



# The Covenant Between the Generations

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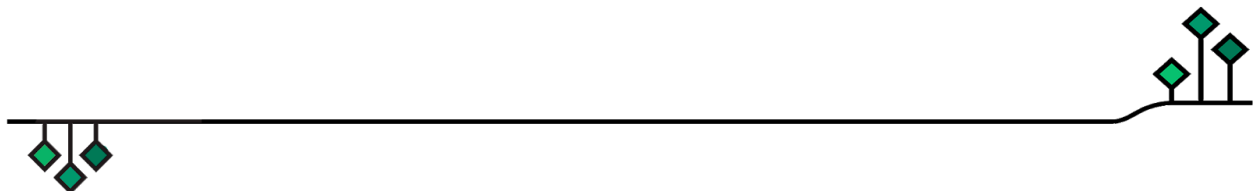
## Parashat VaYehi 5781

Perhaps the most important revelation in the book of Genesis is that the Infinite Cosmic Ground of Being loves the “trivial” finite creatures on this puny planet—and everywhere. Therefore, God recruits humans to join a committed love relationship (covenant) for the purpose of together repairing creation’s flaws and perfecting human societies. The ultimate goal is to create a world in which life flourishes and all people will be treated as being of infinite value, equal and unique.<sup>1</sup>

Our *parashah*, which closes Genesis, reveals that in a covenantal life, every moment is multidimensional. One lives in the moment, but the future is part of the present and affects it. Every act of relationship is at once with fellow human beings and with God. Every life lived is individual, but also a continuation of those who have lived before. After death, one’s life will be continued by later members of the covenant.

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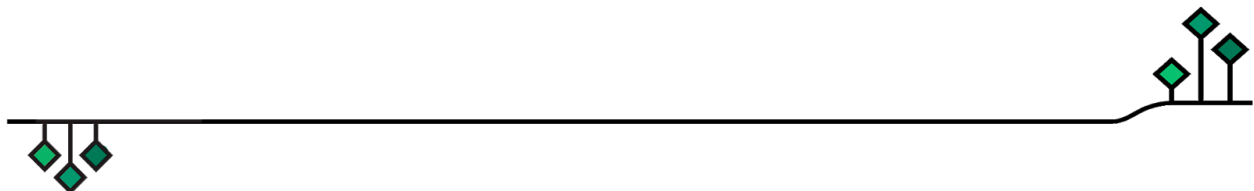
<sup>1</sup> See my essays on e.g. Parashat VaYeishev “The Messianic Life Force” (available here: <https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/messianic-life-force>) and Parashat VaYeitzei “The Journey to Maturation in the Covenant” (available here: <https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/journey-maturation-covenant>).



The covenant paradigm sets up a deep connection between the present human condition and a future state of ideal existence. The Torah starts by affirming the value and preciousness of daily mortal life behaviors. Every act is in the here-and-now, shaped by the context and expectations of present reality. At the same time, every moment is oriented toward a future perfect state and the individual tries to act in some way that is consonant with that future. This means to give an extra measure of dignity to the other, even in a society which is far from universal equality, or extend an extra measure of justice, even in a society where all are not equal before the law.

Genesis describes how God starts with a relationship with all humanity but moves into intense special relationships with particular communities of people, starting with Abraham, Sarah, and the children of Israel. The Israelite covenantal journey starts with a commitment “to keep the way of the Lord to do righteousness and justice” (Genesis 18:19), for this is the treatment to which every person, being in the image of God, is entitled. As the covenant unfolds, each human community will carve out a special realm—a land—in which it will try to build its ideal society with dignity and justice for all. An essential part of human dignity is to have a place where one is planted and free to grow; where one is present by unquestioned right; where one’s memories, language, and cumulative experiences are featured. In the case of Abraham’s descendants, it will be the land of Israel (Genesis 15:7-12; 17:7-8).

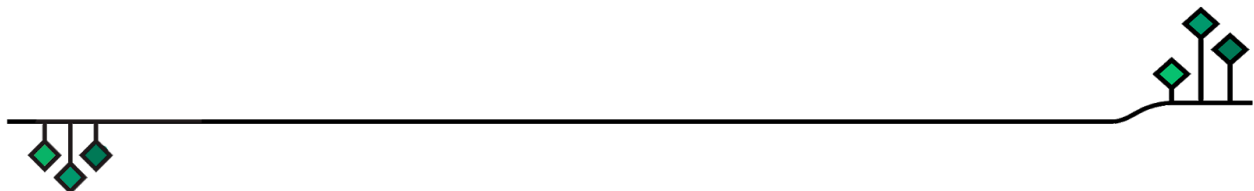
As the covenantal way unfolds, eventually every life behavior is shaped to uphold life and to be in consonance with the covenantal goals. The concept of ritual behavior also develops (mostly after the Exodus and Sinai events) in which stylized behaviors remind people that they are members of a distinctive covenantal community (e.g. circumcision, Shabbat, Kashrut, Sabbatical year) with special historical experiences and memories (e.g. Passover,



Shavuot, Sukkot, and other Exodus reminders). These markers surround people and provide a context for their behaviors as they go through their individual lives and life experiences.

Most human life behaviors—working, eating, speaking—are the same for covenanted and non-covenanted people. The behavior becomes covenantal when it is reshaped in some measure, small or large, to be in consonance with the covenantal guidelines or to advance the outcome, in measure small or large, closer to the final state. Thus Abraham’s staff herds sheep and cattle, but they dig their own water wells from place to place so as not to drain others’ water supplies (Genesis 21:24, 28-31; 26:18-25, 32). Abraham and Sarah offered hospitality to passersby, as was the custom in Mesopotamia, but they make a greater effort to welcome guests (18:2-5) or they offer even more welcoming fare (18:6-8). Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob build altars and offer sacrifices of gratitude but they are dedicated to their covenant partner, the God they have come to know (12:8; 13:18).

Over the long term, the covenant intends to totally transform the world. The goal is to overcome the enemies of life, such as poverty and hunger, oppression and inequality, war and sickness, and to improve its quality. However, the covenantal reshaping of behaviors is partial and incremental. For example, the Torah does not offer a vision for perfect economic equality at once: It offers private property and amelioration of inequality, through helping families keep their ancestral lands (i.e. a source of income), interest free loans, regular forgiveness of loans (every seventh year), and outright *tzedakah* or charity. The incremental approach is deeply respectful of human beings because people—be they wealthy or poor—are more receptive to gradual change. The covenantal method suggests that a two percent improvement done fifty times in the course of history will give a hundred percent result,

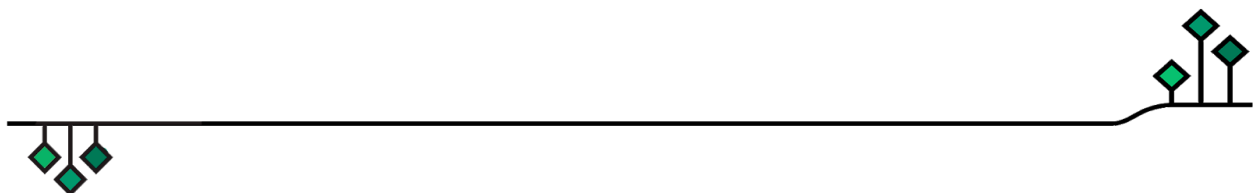


without backlash or breakdowns which often occur when a total change is attempted in one generation.

However, the incremental approach works only if the next generation pushes off from the previous upgrade rather than relapsing. The covenantal approach, therefore, requires a constant and strong emphasis on education, needed to engage the next generation to internalize the ultimate goal and keep the momentum of improvement going. The covenant system incorporates a strong component of ritual, such as reliving the entrance into covenant, so that future generations will feel the same urge to strive for the ultimate goal and not settle for the status quo.

The covenant people is not a super race; the Torah shows the human limitations and flaws of its key characters. Abraham and Sarah's family life is normal, facing standard problems such as health and infertility, jealousy between family members, the challenge of immigration and fitting into new cultures without losing one's own values. The biggest challenge is the succession: how to assure that the next generation takes on the covenantal mission and stays true to it in the face of internal difficulties and societal pressures. In both Abraham's and Isaac's small families, children broke away during the struggle for succession and built their own tribes and kingdoms and directions in life (Ishmael and Esau).

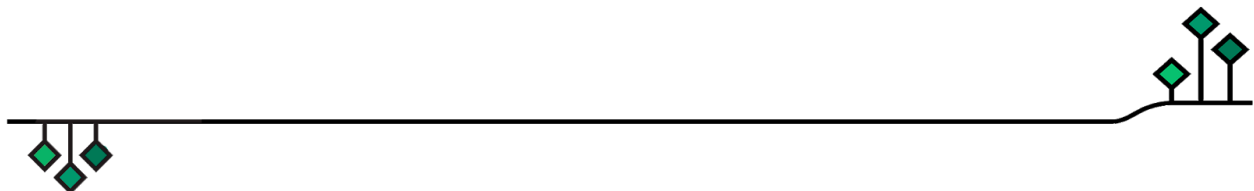
Jacob's family is the first large one in covenantal history—yet it manages to stay together inside the covenantal tent. Despite a period of rivalry and conflict that almost led to fratricide, despite being totally uprooted and driven out of Canaan by famine, the family comes back together and stays faithful to the dream of creating a special covenantal society. Despite Joseph's unparalleled success and his incredible ascent into the highest levels of



Egyptian society, he does not break away from the family vision. He and Jacob agree that his two sons, Ephraim and Menasseh, will be admitted into the family and entitled to share equally with all the brothers in the future relocation and settlement in the land of Canaan (Genesis 48:1-6).

Jacob makes clear the continued centrality of the covenant to him: He will sink permanent roots only in the land where the covenant is to be lived out. Therefore he asks Joseph to bury him in the homeland in the Cave of Maḥpelah, where the ancestors Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, and his wife Leah are buried. VaYeḥi describes his triumphant final scene where he blesses all his sons. They are one covenantal family. Even with mixed feelings, and serious criticisms of some of them, he designates them all as the future twelve tribes of Israel (Genesis 49).

Joseph, too, signals his priority commitment to the ongoing family covenant. He is too high up in Egyptian society to reject burial in Egypt without offending the Egyptians. Still, in true covenantal fashion, the future is a central factor in the present. He envisions a future in which the children of Israel will return to Canaan. He asks his brothers to swear to him that when they or their descendants return some day to the Land of Israel that they will take his bones with them and rebury him in the land of the covenant—as if to say that all other stops on the Jewish journey are temporary. The ultimate goal is an ideal Jewish society in the Promised Land. It will not happen in his lifetime but future generations are part of the covenantal chain. When they carry out their missions, they will bring him with them. They will understand that just as his life and work made them possible so will their future life lift up and validate his life and work. All the generations are part of one unbroken chain.



Thus, Parashat VaYe<sup>h</sup>i teaches us another central characteristic of covenantal living. Since the goals cannot be realized in one lifetime, each generation depends on their future descendants to complete the task. Jacob—and his forefathers and -mothers—have started the mission which can only be realized over many generations. A central principle of covenantal life is “You are not required to complete the work—but you are not free to desist from it.”<sup>2</sup> You start the *tikkun* (repair). Educate the community. Then have faith and trust that future generations will take up the task and bring it to fruition.

Jacob and Joseph ask the next generation to pledge their faithfulness to the covenant and to their forebears. In so doing, they learn another human dimension of the covenant. It is not only a lifetime commitment between God and human beings. Covenant is a loving commitment between the generations of humanity. One would be a fool to start on a journey that one can never complete—unless you believe that flesh of your flesh, bone of your bone, and those who share your dream and commitment will complete it for you and in your name. Thus, the lives of all the generations are bound up one in another in a bond of love and shared hope.

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<sup>2</sup> Mishnah Avot 2:16

