

**B'rit: The covenants that bind us**

*Hinei ani kuli shelcha*

*'aseh bi kirtzoncha*

HERE I AM, COMPLETELY YOURS.

DO WITH ME AS YOU WILL.

This song, written by Israeli musician Shye ben Tzur, is a mystical description of the idea of *b'rit*, the word that describes our relationship with God. But what is this *b'rit*? *B'rit* is often translated as “covenant,” a translation I find unsatisfying because the word “covenant” is used so infrequently that we don’t really have a good sense of its meaning either. So I prefer to translate *b'rit* with a word like “deal” or “contract.” *B'rit* is the deal we make with God, the contract between us that obligates both us and God in certain ways. But even using more familiar words, this concept of *b'rit* is still hard to understand. How can we have a contract with an unseeable, unknowable divine force? When did we enter into this contract? How is it enforced? Who are its guarantors? And why should we abide by its terms, whatever they are? I’m sure the lawyers among us could come up with a lot more questions about what kind of contract this *b'rit* could possibly be. In fact, given the possibility of infinite exposure to the demands of an all-powerful deity, they might advise us to avoid this kind of contract entirely!

Tonight I want to explore with you the meaning of the *b'rit* between us and God by using analogies, just as the authors of the prayers we’ve been saying tonight used analogies to help us explore the meaning of God. To help us understand why we would take on obligations to God and what that might look like, we’ll consider the kinds of obligations we take on to other human beings. We’ll think about how and why we find these obligations compelling, why we take them on, and how they might relate—even imperfectly—to the much more difficult concept of a *b'rit* with God. And we’re going to start at the very beginning.

***B'rit Avot v'Imahot***

The first and most basic *b'rit* we experience in our lives is embedded in our relationship with our parents, *b'rit avot v'imahot*. As children, we depend on parents for food, clothing, and shelter—for our very survival. More than that, we depend on them to create a safe social world in which we begin to learn about ourselves and to develop relationships with others, and parents are the very first and most formative of those relationships. For good or for ill, our parents play a powerful role in shaping us into the people we will become, and their influence is so great that we can spend our lives unpacking how they have left their imprint on us. The importance of the bond between parent and child is thrown into sharp relief when that crucial relationship goes awry, when parents fail to give children the emotional stability and safety that they need to develop, when they fail to protect them from the harshness of the world, and even when they, horribly, replace the love that is children’s birthright with hatred, violence, or abuse. The consequences, we know, can be tragic. Even American law, so reluctant to intervene in individual choice, does take steps, when necessary, to protect children from their

parents. As a society, we recognize that children are uniquely vulnerable and dependent on adults, and that society has a great interest in the welfare of the children who will chart its future.

Those of us who have been parents of or cared for small children know how from the very earliest moments, the love we feel for these tiny creature pushes into our hearts with a force that can be overwhelming. We find ourselves suddenly transformed into advocates, defenders, caretakers, playmates, teachers, and more, all in the service of the child who depends only on us. I remember when our first child was born after many sleepless nights of labor. Sometime after midnight, his bassinet was rolled into our room, and the nurse left. Exhausted, Cheryl and I looked at each other with the same thought: “Oh my God. We have a baby!” You’d think the nine months of pregnancy would have prepared us. The awe-inspiring joy and awesome responsibility of parenthood suddenly became real to us there in the delivery room, and it has never let us go. When I turned 40, with 3 children under 11, I asked my mother, mother of 4 adults and grandmother of 7: When does the anxiety, the worry, the constant desire to help and to protect, when does it end? My mother laughed. She knows from long experience that there is no end to the thread that connects us; the bonds between parents and children are eternal.

Jewish tradition reinforces these bonds we feel in our hearts with a series of obligations, *mitzvot* that are incumbent on parents with regard to their children. At the core of each of these is a principle that we might call enforced selflessness, the recognition that being responsible for a child displaces us from the center of our universe, forcing us to put another’s welfare ahead of our own. The Talmud famously enumerates parental responsibilities to include rearing children and teaching them three things: to acquire a trade, to study Torah, and to swim.<sup>1</sup> Notably, these responsibilities follow the child through different stages of life, from infancy through adolescence to early adulthood, and they cover physical development, intellectual and moral education, and practical knowledge about how to survive. The Talmud is teaching us what we, in our family, have been learning for some time: the obligations of parents toward children are different at each stage of the child’s life, as we move from caretakers to guardians to teachers to coaches, constantly taking small steps backward as our children step forward into their independence and competence. The *b’rit* between us and our children keeps changing and morphing in different circumstances, but its basic terms remain the same. The mandate for parents and caretakers to provide emotional stability, loving attention, moral education, intellectual engagement, and deep respect for the children in their care remains constant.

As I said at the beginning, the whole idea of *b’rit* is that it has two sides, both obligated to each other. The Talmud sees the obligations of children toward their parents mostly as the story of adult children and their aging parents. The rabbis note that the Torah commands us to

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<sup>1</sup> Babylonian Talmud Kiddushin 29a.

“respect your mother and your father”<sup>2</sup> and to “honor your father and your mother,”<sup>3</sup> but, they ask, what do those terms really mean?

The Sages taught: What [does it mean to] fear [one’s parents] and what [does it mean to] honor [them]? Fear [means] that one may not stand in their place, may not sit in their place, and may not contradict their statements or choose sides [when they are arguing with someone else]. Honor [means] that one gives [them] food and drink, dresses and covers [them, and] brings them in and takes them out [for all of their needs].<sup>4</sup>

The obligations of adult children are, on the one hand, to treat their aged parents with deference and respect, and, on the other hand, to provide for their parents’ bodily needs. Just from my personal experience as the child of parents in their late 80’s, let me be the first to say that this can be an immense challenge. As Cheryl wisely said to me many years ago, “If it were easy, they wouldn’t have had to make it a commandment!” Relationships between parents and children are complex, and there are all sorts of reasons why children may find it difficult to respect and provide for their aging parents, sometimes including old wounds and long-ago parental failures to hold up their end of the bargain. But this is the crux of the idea that these are obligations, not choices. We don’t do these things because we always want to do them, and many times we may not want to. We do them because they are right, because they balance out in some small way the fact that our parents brought us into being and, most often, nurtured us and provided for us when we couldn’t do so for ourselves. By fulfilling these mitzvot toward them, we right the scales just a little bit. Perhaps even more importantly, we provide a model to our children and the children of our community about how to treat the aged, which will benefit us as we, Gd-willing, step into the role of elders ourselves. This is, ideally, how *b’rit* works: the obligations we fulfill for each other create ripples of positive side-effects that redound to our benefit and to the benefit of the community in which we live.

### ***B’rit K’hilah***

The second model of *b’rit* with which we are familiar involves what we might call “relationships of choice,” the obligations we take on to people outside of our families of origin to whom we choose to connect. These relationships can be some of the most intense and powerful of our lives, from the closeness of friends, to the love between spouses or life partners, to the strong attachments that we form to members of the communities in which we choose to live. Of course these relationships are all different in type, scope, and intensity, but they share the quality that we choose them, invest our time and emotional energy in them, and end up dependent on them for our emotional and spiritual well-being. They also all require mutual obligations between the partners, obligations that tend to be much more equivalent

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<sup>2</sup> Leviticus 19:3.

<sup>3</sup> Exodus 20:12.

<sup>4</sup> Babylonian Talmud Kiddushin 31b.

and strictly reciprocal than in the *b'rit* between parents and children. In addition, because these are relationships of choice, they are always at risk of dissolving if the partners do not shoulder their obligations; these relationships are conditional in a way that parent-child relationships are not. If the partners carry out their obligations to each other, the relationship survives; if they do not, it dies, and we are all familiar with close relationships in our lives that have withered due to lack of attention or care from one or both of the partners.

Outside of the laws of marriage and divorce, which are fairly limited in scope, American law does very little to regulate or protect these close relationships between equals, even though they are the backbone of our lives, the core of our social experience. Jewish law holds a more detailed and nuanced view of these relationships and the rewards and obligations they involve, built on the model of friendship, which the ancient rabbis value highly. But in what does friendship consist, and how and why should one “acquire a friend?”<sup>5</sup> An ancient commentary on Pirkei Avot answers:

A human being should acquire a friend for themselves with whom to eat, to drink, to study Scripture and debate Mishnah, to sleep, and to reveal all their secrets, secrets of Torah and secrets of worldly things. And when they sit and engage in Torah together and one of them errs in [understanding] the law or [the meaning of] a text, or one says that something impure is pure or something pure is impure, or that something forbidden is permitted or something permitted is forbidden, their friend will bring them back [from their misunderstanding]. And from where do we know that if their friend brings them back and studies with them, they will receive a reward for their labor? As it is written [in Ecclesiastes 4:9], “Two are better than one, for they have a good reward for their labor.”<sup>6</sup>

This beautiful description of friendship covers far more than the material companionship and protection that the source text in Ecclesiastes suggests.<sup>7</sup> A friend is someone to share the spiritual quest of our lives, to search with together for the deeper meanings hidden in Torah and in the world, and to reveal oneself to, even the half-formed thoughts and tentative

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<sup>5</sup> Pirkei Avot 1:6.

<sup>6</sup> Avot d’Rabbi Natan 8:3.

<sup>7</sup> Ecclesiastes 4:7-12: “And I have noted this further futility under the sun: the case of one who is alone, with no companion, who has neither child nor sibling, yet who amasses wealth without limit, and their eye is never sated with riches. [They ask,] “For whom, now, am I amassing [this wealth] while denying myself enjoyment?!” That, too, is a futility and an unhappy business. Two are better than one, for they have a good reward for their labor. For should they fall, one can raise the other; but woe to one who is alone and falls with no companion to raise them! Further, when two lie together they are warm; but how can one who is alone get warm? Also, if a third person attacks, two can stand up against them, and a threefold cord is not readily broken!”

understandings that we may hide from strangers. A friend is a safe harbor in a turbulent world, someone who can return us to the way when we have lost it, someone who can bring us back to ourselves.

The rewards of this deep sharing and support do not come without costs, and some have suggested that the very fact that the Mishnah uses the word “acquire” in relation to a friend suggests that we must give something in exchange for all that this kind of relationship brings us. Clearly, these relationships require trust and openness, but we know that when we reveal ourselves to another, when we tie our hearts to someone else, we give up some degree of independence, safety, and security. We open ourselves up to the possibility of betrayal, pain, and loss, a risk that we must balance against the richness that being so connected to another person can bring into our lives. What’s more, such deep relationships can require very real sacrifices, both small and large. We can see this in the paradigm of friendship in the Hebrew Bible, the close relationship between Jonathan, son of King Saul, and David, who we know will become the next king.<sup>8</sup> Out of love for his friend, Jonathan sides with David against Saul, even though he knows that he is giving up his own chance to become king. Eventually, Jonathan loses his life, and David cries out, “How the mighty have fallen!”<sup>9</sup> as he mourns the loss of the person who was so close to him that their souls were “knit together,”<sup>10</sup> impossible to part.

Despite the risks of pain and loss inherent in these relationships of choice, we enter into them again and again, willingly taking on ourselves the obligations of partnership, of friendship, and of community, because they have such potential to enrich our experience of the world. Fulfilling our obligations to those we have chosen to share our lives with us, and experiencing them fulfilling their obligations to us, fills us with satisfaction, security, and love. Our time on this earth would just not be the same without it.

### ***B’rit Gerim***

Beyond the bonds between parents and children, beyond our relationships with those we choose, there is a third kind of *b’rit* that we enter into and experience every day in the relationships we have with those tied to us by neither family nor choice. This the *b’rit gerim*, the covenant of strangers, the connections we create with those whom we do not know, those who may be very different from us. Every time we leave our homes, in every interaction that we have in a public place or when we travel the streets of our city, we depend on strangers to act in predictable ways, to abide by written and unwritten rules in their dealings with us for our mutual benefit. In commercial interactions, we depend on strangers treating us fairly, not misrepresenting themselves or the transaction, not trying to cheat or mislead us. In public social interactions, we depend on strangers acting with good will, making room for us, sharing

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<sup>8</sup> This story takes up almost half of the Book of I Samuel, chapters 18-31.

<sup>9</sup> II Samuel 1:27.

<sup>10</sup> I Samuel 18:1.

the civil sphere in which we all operate with generosity and care. And when we travel, on roads and highways, in cars and trains and airplanes, we depend on thousands of strangers to obey the rules and regulations that allow for so many people to travel so quickly and so far simultaneously. Every day, in so many ways, we place our lives in the hands of strangers.

To one way of thinking, American law has much to say about the interactions of strangers, with thousands of regulations designed to set boundaries around commercial transactions, transportation, and even public activities like parades and demonstrations. But to another way of thinking, American law does little to address the attitudes that underlie how strangers treat each other, the principles that should govern our engagement. Here, Jewish law is extremely voluble. It begins with the early statement in the Torah that the human being was created in the image of God.<sup>11</sup> The idea that every human bears the imprint of the divine gives us an elevated starting point to approach our relationship with strangers. We continue with the Torah's famous 36-fold repetition of the commandment to shelter, protect, support, and even love the stranger, a strong foundation for our approach to those we don't know. We have object lessons drawn from the story of Abraham, who graciously welcomes the strange angelic visitors to his home,<sup>12</sup> and the story of Hagar—whose name means “the stranger”—who is mistreated by her family but cared for by God.<sup>13</sup> And again and again we hear the justification for why we should treat those we don't know with kindness: “You know the heart of the stranger, for you were strangers in the Land of Egypt.”<sup>14</sup>

It is not easy to trust a stranger. How can we be sure that our trust will be returned by someone we don't know? What guarantee do we have that our safety will not be compromised if we place it in the hands of those who are foreign to us, who do not share the ties of family or community that bind us? Increasingly in this country we hear distrust of strangers, immigrants, and foreigners being expressed in the voices of our fellow citizens and, disturbingly, in the voices of our elected political leaders. We can and do try to combat these voices by referencing the facts, citing statistics that show, for example, that immigrants are far less likely to break our social compact by committing crimes, particularly violent crimes, than native-born citizens. In Jewish communities, we can and do call to people's minds the recent history of Jews in this country, when we were the ones viewed with suspicion and mistrust, we were the strangers, the immigrants, the foreigners whom so many were trying to keep outside the U.S. border, lest we contaminate the citizens within. And too often, our words fall on deaf ears.

But the idea of the *b'rit gerim*, the covenant of strangers, goes far deeper than statistics or recent history. It speaks to the essence of what it means to be citizens of a country, to be

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<sup>11</sup> Genesis 1:27.

<sup>12</sup> Genesis 18:2.

<sup>13</sup> Genesis 16:1-16 and 21:1-20.

<sup>14</sup> Exodus 23:9. The same sentiment is repeated in many other places in Torah, as, for example, in Leviticus 19:34.

human beings in a world full to overflowing with over seven billion people, each carrying the imprint of God. When we fail to take up our obligations to strangers, we undermine our own humanity. The social and moral fabric that holds us together, that makes it possible for us to live together in relative harmony, requires a significant investment in our relationships with those we don't know. We may think that we can just worry about ourselves, that the suffering of others will never touch us, that we can circle the wagons and take care of our own and be ok.<sup>15</sup> But we only have to look around us, at the country in which we live, to see that such thoughts are illusions. The evidence of our failure to fulfill our obligations to our fellow citizens is all around us, in an educational system that routinely provides the most meager resources to the children most in need, an economic system that increasingly divides us into the rich few and the poor many, and a governmental system that consistently does the will of wealthy corporate interests with impunity and puts the will and the welfare and even the very lives of the people last. A society that fails to honor our ties to and dependence on strangers cannot survive. The *b'rit gerim*, the covenant of strangers, is what stands between us and chaos.

### ***Brit ha-Shem***

We've talked about how three different kinds of *b'rit* place obligations on us: *B'rit Avot v'Imahot*, the covenant between parents and children; *B'rit Kehilah*, the covenant with those with whom we choose share our lives; and *B'rit Gerim*, the covenant of strangers. How do these help us understand the idea of a *b'rit* with God, *B'rit ha-Shem*? One insight is that aspects of these relationships find parallels in our bond with the ultimate power of the universe. We speak of God as a parent who is our origin, a companion who walks the way with us, and an unseen force on whom we depend even though it is strange and all but unknown to us. The covenants we make with other people, these webs of obligation, are, themselves, part and parcel of our *b'rit* with God. So much of how we fulfill our obligations to God depends on how we fulfill our obligations to human beings, God's creatures. The Torah, Talmud, and codes of Jewish law are engaged in a holy discussion about how we treat each other, seeing God's face in the faces of those who travel the earth with us. Even when we are newly born, before we know who we are, even before we have a fully-formed sense of an "I," we begin to learn about our connections to and obligations toward others, and these are the seeds of our connection with God.

A second insight is that all of these covenants with other people can be seen as a training ground. They are meant to teach us to act for others, to move our focus off of ourselves, to feel a sense of obligation to what is outside us. They are like a ladder, a spiritual path that leads upward and outward from discovering the self; to bonding with our family; to connecting with friends, partners, and community; to widening our view to encompass strangers, humanity spanning the globe. Our covenant with God—*b'rit ha-Shem*—includes all

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<sup>15</sup> This attitude is condemned in the Torah itself, as in Deuteronomy 29:18-19: "One may fancy oneself immune, thinking, 'I shall be safe, though I follow my own willful heart'... The Lord will never forgive such a one."

of these, but that's not its sum total. This final *b'rit* takes us one step further on the path, one rung higher up the ladder. Beyond the boundaries of our relationships with and obligations to other people is the power that makes these possible, the source of our existence, the ground of the principles of justice, love, freedom, and compassion that we, at our best, act out in our lives. Our *b'rit* with God encompasses our obligations to those principles, what we owe to the source of our lives, the origin of our ability to act. Since we have a hard time approaching those heady concepts directly, *b'rit ha-Shem* gives us metaphors and moments of ritual to help us stay focused, to keep our obligations before our eyes. This night, this observance of Yom Kippur, is one of those moments. Can we take the next step? Can we renew our allegiance not only to our covenants with other human beings but also to the root of all that is, the driving force of our lives, the source of all principles and laws? Can we accept that *b'rit*?

The sense of obligation that humans feel to any of these different kinds of *b'rit* often seems to be waning in the world. But we are here together tonight to renew it in ourselves. Just as we feel so viscerally the responsibility that we owe to children and to parents, so too must we strive to feel that same sense of responsibility for strangers, those foreign to and different from us but sharing our human capacity to care for each other. And just as we cling to the love of our friends, partners, spouses, and community and take on mutual obligations to support each other, to help each other make it through the turbulent journey of our lives, so too must strive to feel that same sense of mutual obligation to the source of our being, the core of our values, the eternal truths that stretch beyond our short lifetimes and carry our highest thoughts far into the future. May we be blessed to receive and to give, to offer ourselves to each other and to God, to say, "Here I am. I am yours and you are mine. Let us make our way through this world together."

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