



Gal Einai

Revealing the Torah's
Inner Dimension

BSD

The Secret of the Covenant

Ma'ayan Ganim: A Chassidic Perspective for the Torah Portion of Noach

The First Covenant

One of the fundamental concepts in the Torah is the concept of covenant. In fact, Jews are sometimes called 'Members of the Covenant' (*Bnai Brit*). The first two covenants were made between God and Abraham. The first is known as the Covenant Between the Shards and the second is known as the Covenant of Circumcision. Following the covenants made with Abraham, God made covenants with the entire Nation of Israel in Horev and again before they entered the Land of Israel. Later in the Bible, there are also covenant ceremonies between God and the Nation of Israel (and also of the Nation of Israel with their king). There is also the promise that in the future, God will forge a "new covenant" with the Nation of Israel.¹

However, for all the many covenants God made with the Jewish people, the *Tikunei Zohar* explicitly says that one of the important anagrams of the word "*Breishit*" ("In the beginning"), the first word of the Torah, is *Brit-aish*, meaning, "covenant of fire." Additionally, the first mention of the word *brit* (covenant) explicitly in the Pentateuch is in the portion of No'ach. We usually remember the covenant that appears after the flood – the covenant of the rainbow, at which time God made a covenant that He would not bring another flood to the world, and promised the existence of the world in general.² The concept of *brit* (covenant) is repeated seven times at this juncture. But the word '*brit*' appears before that in our Torah portion. As part of the warning of the impending flood and the commandment to Noach to build the ark, God says to him, "And I will establish My covenant with you..."³

According to the rule, "Everything follows the beginning,"⁴ contemplation on a given word begins with its first appearance in the Torah. By contemplating the essence of the first appearance of covenant in the Torah, we will get a deeper understanding of the concept throughout the Torah.

¹ Jeremiah 31:30.

² See *Ma'ayan Ganim* vol. 2, *Ki Tisah*, which explains that the fundamental structure of Worlds-Souls-Divinity, parallel the covenants with No'ach, Abraham and Moses.

³ Genesis 6:18.

⁴ *Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer* chapter 42.

The Content of the Covenant with Noah

The commentaries on the first covenant with No'ach focus on the essence of the concept of covenant (what is a covenant?) and the understanding of the specific content of the specific covenant (why was this particular covenant forged?). On a deeper level, the relation between the essence of the covenant in general and the specific content of a specific covenant is the relation between the intellect, which is the light and essential root of the issue, to the character traits, which are the individual, measured characteristics that manifest in a particular reality.

The commentaries on the Torah bring seven different explanations for the first covenant with No'ach⁵. These seven explanations can be paralleled to the seven character traits of loving-kindness, might, beauty, victory, acknowledgment, foundation, and kingdom. Above them, there are three explanations pertaining to the essence of the covenant in general, which we can parallel to the intellectual *sefirot*: wisdom, understanding, and knowledge.

In order to expand on the core and general study of the essence of the covenant that we learn from the three essential explanations, we will first briefly discuss the seven specific explanations, according to the order of the *sefirot*. Afterwards, we will focus in depth on the essence of the covenant in general.

Loving-kindness (*chesed*): The Ramban hints (and the author of *Haktav V'hakabbalah* expands on this) that the first covenant with Noah was forged over the great miracle of “something small that contains something big,” when a sample of all the types of animals and plants, with all that they would need for an entire year, was packed into a small ark. The concentration of this abundant greatness relates to the attribute of loving-kindness, which is overflowing. This is the attribute of Abraham, “the greatest of all the giants.”⁶

Might (*gevurah*): Rashi brings the saying of the sages that the covenant was “that the wicked people of the generation would not kill him.” Overcoming the wicked people – by means of surrounding the ark with bears and lions (the Hebrew word for “lion,” [אריו] [אריו]) shares a numerical value with the sefirah of “might” [יראה] is the Divine attribute of might.

Beauty (*tiferet*): In the book, *Ma'asei Hashem* (brought in *Haktav V'hakabbalah*) it is explained that the covenant made with No'ach before the flood was a covenant of the Torah, vital for the existence of the world, as the verse states, “If it were not for my covenant day and night, I would have not appointed the ordinances of heaven and earth.”⁷ The Torah is the “middle pillar,” the *sefirah* of *tiferet*.

Victory (*netzach*): The first explanation given by Rashi (and following the *midrash*) is that the “covenant was needed for the fruits, so that they would not rot and mold.” This explanation corresponds to the sefirah of *netzach*, which also means “eternity,” in this case, the power to eternalize what would naturally decompose.

Acknowledgment (*hod*): According to the Ibn Ezra (and others), the covenant was “that he would not die in the flood—not in the waters of the flood, and not due to all the accompanying hardships that could take place in the ark during the flood [food depletion, attack by wild animals in the ark, etc.]” In *hod* (a branch of the *sefirah* of might) there is

⁵ All the commentaries are brought together by *Haktav V'hakabbalah* on the verse.

⁶ Joshua 14:15, *Bereishit rabbah* 14:6.

⁷ Jeremiah 33:25 (and see *Shabbat* 33a).

always the fear that “My splendor [*hod*] has turned against me to be destructive”⁸ and a covenant promising safety is in order.

Foundation (*yesod*): The Ibn Ezra explains further that the covenant mentioned prior to the flood is a foreshadowing of the rainbow covenant that would be forged after the flood (when a very similar verse was said, “And I will establish My covenant with you”⁹). The covenant of the rainbow is particularly related to the attribute of foundation, one of whose symbols is the bow that shoots the arrows of sperm¹⁰.

Kingdom (*malchut*): There are commentators¹¹ who say that the covenant for the existence of the world was so that No’ach’s salvation would not be temporary (thus being a miracle for naught), but rather, would be a salvation that would continue to exist. The very existence of the world and reality is related to the attribute of kingdom.

Memory-Creation-Choice

In order to understand the concept of covenant in general from the covenant that we are discussing, we will turn to the explanations of covenant that appear in the commentaries here. These explanations parallel the intellectual *sefirot*: wisdom, understanding, and knowledge.

Wisdom (*chochmah*): The holy Or Hachaim ties the covenant to memory. Accordingly, the Remembrances that we say in the Rosh Hashanah prayers, which open with the memory of Noach, “And also Noach, You have with love remembered”¹² end with “He Who remembers the covenant.”¹³ Humanity fears forgetting and being forgotten. People are afraid to be forgotten (particularly when they reach their golden years, when a person fears being forgetful and also fears that God, Who has helped him until this point, will forget him and throw him aside at the time of his old age¹⁴) – and the covenant promises eternal memory. The Ark in which Noach is rattled for an entire year is like a drop in the sea of the entire world – the world flooded by the floodwaters. Thus, Noach is apprehensive—despite all the miraculous salvations that he merited—that God will forget him and all those in the ark. The forging of the bond, of the covenant is a commitment to remember Noach.

Accordingly, Chassidut explains¹⁵ regarding Rosh Hashanah, “the Day of Remembrance,” that the entire world is like a drop in the sea—and much less than that—in relation to God’s Infinite Light (and the infinite worlds that emanated and were created from it). In order to renew the Creation, God’s remembrance must be awakened, so that He will not forget the world, as it were. This remembrance flows from the forging of the covenant (externally, the covenant of the existence of the worlds and internally, the covenant with the Nation of Israel, the Nation of God, who we coronate as King on Rosh Hashanah).¹⁶

⁸ Daniel 10:8.

⁹ Genesis 9:11.

¹⁰ *Targum Yonatan* on Genesis 49:24 and *Sotah* 36b.

¹¹ Rabbi Yitzchak Aramah’s *Akeidat yitzchak*, end of *sha’ar* 18 and *Ha’amek Davar ad. loc.*

¹² According to Genesis 8:1, “And God remembered Noach etc.”

¹³ Based on many verses of remembrance-covenant in the Bible: Genesis 9:15-16, Exodus 2:24, Leviticus 27:42 and 45, Jeremiah 14:2, Ezekiel 16:60, Amos 1:9, Psalms 105:8, 106:45, 111:5, and 1 Chronicles 16:15.

¹⁴ Psalms 71:9.

¹⁵ Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, *Likkutei torah* (homilies for *Rosh Hashanah*) 57c.

¹⁶ See *Ma’ayan ganim* Vol. 5, *Rosh Hashanah*.

The power of memory relates to the power of wisdom, which is referred to in the Zohar as, “the brain of remembrance.”¹⁷ Wisdom is the primary source, the root drop of all reality. The covenant, according to this explanation, is the memory of the original essence and connection to it.

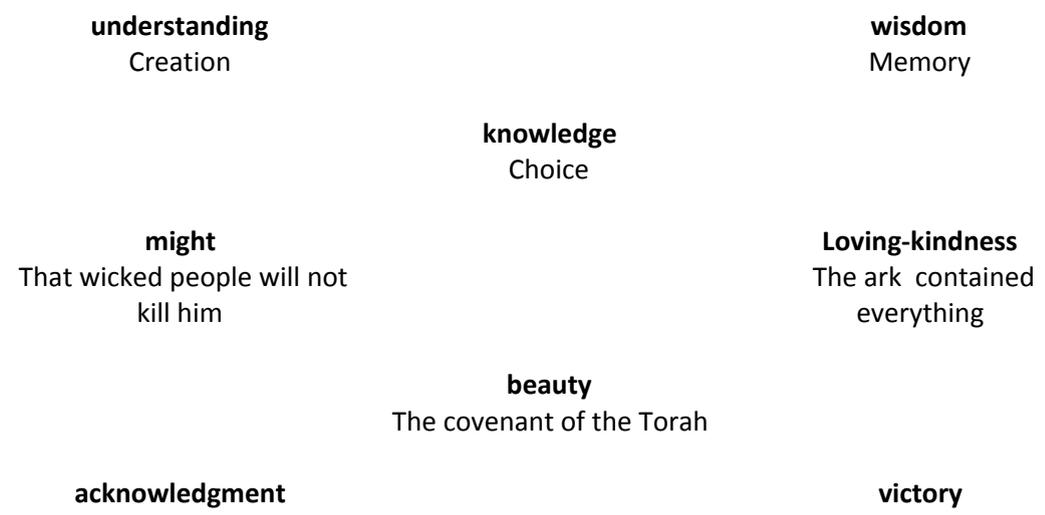
Understanding (*binah*): Maimonides explains that the covenant is the foundation of the world (without using the word “foundation,” as he does not use the names of the *sefirot*). He learns this from the Hebrew word for “creation” (*bri’ah*), which is similar to the word for “covenant” (*brit*).

The *sefirah* of understanding illuminates the World of Creation. It is the world in which *Imma* (the mother figure) is described as nesting, like a mother-bird. The mother builds or creates the formless sperm received from the father into a complete creation, and when it is built, she gives birth to it as an independent creation.

Knowledge (*da’at*): Rabbi Avraham Ibn Ezra (and additional commentators who base their explanations on the simple meaning of the verses) explains that the word for covenant (*brit*) comes from the words meaning to sift or to choose (*breirah* and *bechirah*). As such it represents the, “agreement and of two parties to choose something together.” *Haktav V’hakabbalah* brings lengthy examples from the Bible and the sages to prove that, “my covenant” (בריתי) means, “my choice” (בחירי).

The power of two to choose and clarify together, and as one, emerges from the *sefirah* of knowledge (*da’at*), as the sages say, “If there is no *da’at*, from where can clarification come?”¹⁸). Knowledge of and connection to another with whom we are forging a covenant is also a choice.¹⁹ In more depth, choosing the desirable thing is related to the coronet of loving-kindness within the *sefirah* of knowledge. Exercising the loving-kindness within the *sefirah* of knowledge indirectly prompts the might within knowledge to reject that which has not been chosen, as per the Ibn Ezra’s second explanation that the covenant is a “clear-cut border”).

To summarize the intellectual and emotional attributes of the first covenant made with No’ach:



¹⁷ For example *Torah or* 81c.

¹⁸ Jerusalem Talmud, Brachot 5:2

¹⁹ Genesis 18:19, see the commentaries there

Noach will not die in the
ark

The fruits will not rot

foundation

The covenant of the
rainbow

kingdom

The existence of the world

Covenant from Inside Out

The explanation corresponding to wisdom—that covenant is related to memory—relates at its core to the Divine soul, which we remember as it is in its supernal source, as a drop contained in the “brain of the Father,”²⁰ the *sefirah* of wisdom.

By contrast, explanation corresponding with knowledge—that the covenant is related to choice—relates specifically to the body (which is enlivened by the animal soul), in which the Divine soul enclothes itself. Truly free choice can only be between things that appear to be equal, “And you chose us from amongst all the nations and languages,” refers to the physical body that appears, in its physicality, to be like the bodies of all human beings.²¹

The explanation corresponding to understanding—that covenant means creation—stands between the two previous explanations: it is the forging of a covenant with the soul, as it has already become a creation in and of itself, or as described in Kabbalah, “a part of the Creator which has become a created entity.”²²

Thus, we have before us a process. The forging of the covenant brings out the most internal and essential connection and identifies it (an identification that is between an old memory and a new creation) in external reality, in which it disappears and is swallowed up. This is the meaning of a covenant between two people who love each other. It promises to remember their love even when reality will blur and hide it. On a deeper level, this is also the power of the covenant to give birth—the power to extract the inner essence of the person and to give birth to it in external reality.

This brings us to an understanding of another point: It would seem that the covenant with No’ach was a universal covenant, which predates the choosing and separation of the nation of Israel. How, then, can we learn from it about the essence of the covenant in which the nation of Israel, God’s Children of the Covenant, were chosen?

Prior to the appearance of the light of Abraham, the characteristics and good traits of Israel were present (but, mostly concealed) among the nations of the world. It is only when the nation of Israel (the offspring of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob) were chosen that they received those traits and were able to retain them. Moreover, until the time of the patriarchs, and to a degree, until the Giving of the Torah, these Divine traits were purely on a soul level (and thus could not be passed down from generation to generation). It is only after God chose the patriarchs and in their merit chose their descendants, the people of Israel, that those traits

²⁰ *Tanya* c. 2.

²¹ *Ibid.* c. 49.

²² *Likutei torah Re’eh* 27a.

became embedded in the bodies of the Nation of Israel (and could thus be passed on from generation to generation).

This is the process of the covenant: Remembrance of the primal root and identifying and highlighting it within the physical world, until it becomes clearly natural, a “clear-cut border.”