

THE DOUBLE-EDGED COVENANT

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לע"נ אמי מורתי מרים בת יצחק ורבקה הכ"מ

I

INTRODUCTION

Parashat Lekh L'kha includes both of the covenants between God and Avraham:

- i)The "B'rit bein haB'tarim" ("covenant between the pieces") in Chapter 15, and
- ii)The "B'rit Milah" which introduces the rite of circumcision, in Chapter 17.

In each of these B'ritot, God commits Himself (so to speak) to give Avraham the two great - intertwined - promises: the Land and Progeny. As mentioned, these promises are interdependent. There is no point to inheriting a Land which cannot be passed on, nor is there much succor in knowing that he will have countless descendants if they have no place to consider home.

The B'rit (we will, for the meantime, treat both interactions as one) has echoes throughout the T'nakh (see, e.g. Sh'mot 2:22, Vayyikra 26:42, II Melakhim 13:23) and, as such, has significance for the ongoing success and weal of Am Yisrael. Central and critical as this B'rit is, there are some troubling aspects to the textual presentation which I would like to address in this essay.

Without looking into the textual details of each B'rit, one question immediately presents itself: Why was there a need to reiterate the B'rit of Chapter 15 in Chapter 17? In other words, if the major Divine commitments of Land and Progeny were already promised in the B'rit bein haB'tarim, why was there a need to recommit to them via the B'rit Milah?

A second question comes on the heels of the first: Once we discern the additional components found in the second B'rit which necessitate it, why aren't the two events integrated - or at least presented sequentially in the Torah? If we accept chronological fidelity as a premise of the text (Ramban's approach; see, inter alia, Ramban's comments at Sh'mot 18:1), we would have to reformulate this question as follows: Why was it necessary to introduce - and commit to - the B'rit bein haB'tarim significantly earlier than B'rit Milah, such that the two events are interrupted by the events of Chapter 16?

II

ANALYZING THE TWO B'RITOT

Before we can respond to our two questions of superfluity and sequence, we ought to analyze the text of each B'rit, identifying those significant differences that may hold the key to our problem.

Instead of assessing each B'rit independently, we will look at the common topics, noting how each is addressed in each B'rit.

A: THE LAND

Although the promise of Eretz Yisra'el is a central feature in each B'rit, the Land is not presented in a uniform fashion.

B'rit bein haB'tarim:

And he said to him, I am Hashem who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to inherit it...In the same day Hashem made a covenant with Avram, saying, To your seed have I given this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates; the Kenites, and the Kenazites, and the Kadmonites, and the Hittites, and the Perizzites, and the Rephaim, and the Amorites, and the Canaanites, and the Girgashites, and the Yevusites. (15:7, 18-21)

B'rit Milah:

And I will establish my covenant between Me and you and your seed after you in their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God to you, and to your seed after you. And I will give to you, and to your seed after you, the land where you are a stranger, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God. (17:7-8)

EVALUATION:

The salient features of the Land in B'rit bein haB'tarim are its boundaries and the foreign people who presently reside there - along with it being the destination towards which God brought Avraham out of Ur Kas'dim.

Conversely, there are no boundaries given to the Land in the B'rit Milah - neither is there any mention of how Avraham got there. The only explicit mention of the Land is the eternal relationship between Avraham (and his seed) and the Land: all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession.

We will continue to assay the significant distinctions between the B'ritot. Once we have covered the major themes as presented in both, we will analyze these different presentations.

B: THE PROGENY

The second thread which runs through all of the Avrahamic promises is Zera' - progeny. Again, this promise is addressed in two clearly diverse manners in the two B'ritot:

B'rit bein haB'tarim:

And, behold, the word of Hashem came to him, saying, This shall not be your heir; but he who shall come forth from your own bowels shall be your heir. And he brought him outside, and said, Look now toward heaven, and count the stars, if you are able to count them; and he said to him, So shall your seed be. (15:4-5)

B'rit Milah:

And I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come out of you. (17:6)

EVALUATION:

In Chapter 15, there is no concern whatsoever given to the quality of the seed - only its vast number - like the stars in the sky. In addition, there is no direct relation to Avrahan other than their being his descendants - but they could all come from one child. In other words, Avraham could have one child (son or daughter) who would, several generations down the line, be the source of many children.

In Chapter 17, each of these facets is intensified. Not only will Avraham have children; they will be kings and leaders of nations. In addition, he himself will be blessed and become fruitful - implying that Avraham himself will father numerous children.

C: THE REST OF THE FAMILY

B'rit bein haB'tarim:

There is no citation because, quite simply, the rest of Avraham's family is ignored here. Although we understand why Yishma'el is left out of this B'rit - he wasn't born yet - Sarah is likewise omitted.

B'rit Milah:

And God said to Avraham, As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall her name be. And I will bless her, and give you a son also of her; and I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations; kings of people shall be of her. (17:15-16)

EVALUATION:

This one is quite clear. Not only is Sarah included in the B'rit Milah, she is given equal billing to

Avraham. Her name is changed to reflect her changed status among the nations; she will be blessed with a child and she will be blessed with being the mother of nations.

In addition, Yishma'el, who we would assume to be left out of the terms of the B'rit Milah (besides the obligation for Avraham to circumcise him), is given a similar blessing:

And as for Yishma'el, I have heard you; Behold, I have blessed him, and will make him fruitful, and will multiply him exceedingly; twelve princes shall he father, and I will make him a great nation. (17:20)

D: CONTEXT

B'rit bein haB'tarim:

After these things the word of Hashem came to Avram in a vision, saying, Fear not, Avram; I am your shield, and your reward will be great. (15:1)

B'rit Milah:

And when Avram was ninety nine years old, Hashem appeared to Avram, and said to him, I am E-l Shad-dai; walk before me, and be perfect. And I will make My covenant between Me and you, and will multiply you exceedingly. (17:1-2)

EVALUATION:

The B'rit bein haB'tarim (and its immediate antecedent, God's appearance to Avram presented here) comes in response to something which has frightened Avram. Most Rishonim associate this fear with the story of the war between the kings which into which Avraham intervened, saving Lot and defending the five local rulers against the four marauding kings. This is supported by the opening phrase: "After these things". (The Rishonim are divided as to what caused Avraham's fear - his concern that his merit had been used up as a result of his miraculous victory, that the kings would come after him for revenge, that his reputation would be soiled among the inhabitants of the Land etc. see the Rishonim ad loc.).

B'rit Milah, conversely, doesn't come "after" anything. It takes place a full thirteen years after the birth of Yishma'el, the last event mentioned in Chapter 16. The text seems to imply that this B'rit was made not in response to a fear of Avraham, but rather in Divine "anticipation" of the birth of Yitzchak. Indeed, Yishma'el's blessing (of being fruitful and siring twelve princes) is only in response to Avraham's plea: "O that Ishmael might live in Your presence!" (17:18).

SUMMARY

B'rit bein haB'tarim:

- i) Is a response to Avraham's fear;
- ii) Focuses only on Avraham's success;
- iii) Promises only progeny, ignoring the quality of that seed;
- iv) Does not concern itself with Avraham's direct relationship with that progeny, and
- v) Presents the Land by its borders and as the location of Avraham's rescue from Ur Kas'dim

B'rit Milah:

- i) Is given in anticipation of the birth of Yitzhak;
- ii) Includes Sarah as an equal beneficiary of the Divine blessing;
- iii) Promises children who are kings and leaders of nations;
- iv) Associates that blessing directly with Avraham, as he himself is to be fruitful (as will Yishma'el)
- v) Presents the Land as an Ahuzat Olam (everlasting possession), making no mention of the borders of the Land or the identity of its present-day inhabitants.

III

ONE MORE SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCE

We have assayed the thematic differences between the two B'ritot, noting how common issues are treated differently in each place. There are, however, significant linguistic differences which will help us discover the underlying difference which explains all of the above-mentioned variations. One of these differences lies in the operative word throughout this shiur: B'rit.

Although common convention relates to both settings - indeed to both chapters - as B'ritot, that word used quite differently in each selection.

Although the term "B'rit bein haB'tarim" is the traditional appellation given to the covenant forged in Chapter 15, that phrase shows up nowhere in T'nakh. Indeed, the word "B'rit" shows up only once in the entire chapter:

Bayom Hahu Karat Hashem B'rit et Avram... (on that day, Hashem forged a covenant with Avram...) - v. 18.

The key word "B'rit" is presented without the definite article and is treated as "a covenant" - which is exactly what we would expect. After all, this covenant had never been made before; no one had ever been promised this Land prior to Avraham and the earlier promises (12:7, 13:14-17) were

sufficiently vague as to warrant a clear delineation of the borders of the Promised Land.

The word B'rit appears, in one of two forms, thirteen times in Chapter 17. Significantly, in the first Parashah of that chapter - addressed directly to and about Avraham - the word B'rit shows up three times, and B'riti (which we will discuss forthwith) shows up seven times. Those of you who followed our study of Megillat Ruth may recall that if a word shows up seven times in a Parashah, that is a strong indication that it is the Milah Manhah (guide word) of that Parashah, setting the tone for the entire selection.

Let's consider this word B'riti; specifically in the context of our chapter. Here is the first occurrence of this word:

And when Avram was ninety nine years old, Hashem appeared to Avram, and said to him, I am E-l Shad-dai; walk before me, and be perfect. And I will make My covenant between Me and you, and will multiply you exceedingly.

Unlike the undefined "B'rit", which can be applied to any, previously unknown pact, B'riti is best deconstructed as HaB'rit Sheli. "My covenant" refers to an already existent agreement - the one that is known to be associated with "Me".

It would be tempting to interpret the B'riti of Chapter 17 in light of the B'rit of Chapter 15; to wit, the referent of B'rit Milah is the B'rit bein haB'tarim.

This approach is, however, untenable. The B'rit reiterated (numerous times) in the B'rit Milah section has nothing to do with the ceremonial or covenantal aspects found in Chapter 15. The B'rit of Chapter 15 expressly and explicitly grants Avraham a particular stretch of land - a stretch that remains undefined and relatively peripheral to the agreement entered into via the B'rit Milah of Chapter 17.

We are, therefore, left with one final question: What is the B'rit that is referred to (at least seven times) in Chapter 17?

IV

AN EARLIER PROBLEM

The unidentified "B'rit" which permeates Chapter 17 is not a new problem within the context of B'resheet. The word B'riti, referring to a pre- existent covenant, appears in the context of the Flood narrative. When God commands Noah to build the Ark, he states:

But with you will I fulfill B'riti (My covenant); and you shall come into the ark, you, and your sons, and your wife, and your sons' wives with you. (6:18)

What covenant is the referent here? At this point, God had made no covenant with Noah - that only appears in the postdiluvian scene, where the covenant is marked with the placement of the rainbow. Even in that context, the phrasing is none too clear:

And God spoke to Noah, and to his sons with him, saying, And I, behold, I will fulfill my covenant with you, and with your seed after you ...and I will establish my covenant with you; nor shall all flesh be cut off any more by the waters of a flood...This is the sign of the covenant which I make between Me and you and every living creature that is with you, for everlasting generations; I set My bow in the cloud, and it shall be for a sign of a covenant between Me and the earth. And it shall come to pass, when I bring a cloud over the earth, that the bow shall be seen in the cloud; And I will remember My covenant, which is between Me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall no more become a flood to destroy all flesh. And the bow shall be in the cloud; and I will look upon it, that I may remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is upon the earth. And God said to Noah, This is the sign of the covenant, which I have established between Me and all flesh that is upon the earth. (9:9-17)

Throughout this section, the rainbow is called an Ot B'rit (a sign of the covenant) - but not the covenant itself. At no point are the terms of the actual covenant specified, except insofar as the consequence of that agreement is that God will never again destroy the earth with a flood. Note, however, that the passage begins with the phrase: Et B'riti...(My covenant); again, we must ask: Which covenant is being fulfilled here?

V

THE ORIGINAL B'RIT

If God, while speaking to Noah, refers to B'riti, there must have been a B'rit between God and Mankind before Noah. That takes us back, of course, to the first man.

The creation of Man (in the first creation narrative, 1:1-2:3) is described as follows:

So God created man in His own image, in the image of God created He him; male and female He created them. And God blessed them, and God said to them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves upon the earth (1:27-28)

Although not explicitly called a B'rit, the charge given Man at creation is, indeed, a pact. Man has been given something (the earth and all "lower" creatures) and has, in kind, committed himself (or been committed) to rule over them - while caring for their continued existence.

What, then, is God's commitment here? If Man's job is to oversee the maintenance and successful growth of God's universe, what must God do?

It stands to reason that God has agreed, so to speak, to continue to "support" the universe by maintaining the natural climes, proper cycles etc. in order to allow Man to continue to flourish.

It is only when Man fails his task miserably that God "reneges" and the world of Creation is regressed to primordial chaos (during the flood).

In other words, the original B'rit, between God and Man, involves a mutual commitment to maintain and support God's world.

VI

FLASH FORWARD TO THE FLOOD

Now we can understand the B'rit to which God is referring when He commits to fulfill B'riti with Noah. The statement, broadly read, is understood as follows: Even though I am destroying all of Mankind, I will fulfill my original B'rit with you and your family.

Subsequent to the flood, the rainbow becomes the sign of that covenant ("B'riti"); such that both parties to the agreement have a tangible and visible sign of their agreement, assuring that it will never again be threatened so sorely.

VII

BACK TO AVRAHAM

After ten generations of Mankind's sinful behavior, God set out to "start over" - see last week's shiur for a comparison between the world of Adam and the (postdiluvian) world of Noah. Ten generations after Noah, the world had sunk again - but, this time, instead of destroying most of the world and saving the few righteous people, God selects the righteous individual (Avraham), who will become the teacher of Mankind. Instead of building a new world from scratch, Avraham's job will be to build a nation which will be able to teach the whole world how to worship God in truth, justice and generosity of spirit (see B'resheet 18:18-19).

Before proceeding to analyze the two B'ritot with Avraham, the differences between them and the need for two separate covenants, a quick overview of Parashat Lekh L'kha is in order:

Ch. 12: Avraham is commanded to leave his land etc. and moves towards K'na'an, going through the Land and ending up in Mitzrayim as a result of the famine. While there, he endures a difficult encounter with Pharaoh

Ch. 13: Upon his successful and safe return from Mitzrayim, Avraham must separate from Lot; after Lot chooses the lush Jordan plain, God promises the Land to Avraham.

Ch. 14: The war of the four kings against the five kings. Avraham intercedes in order to save Lot and has a curious détente with MalkiZedek, the local priest, and with the king of S'dom.

Ch. 15: B'rit bein haB'tarim

Ch. 16: Sarah, realizing that she will not likely bear children, suggests that her maidservant, Hagar, stand in for her as a child bearer for Avraham. When she becomes pregnant, Hagar treats her mistress lightly; in response, Sarah oppresses Hagar, who runs away. (See the Ramban ad loc.!). An angel encounters Hagar, directing her to return to Sarah, suffer under her hand, and bear the child - who is to be called Yishma'el.

Ch. 17: B'rit Milah.

Note that all of the interactions involving Avraham up until the B'rit bein haB'tarim are between Avraham and outsiders: Pharaoh, his separation from Lot, the foreign kings, MalkiZedek and the king of S'dom. What, you may ask, is missing here?

When God blessed Adam, effectively committing to the B'rit, He told him to be fruitful and multiply. Man's blessings begin at home, raising a family and ensuring that his own moral and spiritual growth - along with his material success - not only be passed on but grow and increase with the next generation. Avraham's ultimate task, to be the next "Adam" of the world, could not be completed as long as all of his interactions were with outsiders. He was certainly a successful recruiter for God - but the realization of his potential would only happen when he would transmit the tradition of his faith to his own children.

We can now review the "B'rit bein haB'tarim" and understand its unique thematic stylings:

This agreement was not an affirmation of the original B'rit - hence it is not introduced that way. The only concern being addressed here is Avraham's fear - a fear of retribution from the vanquished kings, a fear that his work will be for naught, as he has no seed. In response, God promises him that he will, indeed, have descendants. Their quality is of no import here, since Avraham has not asked

for children who will follow his path and endorse his values - just children to inherit his gifts.

As such, Eretz Yisra'el is described by its boundaries - because it operates, in the context of this B'rit, purely as a safe haven. Note the central verse in the chapter:

I am Hashem who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to inherit it

The emphasis here, just as it is in the verse foreshadowed here (the opening of the Decalogue), is not the beauty or special qualities of the Land. Rather, it is the Land where God brought Avraham after saving him from the land of Kas'dim. Eretz K'na'an's borders are the most important feature here, since Avraham must know how far his "safe territory" extends.

This is the Eretz Yisra'el embraced by many over the years, especially in our miraculous century. Many are drawn home not out of an attraction to the sanctity and glory of the Land, rather out of an utter rejection of Galut and, oftentimes as not, are chased home by inhospitable nations.

Before Avraham can step into the shoes of Adam (and Noah) and become a partner in the original B'rit, he must turn to his family and attend to that dimension of his life. For the first time, in the "sandwich" chapter (16) between the B'ritot, the entire narrative is devoted to the goings-on inside of Avraham's tent.

We now turn to Chapter 17 and understand that this is the "real" B'rit - B'riti, the commitment by God to fulfill, with Avraham, His original pact with Mankind. His entire family is blessed with the same blessing given to Man: P'ru uR'vu is echoed here: v'Arbeh Ot'cha...v'Hifreii Ot'cha (17:2,6). Eretz Yisra'el is not the haven for refugees from Kas'dim, from Mitzrayim (or Russia); it is the eternal possession of a nation of kings. Everyone in Avraham's family is blessed - and this recommitment to the B'rit is in anticipation of the first opportunity to really fulfill it - through the birth of the promised son, Yitzhak.

VIII

POSTSCRIPT

There is one more critical feature found in the "B'rit bein haB'tarim" which has no echo in the B'rit Milah; a difference we can readily appreciate in light of this analysis.

The core prophecy of the B'rit being haB'tarim is the destiny of Avraham's seed;

Know for a certainty that your seed shall be a stranger in a land that is not theirs, and shall serve them; and they shall afflict them four hundred years; And also that nation, whom they shall serve, will I judge; and afterward shall they come out with great wealth. (15:13-14)

This promise, which has been fulfilled several times in our history (focally at Yetziat Mitzrayim), again posits Eretz Yisra'el not as the palace of kings but as the haven of refugees.

We now understand the need for two covenants. When we need our Land as a refuge, when we

return with shattered families and as a broken people, the B'rit bein haB'tarim stands as our guarantee.

When, however, we are finally able to rise to the challenge to teach the entire world, to be (in the words of Chapter 17) a "father of many nations", the Land will be our eternal possession, the birthplace of royalty who will fulfill the destiny established for all of Mankind.

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