

HaBrit vahaChessed – Covenant and Lovingkindness

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The Biblical connection of the concepts of Covenant and Lovingkindness, HaBrit vahaChessed, occurs explicitly in Deuteronomy Chapter 7 v. 12, “and the Lord will observe for you, the Covenant and the Lovingkindness.”

The various classical rabbinic commentaries on the somewhat enigmatic juxtaposition of the two words, illuminate a great deal of Jewish theology.

The concept of Covenant is of course central to Biblical thought, indicating an intimate relationship, undertaking and commitment between God and human beings. Indeed Judaism views all humanity as covenanted with God through the covenant made with Noah and his descendants – thus the whole of humankind. (Genesis ch. 9 v. 12.) While the Divine commitment in the Noahide Covenant related to the promise never to destroy the world again and thus guarantee the eternity of humankind; Judaism defines the Divine expectation of humanity with regards to this covenant, to observe a basic universal ethical code – the seven commandments given to the children of Noah, which principally concern our moral conduct towards each other. So, while the Divine aspect of covenant confers an eternal guarantee upon the subject (in this case human continuity and Divine concern with all people) it also makes moral demands on the latter.

However a more particular covenant is made by God with Abraham Isaac and Jacob (also known as Israel) and their descendants – and is ratified at Mount Sinai with the whole of the Children of Israel. This election of a particular people for a Covenantal relationship with God and its implications, may be described as the central theme of the Torah, the Pentateuch. Similar to the Noahide Covenant, the Divine commitment guarantees the eternity of the people of Israel in history through which it testifies to the Divine Presence in the affairs of humanity. Yet this particular relationship involves demanding expectations of the people to live up to a higher standard of morality and spirituality accordingly. This is the way of life in accordance with the Biblical Commandments.

However the Bible makes it clear that the children of Israel are meant ideally to live this way of life in the Land of Israel. Perhaps this idea can be best understood in parallel to the role a house serves for a family. While Family Values are not the product of a house, it is very difficult to nurture them, if a family is out on the street. Similarly if the children of

Israel are to be a national covenantal paradigm, they must have the normal context for national life – a land. Yet their very ability to live in the land securely is conditional on their commitment to and practice of this way of life. Exile was accordingly portrayed and understood as the consequence of failure to live up to this high standard. Yet even if exiled, Covenant meant that God's love would always ensure their survival and eventual return once more to the Land. (Leviticus 26 v. 42-45)

Accordingly the principle understandings of the juxtaposition of the word "chessed" in relation to "brit" are firstly, that the Land itself is the "chessed", a gratuitous gift of lovingkindness from God.

The other understanding is that precisely because the standards of the "brit" are so high, and because "there is not a man on earth who does only good and sins not" (Ecclesiastes ch. 7 v. 20), we would all stand condemned by our failures. It is Divine "chessed", compassion and forgiveness, that enables us to remain in a Covenantal relationship with God despite our failures. Herein we discover the key Biblical concept of "teshuvah", which is inadequately translated as "repentance" but should more correctly be translated as "restoration" or "rehabilitation". At its root is the idea that God has created us at the outset, with the capacity to "return" (the literal meaning of "teshuvah") to Him, after sin – the bad fruit of our free will – separates us from Him. Thus we are able, through sincerity, to restore ourselves directly to the correct intimate relationship with God. This capacity to do so, is a gift from God and thus reflects Divine "chessed", lovingkindness and compassion.

Another commentary explains that "Brit", "Covenant" is the commitment for this world; and "Chessed" refers to the after life, where we are rewarded in accordance with the way we have lived in this life. This commentary thus emphasizes the inextricable link between our behavior in this world and the nature of the continuity of our souls in "the world to come".

Another of the medieval commentators suggests that "chessed" refers to the "merit of the Fathers", zechut avot, described by Solomon Schechter as the Jewish concept of "original virtue", in which Judaism sees us as being born in goodness with the added advantage of the merit of good deeds of past generations.

However the most famous Talmudic comment relating to Deuteronomy 7 v. 12, defines "chessed" as referring to the people of Israel themselves. Our sages state that three qualities define the children of Abraham our Father: compassion, modesty, and

performing deeds of lovingkindness (Jerusalem Talmud, Kiddushin). Relating this statement to Deuteronomy 7 v. 12, emphasizes that the quality of lovingkindness is itself a Divine gift and that the children of Israel are especially blessed with it. Connected with this comment is another statement of the sages of the Talmud that “he who does not show compassion raises doubts as to whether he is truly of the seed of Abraham”! (Bezah, 32b) In keeping with this idea, the commentator of a century ago, Rabbi Baruch Halevy Epstein, in his work *Torah Temimah*, indicates that the former comment of our sages on the meaning of “chessed”, directly relates to the previous word “brit”, covenant; to indicate that it is precisely whether or not we live with “chessed”, with lovingkindness, that demonstrates whether or not we are truly living in a covenantal manner. In other words “chessed” lovingkindness both defines the “brit”, the covenant; and indicates whether or not we live accordingly.

This idea is also implied in relation to the “brit”, the covenant, with David that guarantees the monarchy to him and his descendants forever (Samuel II ch. 7), as David’s election is not only a reflection of his faith (Samuel I ch. 17 v. 37) but also a reflection of his heart (Samuel I ch. 16 v. 7). Indeed the sages in the Midrash (Yalkut, Psalms 78) elaborate at length on David’s qualities as a compassionate shepherd towards his flocks of sheep, that (similarly to Moses) made him an appropriate shepherd for the people of Israel.

Evidently in emphasizing the need for “brit” to be accompanied by “chessed”, the sages were alert to the danger of the abuse of the concept of covenant to imply amoral (let alone immoral) privilege rather than moral responsibility. This same concern would appear to be behind the Midrash on Psalm 68 v. 2 “Let the Lord arise and scatter His enemies and may those that hate Him flee before Him.” Say the sages, “this is one of five times (in the book of Psalms) that David call on God to arise. But we do not find that God responds to him! When does God arise? (It says in Psalm 12 v 6) “for the plunder of the poor and the cry of the indigent, now will I arise, says the Lord....”. The sages are telling us here that even if you are God’s elected, you cannot assume that God is automatically on your side. When is God on your side? When you are on His! And when are you on His? When you care for the needy and the indigent, the marginalized and the vulnerable. Accordingly our sages teach us that “chessed”, merciful lovingkindness, is the essential handmaiden of “brit”, whether it is the covenant with David and his descendants, the covenant with Israel, or the covenant with all humanity.

Of course the human quality of chessed is meant precisely to reflect, *mutatis mutandis*, the central Divine quality. This is at the heart of the concept of *Imitatio Dei* as enjoined in

the commandment to “be holy because I the Lord your God am holy” (Leviticus 19 v. 2) to “cleave to God” (Deuteronomy 10 v. 12, 11 v. 22 and 13 v. 4 & 5) and to “walk in His ways” (Deuteronomy 11 v. 22). Elaborating upon these injunctions, the Talmud (Sotah 14a) asks how is it possible to cleave to God, and walk in His way? “Is He not described as a consuming fire (Deuteronomy 4 v. 24)?” But what it means, explain the sages of the Talmud, is that we must strive to cleave to the Divine Attributes and walk in those ways, “Just as the Lord clothes the naked as He did with Adam, so you clothe the naked; just as the Lord visits the sick as He did with Abraham, so you visit the sick; just as the Lord comforts the bereaved as He did with Isaac, so you comfort the bereaved; just as the Lord buries the dead as He did with Moses, so you bury the dead.” Similarly in the Midrash (Mechilta, Canticles, 3) we are told by the sage Abba Shaul, “Just as He is gracious and compassionate, so you be gracious and compassionate.”

In conclusion, I might point out the juxtaposition in our three times daily prayer service, between the aforementioned focus of Israel’s covenantal obligation, the Torah; and chessed, as the means for bringing about the Divine blessing of Shalom, peace. The latter is the object of the concluding blessing of the central liturgical prayer, the Amidah, the eighteen benedictions which became nineteen. In this request for the blessing of Peace we recite, “For by the light of Your Countenance, You have given us a Torah of life and lovingkindness (or more precisely, the love of lovingkindness – which is expressed in) “charity, blessing, mercy, life and peace; Thus may it be good in Your sight to bless us all at all times with Your Peace”. Accordingly, chessed, lovingkindness is not only the handmaiden of brit, the covenant; it is also the crucial means by which the Biblical vision of a world of peace living in recognition of the Divine Presence in our world, is brought to fruition.