



Setting Limits in Order to be in Relationship: The First Covenant in Tanakh

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Of the many profound lessons that Parashat Noah teaches us about relationships, I'd like to focus on the one we learn from the covenant, the *berit*, that God makes with Noah in the wake of the flood. A covenant is, fundamentally, a record of the terms of a relationship. Reading the terms of a covenant can teach us about the components and terms of that relationship. This is the first covenant that appears in Tanakh and its function is self-restraint in the name of sustaining and preserving relationship. This covenant presents a model: Any successful set of relationships is predicated on knowing one's weaknesses and putting systems in place to deal with one's own limitations.

As the Great Flood's waters recede, and Noah, his household, and all of the animals emerge from the ark, God makes a covenant with humanity. What does this covenant mean and why is it necessary for Noah's return to the world? In order to explore these essential questions, we first need to focus our attention on one particular moment that precedes the covenant's establishment. Simultaneous with the emergence from the ark, "God said to Himself, I will no longer curse the earth on account of humanity for the inclination of a person's heart is evil from their youth. And I will no longer smite all that lives as I have done. For as long as the earth exists, sowing and reaping, cold and heat, summer and winter, night and day will never cease" (Genesis 8:21-22). It seems that God promises Himself that He will not bring another flood on the earth!

In order to understand the covenant itself, we need to understand this prefatory statement. I would like to draw your attention to four salient components of these verses: the manner of

speech, the object of the statement, its content, and the challenge that the statement presents.

- 1) First let's turn our attention to how God speaks. The language that the verse uses to describe God's speech is "to His heart," like an internal monologue.
- 2) Second, the objects of God's statement are the earth and "all living." God's speech is directed to Nature. Granted, people are included in "all living," but God is not speaking regarding humanity specifically.
- 3) Thirdly, the content of God's speech is made up of a number of different components: the earth will no longer be cursed, God will no longer kill His creatures, and the laws of nature will not be abrogated, neither the cycle of the seasons, nor the pattern of day and night. One aspect sticks out—this is a shift from the past. In the past God could or would alter the course of nature; this is a decision regarding the future that is discontinuous with the past.
- 4) Lastly, humanity is not the main object of God's statement, but humanity provides the major challenge to God's ability to execute and keep His word. Humanity, due to the evil embedded in its heart, is likely to act in a way that invites cursing and destruction. Nevertheless, God commits not to curse or destroy the earth. God's resolution is not contingent on humanity's actions.

In the continuation of the *parashah*, we see the more famous covenant that God makes with humanity and the world. These second set of verses have similar content, but an entirely different presentation. Let's examine these two sets of verses side by side:

God said **to Himself**:

God said to **Noah and to his sons with him**:

I now establish **My covenant with you and your offspring** after you, and with every living thing that is with you—birds, cattle,

I will **no longer** curse **the earth** **on account of humanity** for the inclination of a person's heart is evil from their youth. And I will **no longer** smite **all that lives as I have done**. For as long as the earth exists, sowing and reaping, cold and heat, summer and winter, night and day will never cease

and every wild beast as well—all that have come out of the ark, every living thing on earth. I will maintain **My covenant with you**: no longer shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and no longer shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.

God further said: 'This is the sign of the covenant that I set between Me and you, and every living creature with you, for all ages to come. I have set My bow in the clouds, and it shall serve as a sign of the covenant between Me and the earth.'

Let's compare these two sets of verses, using the four components that we identified: the manner of speech, the object of the statement, its content, and the challenge that the statement presents:

- 1) Firstly, one of the most striking differences between these two sets of verses is that it transitions from God's speaking to Himself, "to His heart," a personal promise that God expresses only to Himself, to a statement that is properly described as a covenant, a *berit*, that is pronounced in public: "God said to Noah and to his sons with him: I now establish My covenant..." (Genesis 9:8-9)—this is the covenant with people, "My covenant with you."
- 2) Secondly, the object of the statement shifts as well. God's original statement to Himself was about the earth, the forces of nature, of which "all living things" are a part. However, regarding God's speech in the covenant, the object is humanity. Humanity is no longer conceived of as an impediment to the promise, but as the

partner in the covenant. Even though this second iteration does include all animals “every living thing that is with you—birds, cattle, and every wild beast as well—all that have come out of the ark” (v. 10) the emphasis is very much on humanity. They are the ones who are specified in the covenant, they are the addressees of God’s words, generations of them: “I now establish My covenant with you and your offspring after you” (vv. 8-9).

- 3) Thirdly, the content of the covenant, like in God’s initial statement, is a unidirectional promise that God will not bring another flood on people and the rest of the living creatures—“I will maintain My covenant with you: No longer shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and no longer shall there be a flood to destroy the earth” (v. 11). In God’s soliloquy in chapter 8 and in God’s outward promise in chapter 9, there is no condition attached, there is no demand that needs to be fulfilled in order for the covenant to be kept, just a simple, one-sided promise.
- 4) Lastly, as I mentioned, a final element is worthy of our attention: The potential challenge to the fulfillment of the blessing. Humanity with its heart inclined to evil is the primary obstacle to God’s statement, God’s promise to Himself in chapter 8. It appears, however, that unlike God’s statement in chapter 8, in the covenant described in chapter 9 no potential obstacle is presented. To the contrary, there is a guarantee in the form of a sign, “I have set My bow in the clouds, and it shall serve as a sign of the covenant between Me and the earth.” (v. 13). However, a closer examination points us to the presence of a more subtle threat to the covenant instead.

The Sifrei, the Tannaitic Midrash on Sefer Bemidbar, turns our attention to God’s promise that “there will never be another flood.” This phrase, while perhaps intended to be comforting, actually reminds us of a painful past, of the way that God behaved towards us before preventing this type of reaction by means of a covenant:

Sifrei Bemidbar, Parashat Korah, 116

You say, “There will never be another flood” what does “another” come to teach us?
That there had been.

The obstacle to the covenant is the past. History testifies to what could happen if the covenant is not kept—a flood. The past itself, the way life looked before the establishment of this covenant, is the central threat and challenge to it. Thus, the major transition from God’s statement to Himself to God’s covenant with the world is a shift in blame. When God speaks to Himself, God blames humanity for being inclined towards evil. On the other hand, when God constructs the covenant, He acknowledges His extreme reaction to evil. God complains to Himself about humanity’s nature, and God makes promises to Humanity about God’s own behavior.

The role of the rainbow, the need for a sign, emerges from here. A close reading of the verses shows that the rainbow is, in fact, a sign that God makes for Himself. The rainbow reminds God of the covenant that He made with humanity: “I will remember My covenant... When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and all living creatures, all flesh that is on earth” (9:14-16). The rainbow is a sign that God shows to Himself. It’s necessary, ostensibly, because the God of the covenant of Parashat Noah recognizes His own character traits in the rainbow and is reminded of them when the rainbow is present. These characteristics, as they are presented to us, the biblical readers, include disappointment and sadness that could theoretically result in an extreme act of destruction, in a flood.

Therefore, the content of the covenant is based on a deep understanding of these character traits and it functions as a recognition of them and as a resolution taken to allow the relationship to continue, to enable the continuation of a life together. God, as it were, limits

Himself and says, “that the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh” (9:15), for the sake of maintaining His connection to, and with, humanity.

The shift from God’s statement to Himself to God’s covenant with the world and with humanity, from chapter 8 to chapter 9, is an instructive process, one that moves from an internal monologue to a dialogue.¹ Perhaps every connection we make with someone else demands that we connect with ourselves first. God is demonstrating the way in which an internal conversation and reflection can become the foundation of communication between partners, and the basis for creating a lasting bond.

God’s relationship with the world is not simple or easy and God has reason to feel resentment and mistrust. The Torah says explicitly, “God regretted that He had made man on earth, and His heart was saddened” (6:6). Parashat Noah teaches us very pointedly about a bond that is full of feelings of sadness, disappointment, and even regret. This type of bond has a risk attached—these feelings are likely to bring about a devastating storm. This parashah emphasizes the way in which this kind of fraught relationship can be given new life when there are some boundaries on behavior set in place. The restriction isn’t on the *cause* of the disappointment or sadness, but on the *person* who is frustrated and furious. When this angry and hurt person chooses to manage their behavior at the times that those feelings come to the surface, they are consciously choosing not to break out in a destructive rage, knowing that if they do the relationship dissolves and the covenant is severed.

Perhaps every relationship needs this kind of covenant, one where an individual is aware of one’s own weaknesses and recognizes them. The content of the covenant is a statement regarding control over the potential destructive storm, a covenant that is a guarantee that the individual will set up boundaries to stop these potential storms. An individual needs to commit themselves, to bind themselves, to make strict, inviolable rules regarding their own

¹ This transition is beyond the scope of our discussion here, but a deep exploration is warranted of the relationship between the permission to eat meat and the prohibition of murder that comes in the wake of this shift.

behavior, no matter how frustrated or even justified their position, for the sake of lasting relationships.

In Parashat Noah, God shows us that being in relationship with other people requires deep knowledge of ourselves and our own weaknesses, and a strong commitment to controlling our own impulses and our own behavior. God does not try to change the nature of humanity, to change the “inclination of man to good.” Instead God talks to Himself, talks to humanity, puts restrictions on Himself, and becomes able, thereby, to be bound to us.