to make humanity part of the purpose of creation. He has chosen to relate to us, command us, communicate with us, and give us a role in bringing His

2. Pirke Avot 1:3

presence into the world. That is what makes the relationship so extraordinary. Hashem is not merely above us. He is, so to speak, with us. The Torah therefore speaks of Elokeinu - "our God." Rabbi Lamm notes that the possessive language itself expresses intimacy. This is not merely *God*. It is our God. He is the God of Avraham. He is the God who enters into a brit. That means that Judaism is not merely about knowing that God exists. It is about knowing that God is here.

BRIT MILAH:

THE RELATIONSHIP IS FOREVER

There is another dimension of brit. The Brit Milah teaches us that the relationship is not only intimate; it is permanent. The Torah calls circumcision: **אוֹת בְּרִית** - "A sign of the covenant."³

The sign is placed permanently upon the body. It cannot simply be removed when it becomes

inconvenient. It is indelible and irrevocable. That is precisely the message of Brit Milah: Our relationship with Hashem is not temporary. We do not enter the covenant when we happen to feel inspired and leave it when we no longer feel inspired. We do not get to say, "This part of Judaism speaks to me, but that part doesn't." We do not renegotiate the

3. Bereshit 17:11



Rabbi Norman Lamm z"l

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covenant every generation. That is the power of the covenant: it connects us not only to Hashem, but to generations before us and generations after us.

A THIRD DIMENSION: THE BRIT WITH ONE ANOTHER

Rabbi Lamm introduces a third dimension of brit that is perhaps the most important one for us today. The covenant does not bind us only to Hashem. It also binds us to one another. Hashem tells Avraham: וְאֶתְּךָ לְגוֹי גָּדוֹל. And I will make you into a great nation.⁴ We are not merely individuals who happen to share a religion. We are a people. If I am part of the brit, then another Jew is not simply another person. We are members of the same covenant. That means that the brit creates three relationships:

- A relationship with Hashem.
- A relationship with our heritage.
- A relationship with one another.

Perhaps this is the deeper message of the two britot in Lech Lecha. **Brit Bein HaBetarim** teaches us that the relationship is one of closeness. **Brit Milah** teaches us that the relationship is permanent. The broader covenant of Avraham teaches us that we are bound together as a people.

WE ARE PEOPLE OF THE BRIT

There is something very powerful about the fact that a brit is not a feeling. Feelings come and go. There are days when we feel inspired, and days when we don't. There are moments when our emunah feels strong, and moments when we struggle. But a brit is deeper than a feeling.

A brit says: Even when I don't feel it, I belong. That may be one of the greatest gifts Judaism gives us. We are not asked to reinvent

our Judaism every morning. We wake up already part of a story. We are connected to Avraham and Sarah, to Yitzchak and Rivkah, to Yaakov and Rachel and Leah. We are connected to generations who carried the Torah through prosperity and persecution, through joy and tragedy. Now the covenant is in our hands. The question is not simply whether we believe in the brit. The question is: What are we going to do with it? Will we pass it on? Will we make our children feel that Judaism is not merely an obligation but a privilege? Will we make them feel that being Jewish means belonging to something eternal? Will we treat other Jews as members of our own family? Most importantly, will our lives communicate that Hashem is not an abstract idea somewhere in heaven, but our God -Elokeinu -whose presence accompanies us here and now?

That is the challenge of the brit. It is not a bargain. It is not merely a contract. It is belonging. Perhaps that is the most beautiful way to understand what it means to be a Jew: I am not simply someone who believes in God. I am someone who is in a brit with God. A brit means that I am never truly alone. I belong to Hashem. I belong to my people. I belong to a past that I did not create, and I carry a responsibility for a future that I will not live to see. That is what it means to be a ben brit - a child of the covenant. It is a responsibility, but it is also an extraordinary privilege. ■

4. Bereshit 12:2

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