

Yom Kippur Morning Sermon 5781

A Nation in Search of Covenant

Rabbi Jonathan Jaffe, Temple Beth El of Northern Westchester

This morning, I would like to speak about the concept of covenant, which was first introduced to the world by the Jewish people some 4,000 years ago. The idea first appears in the book of Genesis, when Abraham, the founder of the Jewish people, enters into a binding relationship with God. Abraham agrees to follow God's commandments and bring his progeny into the fold. In response, God promises to make a nation of Abraham's descendants and bring them to a land which they will call their own. This agreement is marked in blood, which is why you may not realize that you already know how to say covenant in Hebrew: brit, or in its Ashkenazi pronunciation, bris.

The idea of covenant is later expanded in the Book of Exodus, when the freed Israelite slaves make a pact with God at Mt. Sinai, receiving the tablets and the 613 commandments. And finally, the covenant is renewed once again in the book of Deuteronomy, in the section we read just moments ago.

These verses are read to emphasize the fact that each year, we gather at Yom Kippur to renew our covenantal relationship with God and one another. And although we read these words each Yom Kippur, I feel as though they carry a deeper resonance today. Why? Because as our nation struggles to respond to herculean challenges such as COVID-19, racial injustice and climate change, it has become abundantly clear that what our nation lacks most is a sense of covenant. A sense that we are responsible for one another. A sense that I ought to curb my behaviors if they endanger your wellbeing. A sense that what happens to you matters to me. I believe that this is the central challenge of our moment: rebuilding our community's broken sense of covenant.

This fall, in much of the world, a semi-normal state of life has returned, with schools and businesses up and running. Flare ups remain but severe measures are immediately enacted to tamp down the virus that has consumed our world. But this is not so here in the US. Yes, we Americans can point towards a failure of political leadership but we ought keep in mind that our leaders reflect the will of their citizens. We can also point towards the comfort with social distancing and wearing masks developed in much of the Asian continent following SARS and MERS outbreaks, something that did not happen in the United States. And yes, we can point towards mixed messages from the World Health Organization and Center for Disease Control on the effectiveness of wearing a mask towards limiting the spread of the virus.

But above all, I believe America's bleak standing is largely due to our disregard for any notion of covenant, and our cultural prioritization of personal freedom over mutual responsibility. As Dr. Anthony Fauci recently testified, "The nation's traditional emphasis on the rights of individuals distinguishes the United States from many other countries...because of the individual spirit of our country, we don't listen to authority." As we mark 200,000 Americans having passed due to COVID and researchers estimating that infection rates would plummet if Americans overwhelmingly wore masks, the rift between freedom and obligation has become more relevant than ever. This issue also brings into stark contrast Judaism's emphasis on communal responsibility in the form of a covenant versus the American ethic of personal freedom and liberty.

The 20th century philosopher Isaiah Berlin wrote about the chasm between personal liberty and communal responsibility through his theory of positive and negative freedom. Negative freedom comes from the rejection of barriers to individual choice. We achieve negative freedom by throwing off the limits of authority. Negative freedom means I get to do what I want and no one else can

tell me otherwise. We Americans are well versed in negative freedom as stated in its purest form: Don't tread on me.

On the other hand, positive freedom comes from joining into mutual obligation with fellow members of society, to unlock each person's ability to realize their goals. Positive freedom understands autonomy not in terms of the individual but rather the group. In this situation, freedom means that my membership in the group affords me opportunities beyond myself. Living in covenant is an expression of positive freedom.

Berlin points to the story of the Exodus from Egypt as an example of first negative and then positive freedom. The limits of slavery are cast away and the slaves achieve negative freedom to do and go as they wish. But they do not descend into anarchy. Rather, they head directly to Mount Sinai where they enter into a structure of positive freedom in the form of a restrictive covenant, based upon 613 commandments or mitzvot. By accepting these laws, the Israelites are able to create communal practices and structures which make available otherwise unreachable opportunities.

Bringing Berlin's terminology to our current predicament, when someone refuses to wear a facemask because it constitutes an undue threat to their autonomy, they are exercising negative freedom. On the other hand, countries who have enacted strict regulations so their citizens can now walk freely down the street, go to work and send their kids to school, experience positive freedom. They can achieve together what they are not able to do alone. In this case, we Americans suffer from a lack of positive freedom by refusing to adhere to a common sense of covenant. But our failings are certainly not limited to the pandemic.

Our sense of covenant calls upon us to listen when our African American brothers and sisters cry out in pain for the violence inflicted upon their communities. But in

so much of America, what happens to you does not matter if it does not also happen to me. Living in covenant means regarding your life as equal to mine, so that a young adult robbed from your community is as painful as if he or she had been robbed from mine. But in 21st century America, such a sense of covenant rarely exists.

Our sense of covenant calls upon us to respond with empathy and urgency to those most threatened by the effects of climate change. But for many Americans, climate change is something that happens to other people in faraway places and therefore does not require my immediate attention. Living in covenant means demonstrating concern for those affected by the consequences of my actions. But in 21st century America, such a sense of covenant rarely exists.

Our sense of covenant calls for us to show concern for the millions of Americans who are struggling to make ends meet and feed their families during this pandemic. But many of us Americans can transition to working from home in sweatpants without significant loss. We have yards, trampolines and WiFi, and the stock market is doing ok, so what's the problem? Living in covenant means demonstrating concern for those without such resources when enacting policies to care for the most vulnerable among us. But in 21st century America, such a sense of covenant rarely exists.

And, our sense of covenant calls for us to value the lives of those Americans who are most threatened by the COVID virus; the elderly, the sick, the immunocompromised and the first responder. To say, "I won't get sick and so I don't need to alter my lifestyle" is to live completely outside the scope of covenant. If making small compromises to my life affords you a greater chance to live, then I am obligated to curtail my activities. But in 21st century America, such a sense of covenant rarely exists.

This covenantal ethic is prevalent throughout the Yom Kippur liturgy. The 13th century philosopher Moses Maimonides teaches that each of us should see ourselves on Yom Kippur as balanced between positive and negative deeds. And we ought to see the entire world as similarly balanced between good and bad. Therefore, our actions carry the possibility to sustain or destroy those around us. We ought to strive towards atonement, as perhaps we might push the scales in favor of life. It is for this reason that the Yom Kippur liturgy is offered in the first person plural. “Al chet shechatanu lefanecha...for the sins we have committed.” I know that I am not responsible for all of these sins. But this is a group effort, and perhaps my actions will support those around me with whom I live in covenant. Because even if you did something wrong this year, your life is valuable to me. After all, we are in covenant.

Perhaps this idea was best explained to me by my friend and teacher Rabbi Gedaliah Potash, who headed the Chabad near where I used to live in San Francisco. While co-teaching on the topic, he explained, “When I walk down the street and I refrain from killing you, this is simply because I am a rational human being and I would not do that to anyone. And after all, it is not in my self interest. This is not covenant. But when my wife turns to me late at night and asks that I make her a cup of tea, I don’t ask her why. Even if the request is completely irrational to me, and I cannot imagine why a cup of tea is so important at this very moment, I have entered into an unbreakable bond with her, and I am willing to go beyond my self-interest in serving her. This is the essence of covenant.”

Traditionally, Jews have observed the 613 mitzvot not because they make sense or are personally beneficial but rather because we are commanded. This concept has become so watered down in the individualism of modern society that the word mitzvah is often mistranslated as a “good deed”, that is, a choice which merits a pat on the back. But the true meaning of mitzvah is a covenantal obligation. One

ought not be commended for performing a mitzvah because he or she has met the requirement. And after all, it was never a choice. It was part of the covenant.

The biblical concept of covenant presents a relationship in which we people of Israel follow the mitzvot and in return, God protects us. Prophets such as Isaiah and Jeremiah implore the people to follow the commandments, lest they die. This is a central facet of the Yom Kippur liturgy. And this judgment is made not on an individual but a communal level. And so Jews historically followed the commandments in order to protect the community from harm. The implicit idea is that I restrict my personal choices so that I can keep my friends and neighbors safe. It is not about whether or not I will survive. Rather, we will all survive only if we collectively fulfill our covenantal obligations.

I wonder what our country might look like if we citizens believed that our collective actions carried such consequences. And yet in the year 2020, this prophetic call has seemingly come to fruition. COVID-19 can only be combated from a citizenry united in covenant. The same goes for systemic racism, climate change, economic insecurity and the myriad of challenges facing our nation and world. The prophetic challenge to live in covenant or perish has never been more relevant.

In the opening chapters of the Torah, Adam and Eve's son Cain slays his brother Abel. God confronts Cain for his murder, saying, "Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground." Cain responds by asking, "Am I my brother's keeper?". That is, am I responsible for the consequences of my actions upon others? The year 2020 has offered its blunt response: yes. Live together in covenant or perish alone.

And so today, as we members of the Jewish people renew our sacred covenant, this year in the safety and security of our homes, we are beckoned to consider the

state of our union. Are we willing to curb our behaviors for the benefit of others? Or will our devotion to negative freedom blind us to the cries of our brothers and sisters? Are we willing to restore within ourselves a sense of covenant? It is the same question as was first posed to Abraham in the land of Haran, repeated to the Israelites at the foot of Mount Sinai, and again to our ancestors, upon entering into the promised land. On this Yom Kippur, we re-enact this covenantal ritual. In the year 5781, I pray that we are up to the challenge.