

Lech Lechà

Seven times God makes a covenant with Abraham, four of them in our sidrà. The fourth of seven, the central one, is described in Genesis, 15 7:16:

7 He also said to him, “I am the Lord, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to take possession of it.”

8 But Abram said, “Sovereign Lord, how can I know that I will gain possession of it?”

9 So the Lord said to him, “Bring me a heifer, a goat and a ram, each three years old, along with a dove and a young pigeon.”

10 Abram brought all these to him, cut them in two and arranged the halves opposite each other; the birds, however, he did not cut in half. **11** Then birds of prey came down on the carcasses, but Abram drove them away.

12 As the sun was setting, Abram fell into a deep sleep, and a thick and dreadful darkness came over him. **13** Then the Lord said to him, “Know for certain that for four hundred years your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own and that they will be enslaved and mistreated there. **14** But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterward they will come out with great possessions. **15** You, however, will go to your ancestors in peace and be buried at a good old age. **16** In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure.”

17 When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces. **18** On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram (...)

This passage is a very strange one. What is happening here? Rashi in his commentaries gives two major explanations. One is based on what he calls the plain meaning of the text. What it is happening here is simply a custom, a way of making a covenant, common to the Middle East in that period, consisting of cutting something in two parts and walk through them as a sign of acceptance. The smoking furnace and the flaming torch that pass through the cut animals are symbols of the presence of the Eternal, making His covenant with Abraham. For supporting his explanation Rashi quotes a verse in Jeremiah, chapter 34:

“And I will make the men who violated My covenant, who did not fulfil the terms of the covenant that they made before Me, like the calf that they cut in two so as to pass between the halves”.

What we have to pay attention here is that only God is passing through the cut animals, not Abraham. This is a crucial point that led modern commentators to say that this is an unconditional covenant, only made by God.

The second explanation he gives is based on the interpretation given from Midrash Rabbà: Abraham is asking to God not a sign that the promise will be fulfilled. Abraham trust God, but he does not trust his descendants. His concern is about the future: what will be the merit for which my descendants will be kept in the covenant? For sure they will go out from the path, they will sin. Will the covenant be still valid? What Midrash says is that God is showing to Abraham the Temple and the sacrifices: the animals who are cut and their number stand for the sacrificial system that, with atonement and prayer, will be the mean to amend sins and stay in the covenant.

The Midrash goes further, saying that the smoking furnace and the torch are not symbols of the Divine Presence. They stand for four things that God shows to Abraham in his vision or dream: Gehinnom, foreign kingdoms, Revelation and Temple. If the children of Israel will occupy themselves with the last two, they will be saved from the first two. Abraham has the possibility to choose what will be the punishment between Gehinnom or foreign kingdoms, but there is no doubt here that, according to this interpretation, the covenant has conditions standing upon the heads of the sons of Israel.

Choosing from these different interpretations, between a conditional or unconditional covenant, brings to a completely different vision of our history and our relationship with God. We are still here and alive, after centuries of persecution. Is not this a sign of an unconditional covenant? The sign that God is with us, that after the darkneses of Egypt, we can have again freedom and relief from slavery? But we also know that our loss and distractions have been interpreted as our failures to fulfil the conditions of our covenant with God. And what about Shoà? We cannot really say that it was a punishment for not respecting our duties in the covenant with our God. So, has God forgotten us? Did He break the covenant? And what about our personal lives and journey: where is God when we lose a beloved person and feel lost and alone? When we struggle in distress and despair?

I was struggling with these ideas and interpretations, thinking if we can reshape our view of our covenant with God, and I remembered of two things. One is what said once my Rabbi Sylvia Rothschild, speaking of the relationship between Israel and his God as an indissoluble marriage. It could look as a terrifying idea, but, for me, it keeps together the ideas of an unconditional relationship with that one of partnership. Like in a marriage, God and people are partners, supporting each other, sometimes carrying the burden for the one who is lost and fragile. The other thing I remembered is what I was taught from one of my teachers about Genesis 17:1. Before making again a covenant with Abraham, that one implying circumcision, God says to Abraham: “hitalech lefanai v'hiyeh tamim” “walk before me and be righteous, whole.

We are partner to God and we have to walk before him. When in our relationship with God, He hides his face(s), leaving this world in darkness, in loss and despair, it is our turn not to walk with Him, like Noah, but to walk before Him, opening a path for justice, for loving kindness, for hope, for making His presence alive again. I know people who are so brave to walk alone on a hard path, when everything is lost and it seems there is no space for hope. They walk tamim before God. Let us sustain them, let us walk with them.

These words are dedicated to one of my classmate, Dov. He is a “tam” man, walking before God in hard times.