

This month's study with
Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein



***“The LORD our
God made a
covenant with
us at Horeb”
— Deuteronomy 5:2***



Moses: Covenant with A Nation

More than 3,000 years ago, the fledgling nation of Israel stood at the foot of Mount Sinai, also known as Horeb, in the middle of the desert. Lighting flashed, thunder boomed, and God descended onto the mountain in a great ball of fire.

In an event that would forever change the human experience, God spoke to the nation, giving them the Ten Commandments and the *Torah*, the first five books of the Bible. God charged the Israelites with transmitting the wisdom of the *Torah* to the entire world, entering into a covenant with Israel that still exists to this very day. That covenant, instituted under the leadership of Moses, is known as the Mosaic Covenant.

For the first time in history, all humankind was officially given God's requirements for holy living. The Law was given to reveal God's righteousness and holiness (Exodus 19:23; Romans 7:12), and to establish God's standard of righteousness for His people (Deuteronomy 7:6; Isaiah 62:12).

Before God revealed His Word at Mount Sinai, the world was a different place. Paganism was the dominant theology, pitting one god against another, one nation against another, and one man against another. Atrocities and immoral behavior were carried out in the name of these gods on a regular basis.

“Might makes right” was the prevailing notion that ruled society, and there was no objective source for what was truly right and what was definitively wrong. In such a society, people could subjectively decide for themselves what was acceptable and what was not. The purpose of life was anyone's guess or opinion.

When God gave His *Torah* to the nation of Israel that changed. There was now an objective source, the one true God, Who dictated right and wrong, good and evil,

and Who gave instructions on how to live a life of purpose and meaning. These laws for living were entrusted to Israel so that they might share them with the world.

It's often asked why God chose the moment of revelation and the giving of the *Torah* to occur in the desert. Why didn't He wait until the Israelites were settled in the land He had promised them as an everlasting inheritance? According to Jewish tradition, God specifically chose to give His Word in the desert because the desert is ownerless.

In so doing, God was making the statement that the *Torah*, too, is not “owned” by any specific nation or individual. God's Word is intended for every human being, for all times, and in all circumstances. Although only the Israelites would be subject to specific laws and obligations enumerated in the Bible, the wisdom and guidance of the Bible is universal. It is one of God's greatest gifts to us.

Winston Churchill summed it up this way: “We owe to the Jews in the Christian revelation a system of ethics which, even if it were entirely separated from the supernatural, would be incomparably the most precious possession of mankind, worth in fact the fruits of all other wisdom and learning put together. On that system and by that faith there has been built out of the wreck of the Roman Empire the whole of our existing civilization.”

Indeed, the powerful moment of revelation, thousands of years ago, reverberates in our society today. As we study the Mosaic Covenant, it is my hope and prayer that the ideas and teachings found in the Law of Moses continue to shape society and bring blessings to us all.

Rabbi Eckstein



A Chosen People

“Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”

— Exodus 19:5-6

More than likely, you have heard the term the “chosen people” in reference to the Jewish people. But are the Jews, in fact, the chosen people? And, if so, why? For what purpose? The truth is that the people of Israel were chosen for one purpose only — to uphold and share the Word of God as revealed to them on Mount Sinai.

It was at Mount Sinai that the Israelites entered into a covenant with God, a partnership known as the “Mosaic Covenant,” a divine agreement established through the greatest Jewish leader of all time, Moses.

The simplest explanation for why the children of Israel were chosen to enter into this great covenant with God is because God promised their forefathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, that their descendants were destined to become the chosen nation. In this way, the Mosaic Covenant is really a culmination of the Abrahamic Covenant, the fulfillment of God’s promises made to Abraham.

Christian theologian R. C. Sproul described the Mosaic Covenant in the following way, “Under the Mosaic covenant, God makes huge strides toward realizing the promises He made to Abraham (Genesis 12:1–3). A large number of families are constituted as a nation during the exodus from Egypt and brought to Canaan, which begins the first major fulfillment of God’s promise to the patriarch. The Lord is present among Israel in the tabernacle as He keeps His word to bless Israel. All the nations of the earth begin to find blessing as the Law is written and later proclaimed to the nations (Jonah 3).”

The Mosaic Covenant is therefore an eternal covenant, unbreakable, and unconditional, based on the faith of the forefathers. Indeed, in the Christian Bible, Jesus taught, *“For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished”* (Matthew 5:18).

This new covenant revolutionized the world, and continues to greatly influence our world today. It was that covenant that brought us the Ten Commandments, the Law, and along with it, the Judeo-Christian values that have shaped our society.

U.S. President John Adams once said, “I will insist that the Hebrews have done more to civilize man than any other nation,” and President Lyndon Johnson explained, “Our society is illuminated by the spiritual insights of the Hebrew prophets.” Indeed, the covenant between Israel and God has had a profound effect on all humanity.

Consider some of the influences that the Law of Moses and the Ten Commandments have had upon the legal systems, particularly in Western societies. Here are just a few of the foundational legal principles that are derived

from the Mosaic Law: all are equal before the law, just as before God (Deuteronomy 10:17); judges are bound by law and not personal opinions or feelings (Leviticus 19:15); and a person is innocent until proven guilty (Deuteronomy 19:15).

Yet, like their forefather Abraham, the Israelites are also credited with “choosing God” just as much as they were chosen *by* God. To start with, according to Jewish tradition, only a fraction of the Israelites enslaved in Egypt actually left to follow Moses into the wilderness. Many lacked the faith to leave behind everything they knew to follow God into the desert and the unknown. Those who did leave Egypt were a self-selecting group, ready and willing to follow the God of their forefathers with complete faith.

Moreover, Jewish oral tradition teaches that God offered the *Torah*, the Bible, to other nations as well so that they could not complain that God only offered the Bible to the Israelites. As the teaching goes, each nation in turn asked what was inside God’s Bible, and then rejected it for one reason or another.

Whether we take this anecdote literally, the fact remains that our all-knowing God knew that no other nation on earth would accept His law unconditionally. Only the Israelites replied with complete acceptance. *“Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it to the people. They responded, ‘We will do everything the LORD has said; we will obey’”* (Exodus 24:7).

The Israelites declared that they would do whatever God asked of them even if they did not understand His ways. Above all, they would obey, and only then would they seek meaning and understanding of God and His laws.

Today the Jewish people continue to uphold their national mission. As “the People of the Book,” the Jewish people live by the Bible and share the wisdom of the Bible. And while the relationship between God and the Jews has certainly had its ups and downs, the covenant remains unbreakable and the unique bond continues to be unshakable.

think about it ...continued on page 4

1. The impact of God’s Word, the Bible, can be seen in so many places. For example, Moses as lawgiver is depicted in one of two marble friezes in the U.S. Supreme Court. Where do you see evidence of its influence on Western governments, public institutions, and society in general?
2. The Bible is “ownerless” and belongs to everyone, but that doesn’t mean that we shouldn’t take “ownership” of it. How do you make it your own and incorporate it passionately into your life?
3. The nation of Israel was chosen to uphold and share the Word of God at the foot of Mount Sinai. How might you share God’s Word and serve as a reflection of biblical values?



A Match Made in Heaven

Moses then took the blood, sprinkled it on the people and said, “This is the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words.”

— Exodus 24:8

More than 3,000 years ago, on the sixth day of the Hebrew month *Sivan*, three million Israelites stood at the foot of Mount Sinai in excited anticipation. In an event unprecedented in history, God revealed Himself to them and entered into a sacred covenant with them. “Moses then took the blood, sprinkled it on the people and said, ‘This is the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words.’” This was the precise moment in time when Israel became God’s “treasured possession” (Exodus 19:5) and “holy nation” (Exodus 19:6).

The Sinai experience is often compared to a marriage ceremony. God as the groom entered into a sacred relationship with Israel, the bride. The *ketubah*, the marital contract, was represented by the Tablets containing the Ten Commandments, appropriately referred to as “the tablets of the covenant law” (Exodus 25:16).

The idea of Israel being God’s bride is echoed in the words of the prophets. In Jeremiah 2:2, we read, “*This is what the LORD says: I remember the devotion of your youth, how as a bride you loved me and followed me through the wilderness, through a land not sown.*” God refers to Israel as His bride during the time spent in the desert, as the nation of Israel began its journey together with God. Certainly, we see this imagery expressed in the Christian Bible as well, with the church being described as the bride in the book of Revelation (Revelation 19:7; 21:9).

However, at times when Israel strayed from God, Israel was compared to an unfaithful wife, as we read in Jeremiah 3:20, “*But like a woman unfaithful to her husband, so you, Israel, have been unfaithful to me,*” declares the LORD.” Yet, while the “marriage” between God and His people, could be strained, it could never be broken.

Like any marriage, the relationship between God and Israel consists of privileges and obligations. As the Bible mentions numerous times, God would provide for and protect His people. In turn, the people were required to be faithful and obedient to the Lord. Part of this obedience requires the nation of Israel to observe the 613 commandments enumerated in the *Torah*.

However, the words “commandments” or “laws” are poor translations of the word *mitzvot*, which does not have an exact English translation. In Judaism, the *mitzvot* are 613 ways to connect with God. Each ordinance is a prescription for closeness with the Lord. The *Torah*, related to the word *horaah*, which means “teaching” or “instructions,” is a book of instructions for living a godly life.

And, herein lies the purpose of God’s covenant with the nation of Israel, the Mosaic Covenant. Through this partnership, Israel would serve as a “light unto the nations,”

bringing godliness into the world, sharing God’s wisdom and values while increasing the awareness of His presence. As God spoke through the prophet Isaiah, “*I, the LORD, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles*” (42:6). Likewise, in the Christian Bible, Jesus taught his followers, “*In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven*” (Matthew 5:16).

In order to fulfill this mission, the nation was required to abide by a more demanding set of rules, much like the priests who would serve God on a more intimate level would have additional restrictions placed upon them. As God explained to the Israelites, “*you will be for me a kingdom of priests*” (Exodus 19:6). We see this call to holiness echoed in the Christian Bible, when the apostle Peter taught, “*But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light*” (1 Peter 2:9).

If the nation of Israel is indeed the “chosen” nation, then they were chosen to serve, to point the nations of the world on their journey toward God. Ultimately, God desires an intimate relationship with all humanity. Through His relationship with one nation, His glory will spread to all nations. Through the Mosaic Covenant with Israel, the sacred partnership with the nation of Israel, God would achieve His ultimate purpose for the entire world.

apply it...

1. **CHOOSE GOD.** The Israelites, like Abraham before them, chose God as much as God chose them. Every day, make the decision to choose God as your Guide and King. (Joshua 24:15; Matthew 6:24)
2. **STUDY GOD’S WORD.** One of God’s greatest gift to humanity is the Bible. It is our instruction manual for living. Study it, cherish it, and live it. (Deuteronomy 8:3; 2 Timothy 3:16-17)
3. **MARK THE SABBATH.** Taking one day, or one hour, a week to remember that God is the Creator and Sustainer of our world is an extremely effective way to refresh our relationship with God on a consistent basis. (Isaiah 56:2; Hebrews 4:9-10)
4. **SURRENDER.** Just as the Israelites were willing to accept God’s Word unconditionally, so must we be willing to accept God’s will for our lives unconditionally. Trust and surrender to God. (Exodus 24:7; Luke 11:28)
5. **BE A “LIGHT TO THE NATIONS.”** As representatives of God and the Bible, we must be especially mindful of our words and actions. How people see us will influence how they see all people of God. (Isaiah 42:6; Matthew 5:14-16)



An Everlasting Sign

“Also I gave them my Sabbaths as a sign between us, so they would know that I the LORD made them holy.”

— Ezekiel 20:12

After God established a covenant with Noah, He gave him an eternal *oht*, a “sign,” which was the rainbow. When God entered into covenant with Abraham there was an eternal *oht* as well, the sign of circumcision. Yet, when we read the account of God establishing His covenant with the nation of Israel in Exodus 19–20, we do not see any mention of an *oht* associated with the Mosaic Covenant.

Or so it seems.

In Exodus 20, we read the initial details of the covenant God made with Israel through the Ten Commandments. The fourth commandment reads, *“Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work . . . For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy”* (Exodus 20: 8-11). This commandment sets out the requirement of Sabbath observance and the reason behind it – to testify that God is the Creator.

Later, in Exodus 31, we come across the commandment to observe the Sabbath again; however, the language is significantly different. Scripture reads: *“Say to the Israelites, ‘You must observe my Sabbaths. This will be a sign between me and you for the generations to come, so you may know that I am the LORD, who makes you holy’”* (Exodus 31:13). This verse makes it clear that the Sabbaths, both the weekly and the yearly Sabbath (Leviticus 25:4), serve as the eternal *oht* reminding us that God made Israel holy.

When did God make Israel holy? At Mount Sinai when He established the Mosaic Covenant, as we read in Exodus 19:5-6, *“Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession . . . you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”* In Ezekiel 20:12, the prophet echoes this sentiment relaying God’s word: *“Also I gave them my Sabbaths as a sign between us, so they would know that I the LORD made them holy.”*

Indeed the Sabbath, still kept and guarded by the Jewish people today, is an eternal sign of the sacred relationship between God and Israel. In the closing words of the book of Isaiah, the prophet wrote that the Sabbath endures, as does God’s relationship with His people: *“As the new heavens and the new earth that I make will endure before me,’ declares the LORD, ‘so will your name and descendants endure. From one New Moon to another and from one Sabbath to another, all mankind will come and bow down before me”* (Isaiah 66:22-23). In the Christian Bible, we read in the book of Hebrews, *“There remains,*

then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God’s rest also rests from their works, just as God did from his” (Hebrews 4:9-10).

But why the Sabbath? Out of all of God’s precepts, why was the Sabbath chosen as the sign?

The Sabbath is often the defining element of the relationship a Jew has with God. Moreover, Jewish tradition teaches that observance of the Sabbath is equivalent to the observance of all of God’s commandments.

The Sabbath underlines the two most essential precepts of Judaism. The first, as already noted, is that our God is the Creator, the one and only Lord. The second, which appears in Deuteronomy 5:15, the second time the Bible enumerates the Ten Commandments, tells us: *“Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the LORD your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the LORD your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day.”* The Sabbath is a reminder that God is involved in our world, hears our cries, and intervenes on behalf of His children.

These two concepts – that God created the world and that He is intimately involved in the world – are the foundation of the Jewish faith. As long as Jews cling to the Sabbath, they reaffirm these two basic ideals, and thus retain their identity and the core of the mission of Israel – to live these truths and share them.

Perhaps this is why the famous Israeli writer Ahad Ha’am once remarked that, “More than the Jews have kept the Sabbath, the Sabbath has kept the Jews.” This weekly encounter with our Creator reinforces the relationship established between God and Israel 3,000 years ago.

As the sign of the Mosaic Covenant, the Sabbath reminds the nation of Israel of their sacred relationship with God and the obligations that come with being a holy nation charged with a divine mission. And when Israel keeps the Sabbath, it “reminds” God that we are still committed to that mission, that we join with our ancestors at the foot of Mount Sinai, in declaring, *“We will do everything the LORD has said; we will obey”* (Exodus 24:7).

think about it...continued from page 2

4. God’s relationship with Israel is often described as a marriage. In what ways, do you see your relationship with God as a marriage? Like a marriage, what might you need to work on to keep that relationship fresh?
5. The Jewish people are frequently referred to as “people of The Book.” How would you describe yourself in your relationship with God’s Word? What might you do to be considered a person of “The Book”?