

Partners With God

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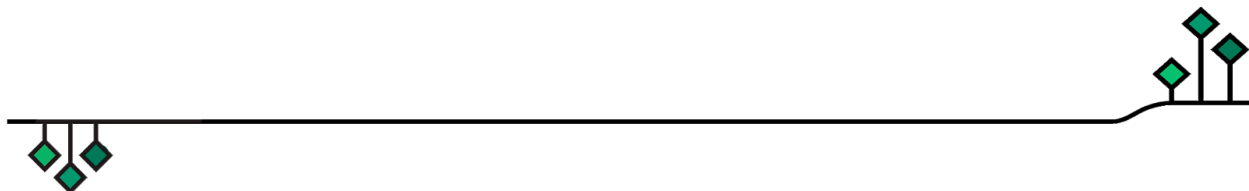
Parashat Emor 5781

Opening the list of holidays in Parashat Emor, God instructs Moses to “speak to the children of Israel, and tell them: **The feast days of the Lord, which you shall declare to be days of holy gathering—these are My feasts.**” (Leviticus 23:2). The Rabbis turn this simple, straightforward sentence into a declaration that the covenant between God and Israel is a partnership.

The Rabbis break up the Torah verse into three stages. (i) Until Israel entered into covenant—literally, became God’s people—“**the feast days...** [are set by] **the Lord.**” For example, the Shabbat was sanctified and ordained by God before the Jewish people even existed.¹ (ii) Once Israel became people of the covenant, God said: “**You shall declare** [these] **to be days of holy gathering.**” This refers to the rabbinic courts declaring the date of the New Month (Rosh Hodesh) and thereby setting the dates of the holidays/feast days.² (iii) By Israel’s actions, “**these are** [become] **My** [God’s commanded] **feasts.**”

¹ As it says in Genesis 2:3: “The Lord blessed the seventh day and sanctified it.”

² Such as Passover, the 15th-21st of Nissan, Shavuot, the 6th of Sivan, Sukkot, 15th-22nd of Tishrei, etc.

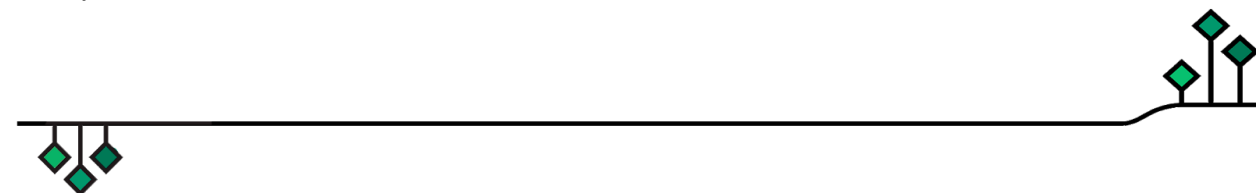


This rabbinic interpretation may appear to be stating a technical fact that rabbinic courts set the calendar; actually, a deeper point is being made. Acting as partners, the Jews are sanctifying the holidays. Another *midrash* tells the following: “When the angels who serve before God enter the Divine Presence, they ask: When is Rosh Hashanah? When is Yom Kippur? The Holy One the Blessed says to them: Why are you asking me? You and I should go to the Lower Court.”³ In other words, the people of Israel’s designations of the holy days sanctify them and are binding on God and the heavenly realm. God follows their rulings and accepts their actions as normative in the covenant.⁴

The idea that God is not just reaching out to—and entering a relationship with—humans, but is asking them to become partners in a covenant (of *tikkun olam*), is one of Judaism’s revolutionary ideas. This model of partnership prevents (or corrects) two negative impacts which the encounter with God has had on human beings in history. To many people—and in many religions, including Judaism at various times—the discovery of the existence of the Infinite, All-Powerful God, who cares about humans, leads to a certain regression—even infantilizing—of people. Instead of taking responsibility, people turn over their requests and needs to the Supreme Lord. They ask that God do it all for them, e.g. bestow a better world or their specific personal needs, by divine miraculous gift. The partnership concept rejects this magical thinking and makes clear that, unless the people do their share, God will not do it for them.

³ I.e. the rabbinic high court. The setting of the calendar was traditionally the role of the Sanhedrin when such an institution existed. Midrash from Devarim Rabbah 2:14, quoted in Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man* (Philadelphia, 1983), pp. 80-81.

⁴ See Soloveitchik’s comments referred to in previous note. In Shabbat Kiddush, we bless God “who sanctifies the Shabbat.” In the holidays’ Kiddush, we bless God “who sanctifies Israel [and who, in turn sanctify] the holidays.”

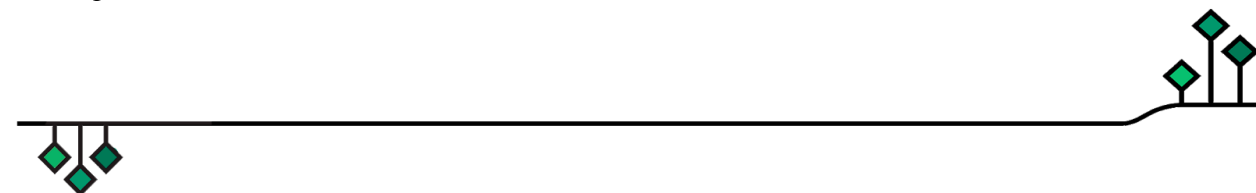


There is another “pathology” which the partnership model stops in its tracks. Many people are so overwhelmed by divinity and visions of heaven that they turn their efforts to divine service, and to earning their way into Heaven, instead of working to repair this world. Marx scorned this effect as religion becoming “the opium of the masses.” He charged that those who controlled power and wealth taught people such an other-worldly concept of religion to get them to accept the status quo which was exploiting them. In this way, the masses did not challenge the unfair distribution of wealth because they were focused on the world-to-come. Religion has often been the bulwark of undemocratic regimes, its teachings deployed to pacify the peasants or serfs, to ensure that they did not rebel to improve their status. The approach of partnership, however, makes clear that God asks people not to switch their attention from this life, but to become more involved in repair of the world and in overcoming the enemies of life: poverty, oppression, war, and sickness.

The covenantal partnership also communicated the two great positive gifts of God’s Presence in the world. The uncontested reign of wicked rulers was broken. Just when people were ready to surrender to the powers that be and yield to despair, God upheld them. In the words of the psalmist, “...were God not my help, I would soon have dwelt in permanent silence. When I thought my foot was slipping, Your covenantal love sustained me...” (Psalm 94:17-18).

The second positive is that God serves as an incorruptible standard of justice and fairness. The Lord is a Judge who cannot be bought or controlled. When the wicked become all powerful and control human institutions—even when they become the arbiters of right and wrong—the oppressed still have access to God who validates their cause and condemns the oppressors.⁵

⁵ See e.g. Psalm 146:6-8.



The covenant partnership idea also bestowed two great callings on human beings. One is that, even though this is God's world,⁶ nevertheless we are partners, i.e. part owners. We cannot just punch a clock, put in hours of work, and let others worry about the big picture. As part owners, we must look out for the general condition of the earth, whether the trends (such as in climate or population) are positive or negative, and take action to keep the earth on a positive keel. We cannot pass the buck and leave it to God while simply serving our time.

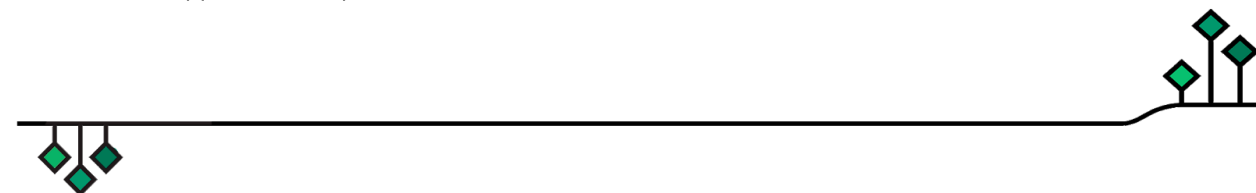
It should be understood that humans are partners not only in the secular but in the religious spheres as well. All members of the covenant are stakeholders in the inculcation of values, in the unfolding of the tradition, and in the transformation of the covenant and the human and Jewish mission to perfect the world. We cannot simply receive the Torah and repeat its actions automatically. In Soloveitchik's words, we as Jews⁷ "received the Torah from Sinai not as a simple recipient but as a creator of worlds, **as a Partner with the Almighty in the act of Creation.**"⁸ This partnership gives humans the task to apply the Torah in new or changed conditions. We have the responsibility to find new ways of living properly, as are necessary. This includes when there is new evidence and new understanding and the inherited Torah is having destructive effects, the human partner has the responsibility to adjust the Torah to make sure that it is (as it wants to be) on the side of life and world repair.

Let me cite two examples with which I am engaged. One is where, in the course of history, Gentiles' lives became devalued and their religions were dismissed as idolatry, because they were enemies of Jewry and acted badly toward us. Now there is the task of revaluing and upgrading their lives as being in the image of God—as all humans are. Similarly, covenantal

⁶ Psalm 24:1: "The Earth and its fullness is the Lord's; [as is] the world and all who dwell within it."

⁷ My translation of Soloveitchik's terminology, "halakhic man."

⁸ *Halakhic Man*, pp. 81-82. Emphasis mine.



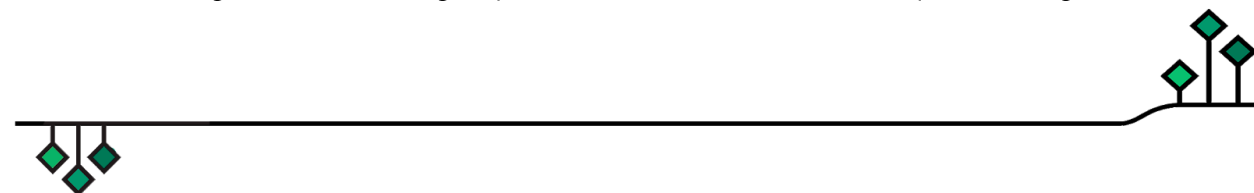
Jewry has the task of finding the Presence of God in their midst and recognizing the religious and ethical values in others' religions. We need to cooperate with them in fulfilling our God-given mandate to uphold life and to repair the world.

The second example is affirming the dignity of people who are gay. Our generation has established that gay sexuality is not a perverse, anti-family choice, but rather a natural sexual expression on the spectrum of sexuality. Therefore, one cannot hide behind the claim that “I (i.e. this generation) just work here.” As partners, we are responsible that the Torah's strictures—directed against a promiscuous, power-driven rather than relationship-focused, anti-family form of sexual behavior—are now harming people who want to live lives of committed relationship and emotional faithfulness, as well as raise families. We have the authority as partners to honor the ethical and family values inherent in such relationships and to guide the Torah to sanctify and enable these lives also.

This generation has the power to make these adjustments. By entering into covenant/partnership, in Soloveitchik's words: “...the Holy One the Blessed has, as it were, handed over His imprimatur, His official seal in Torah matters, to man. It is as if the Creator of the world Himself abides by man's decision and instruction.”⁹

I would put the partnership role in my words. God and the Torah **depend on** later generations to be responsible partners. To look away when something is going wrong allows the Torah to

⁹ *Halakhic Man*, p. 80. Never mind the “as it were” or “as if” phrases. The human partners in the living generation have the full responsibility to act. They need not be of the same stature as the generations before. As the Talmud says (Rosh Hashanah 25b): “Jephthah in his generation [has all the needed religious authority] that Samuel had in his generation”—although Jephthah was far inferior in wisdom and spiritual strength to Samuel.



become a vehicle of discrimination and oppression.¹⁰ The partner's task is to act to ensure that the Torah is humane and life-affirming in all its applications.

¹⁰ For example, the current situation of *agunot*. The Torah's instruction to husbands to issue the *get* (divorce document), which was intended to protect wives from arbitrary and impulsive oral dismissal, is being used by the husbands to hold the wife chained in a failed marriage by not issuing the *get*. Not only have the rabbinic courts, for the most part, failed to stop this oppression by releasing women through alternate halakhic methods of ending a marriage, they have typically deligitimated the handful of rabbis trying to end this abuse.

