



This month's study with
Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein



The Covenant: God's Eternal Contract

In both the Jewish and Christian faiths, the *brit*, Hebrew for “covenant,” plays a central role. It defines events of the past and assures us of promises for the future. However, to fully appreciate the significance and meaning of God’s covenants with humanity, we must understand the context in which they were made. While the idea of God entering into a covenantal relationship with a group or an individual seems natural to us, it was a radical idea in ancient times, an idea that has changed and shaped the world.

The ancient world was pagan. Most people believed there were many gods, each controlling a different earthly component. These so-called gods not only were at odds with humans, but also with each other. The most one could hope for was to appease the gods and trust that his or her god was stronger than the next person’s. Even if an individual believed in one Creator-God, that person most likely believed that God created the world and left it to its own devices. God was “up there,” while people were left to fight for survival “down here.”

The thought that one supreme God initiated a relationship with man shattered this world-view. First, the idea of one universal God suggested that there were no gods fighting one another, and more significantly, that all people came from the same source, shared a similar destiny, and were made to exist in harmony.

Jews affirm this basic principle when we recite the *Shema*, the centerpiece of our daily morning and prayer service, from Deuteronomy 6:4-5: “*Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.*”

Moreover, a covenantal relationship with God affirmed the fact that God was involved with humanity, that He wanted a partnership with us, and that our purpose was to fulfill our part in the covenantal relationship.

Covenants were commonly made in the ancient Near East. They served as contracts

or formal agreements between two parties, usually between kings of two nations, or between kings and their subjects. The Bible is filled with covenants between people who wished to ensure peace between both parties.

For example, Abraham made a covenant with Abimelek (Genesis 21:22-34) and David with Jonathan (1 Samuel 18:3). The Israelites made a covenant with the Gibeonites. Even after discovering that they had been tricked into making peace with people who pretended to be from a faraway country, the Israelites could not and would not break the covenant they made (Joshua 9).

However, in this month’s *Limmud*, we will explore the most momentous covenants ever made – God’s covenants with humanity. Like other covenants, these divine covenants are legal and binding contracts that apply even today. As we explore the covenants made for all the world through Noah, with Abraham and the nation of Israel at Mount Sinai, and with David for his eternal dynasty, we will see how these covenants are echoed in the Christian Bible as well (Luke 1:55; Galatians 3:16).

From the time of Noah until the time that the Messiah will come to usher in a new era, these covenants form the foundation of our faith. They guide us and provide us with direction while affirming the hope-filled promises that God has made to us.

Join us as we discover the partnership available to each of us as we rededicate ourselves to our personal and collective covenant with God. In the upcoming months, we will continue to explore these divine covenants; delving more deeply into the covenants God made with Noah, Abraham, and Moses, and the implications of each for us today.

It is my prayer that these studies will motivate and inspire you to step fully into your role as partner with God.

Rabbi Eckstein

You are standing here in order to enter into a covenant with the LORD your God, a covenant the LORD is making with you this day and sealing with an oath, to confirm you this day as his people, that he may be your God as he promised you and as he swore to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

— Deuteronomy 29:12-13



A Promise for Humanity

“I establish my covenant with you: Never again will all life be destroyed by the waters of a flood; never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth.”

— Genesis 9:11

The very first time that the word *brit*, בְּרִית, “covenant,” is used in the Bible is in Genesis 9, when God promises: *“Never again will all life be destroyed by the waters of a flood; never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth.”* As we have mentioned earlier, at its very basic level, a covenant is a contract between two parties or more. In this instance, God makes a commitment to every living being that He will never destroy the world by flood again. In return, God requires basic morality from human beings, which consisted of seven universal laws that in Judaism are referred to as the Noahide Laws.

If Genesis 1 is the story of the creation of the world, then Genesis 6 is the story of the de-creation, or destruction of the world, because God saw *“that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time”* (Genesis 6:5). Genesis 8 and 9 are the story of the re-creation of the world after the flood; however, this new world would be fundamentally different from the first.

In our world, God knows that *“every inclination of the human heart is evil from childhood”* (8:21), but accepts flawed humans as they are anyway. Yet this new world needed to be governed by a different system – one founded upon a covenantal relationship between man and God. There were basic obligations placed upon humanity so that the world would not descend to the level of depravity that had brought about the flood in the first place.

According to Jewish tradition, there are seven laws, known as the Noahide Laws, that every human – every descendant of Noah – must abide by even today. God said in Genesis 9:12, *“This is the sign of the covenant I am making between me and you and every living creature with you, a covenant for all generations to come.”* Under the Noahic Covenant, the laws are: Do not murder; do not steal; do not worship false gods; do not be sexually immoral; do not be cruel to animals; do not blaspheme God; and an affirmative command to set up a system of justice. In return, God would keep His side of the deal to protect the world from destruction.

Moreover, according to Jewish tradition, anyone who abides by these seven laws of basic morality, particularly non-Jews, will be considered a righteous Gentile. From the Jewish perspective, abiding by these seven laws is what is required for any Gentile to walk with God and enjoy a meaningful relationship with Him.

Some Christian scholars believe that the rules suggested in Acts 15:19-20 for Gentiles to follow as part of the early Church were a reflection of these same laws given to Noah. Speaking before the council at Jerusalem, one of the council’s leader, James said, *“Instead we should write*

to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood” (Acts 15:20).

Christian theologians point to other connections between the Noahic Covenant and New Testament theology. On his website **desiringGod.org**, Christian author John Piper writes, “And therefore the New Testament writers see the flood as a foreshadowing of the final judgment with fire (2 Peter 3:5–7), and the ark as a foreshadowing of final salvation (1 Peter 3:20–21), and the days of Noah as typical of the last days before the coming of the Son of Man (Matthew 24:37).”

In most of the major covenants in Scriptures, we find both the word *brit*, “covenant,” and the term *oht*, אוֹת, which means “a sign.” The sign was both the way that the deal was sealed and a reminder of the covenant. Appropriately, the *oht* associated with the Noahic Covenant is the rainbow. In Genesis 9:13, God says: *“I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth.”* The beautiful, peaceful, and colorful rainbow is a sign that the world is now in partnership with God instead of at odds with Him. Some suggest it is not by accident that there are seven colors in a rainbow, a representation of the seven obligations for all humanity.

Even though God tells us in verses 14 and 15 that the purpose of the rainbow is so that *He* will remember the covenant, we know that God doesn’t forget anything. Rather, the rainbow is a reminder to us that God remembers His covenant; that He relates to us with everlasting love; and that His patience is great and that He is merciful. It also reminds us that we have an obligation to ensure that His world remains a place of morality, justice, and kindness through these seven laws that He gave us.

The Noahic Covenant is a reminder that our God is a faithful partner of His covenant with us. In Isaiah 54:9, we read, *“To me this is like the days of Noah, when I swore that the waters of Noah would never again cover the earth. So now I have sworn not to be angry with you, never to rebuke you again.”* What God extended to Noah and his descendants and sealed with His rainbow is given to us today.

After the flood in the times of Noah, God created a world in partnership with all humanity. That means that every human being alive today is part of that covenant. As Paul wrote in the Christian Bible in Romans 8:31, *“If God is for us, who can be against us?”* God is not against us. He wants a relationship with us. God offers us His hand; it is up to each of us to take hold of it and walk with Him in peace.



A National Commitment

“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

From the broad stroke of the Noahic Covenant given to all humanity, we come to God’s next covenant given to one man, Abraham, which culminated in God’s covenant with one nation, Israel. At first, God promised Abraham to bless him and all the world through him (Genesis 12:3); to give Abraham descendants too numerous to count (Genesis 15:5); to make him the father of a great nation and to make his name great (Genesis 12:2).

As Abraham’s relationship with God progressed, God initiated a covenant with him, creating an official partnership with Abraham, the first Jew, and all his offspring. In the covenant, God promised Abraham that He would give his offspring the land of Canaan as an internal inheritance: *“On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram and said, ‘To your descendants I give this land . . .’”* (Genesis 15:18).

God elaborated upon this covenant in Genesis 17, promising Abraham that He would make him the father of many nations (v. 4), that He would be his God and the God of his descendants, and that they would be given the land of Canaan as an eternal possession for the generations to come. (Read Genesis 17:7-8.)

Abraham, as his part of the agreement, promised to obey God’s command to *“walk before me faithfully and be blameless”* (Genesis 17:1). He committed to faithfulness, obedience, and righteousness. Abraham’s incredible obedience was demonstrated when he offered his only son, Isaac, on the altar — not to earn God’s favor, but because of his complete confidence and faith in God’s promise of descendants through Isaac (Genesis 21:12, Hebrews 11:17-19).

The *oh*t, “the sign” and sealing of this covenant, was circumcision. God instructed Abraham: *“You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you. For the generations to come every male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised”* (Genesis 17:11-12). Even today, when a Jewish baby is born, a great celebration is held eight days later at what is called a *brit* — literally, “covenant,” where the baby boy undergoes a circumcision and enters the covenant.

In the Christian Bible, the apostles, particularly Paul, who was Jewish and educated by one of the most respected rabbis of that time, taught that circumcision for those early Christians was obtained through faith. (See Romans 2:29; Philippians 3:3; Colossians 2:11.)

Judaism teaches that the culmination of the Abrahamic Covenant was made at the foot of Mt. Sinai when God extended His covenant with Abraham to the people of Israel to be *“my treasured possession”* (Exodus 19:5). As their part of the agreement, Israel promised to obey God’s *Torah* and commandments, while God promised to bless them. Both the *Torah* and the Tablets of the Ten Commandments are symbols of the covenant, referred to as *“The Book of the*

Covenant” (Exodus 24:7) and the *“Tablets of the Covenant”* (Deuteronomy 9:9), respectively.

However, while the covenant is essentially a formalized, legal agreement, the relationship between God and Israel is rooted in love and cannot be reduced to mere legalism. God’s love for Israel was so great that He gave them the *Torah*, while Israel’s love for God was so overwhelming that they wholeheartedly agreed to follow His law. Jewish tradition often portrays the covenantal relationship between God and Israel as analogous to the institution of marriage, which though established through vows and legalities, is grounded in love and commitment.

This imagery of the relationship between God and His people as a sacred marriage is repeated in the Christian Bible as well. In the parable of the ten virgins, Jesus describes himself as the bridegroom (Matthew 25:1), and in the book of Revelation, the church is described as the bride, *“the wife of the Lamb”* (Revelation 21:9; see also 19:7).

It’s also important to understand that if Israel is the “chosen people,” they are also the “choosing people,” because just as God chose them, they also chose God. Moreover, Israel’s “chosen-ness” does not imply superiority; rather, Israel was chosen for the purpose of serving God and the world.

The Jewish people were to serve as witnesses to the One God and as a light to the nations through their actions, ethics, and morality. (See Isaiah 42:6, 49:6.) Israel, as an extension of the covenant with Abraham, is meant to bring blessings to the world. As partners with God, the nation of Israel is charged with building His Kingdom and declaring His glory to all.

Christians, too, have been given this call of bringing light to the world (Ephesians 5:8) and the mission of kingdom-building (Luke 9:1-2; Acts 28:23). Together, as Christians and Jews, we have fulfilled this call through the lifesaving work of *The Fellowship*. It has been true for more than three decades, and God willing, it will be true in the years ahead because of faithful partners like you.

think about it

1. Why do you think God chose to enter into covenant with man?
2. Why do you think God re-states and renews His covenant with Abraham and his descendants numerous times in the Bible? (For example, see Genesis 26:3, Genesis 28:13, Leviticus 26:45, Deuteronomy 29:12-13, Joshua 24:25, Jeremiah 34:13)
3. What do we gain as a people and as individuals when we re-state and renew our covenant with God?
4. Which of God’s covenants inspires you the most, and why?



A Personal Partnership

*“If my house were not right with God,
surely he would not have made with me an
everlasting covenant...”*

– 2 Samuel 23:5

Through the covenant with Noah, God entered into covenant with all humanity. With the covenant established with Abraham, and later expanded to the nation of Israel, we witnessed a covenant made between God and a specific people. Now, we will look at one more covenant that perhaps is more relevant today than ever before — the covenant God made with David.

This covenant was made between God and one individual, yet it would apply to each individual who succeeded him, throughout the generations. God promised David that all Kings of Israel would descend from him forever. Today, both Jews and Christians await the day when the descendant of David will reign as the Messiah and King.

God first established His covenant with David in 2 Samuel 7:16 when He promised David: *“Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever.”* Although the word *brit*, “covenant,” does not appear here, both David and God refer to this promise later on as a covenant.

In 2 Samuel 23:5, David said, *“If my house were not right with God, surely he would not have made with me an everlasting covenant.”* And in Jeremiah 33:20-21, God, through the prophet Jeremiah, said: *“If you can break my covenant with the day and my covenant with the night, so that day and night no longer come at their appointed time, then my covenant with David my servant – can be broken and David will no longer have a descendant to reign on his throne.”*

Both David and God affirm that the promise of eternal kingship is indeed an everlasting covenant. Christians, of course, believe that this covenant was fulfilled in Jesus, as recorded in Matthew 1:1 and Luke 1:31-33, while Jews continue to wait for the “son of David,” who will usher in the messianic era.

While there is no mention of an *oht*, a “sign,” in this covenant, Psalm 89:35-37 informs us that *“Once for all, I have sworn by my holiness – and I will not lie to David – that his line will continue forever and his throne endure before me like the sun; it will be established forever like the moon, the faithful witness in the sky.”*

The very sun and moon will serve as a reminder of the covenant. Just as there are times that the sun is covered by the clouds, or the moon is but a sliver in the sky, yet still present, so, too, David’s dynasty would shine brightly at times, and then at other times, be barely visible. Yet, always, God’s promise would remain. As the psalmist reminds us, *“I will not violate my covenant or alter what my lips have uttered”* (Psalm 89:34).

In addition, we don’t readily find evidence of David’s side of the contract in the initial promise that God made to him. Yet, if we look to Deuteronomy 17:14-20, we learn the laws of the king of Israel. The king was not allowed to have many horses, wives, silver, or gold, or *“his heart will be led astray”*

(v.17). The king was to write an entire *Torah* scroll by hand, keep it with him at all times, and study it daily (v. 18).

In this way, the king would *“learn to revere the LORD his God and follow carefully all the words of this law and these decrees and not consider himself better than his fellow Israelites and turn from the law to the right or to the left”* (vv.19-20). If the king remained faithful to God, *“Then he and his descendants will reign a long time over his kingdom in Israel”* (v.20).

In short, the king of Israel was called upon to use his abilities to serve God and His people in humility, faithfulness, and obedience. Yet, while God made this particular covenant with David and the house of Israel, it was intended to establish a ruler over the entire world. As we read in the prophetic words of Isaiah, *“Of the greatness of his government and of peace there will be no end”* (Isaiah 9:7).

Just as God made a personal covenant with David, He offers each of us the ability to create our own partnership with Him, using our particular talents, abilities, and the opportunities He places before us. Listen to the invitation given to us through the prophet Isaiah: *“Give ear and come to me; listen, that you may live. I will make an everlasting covenant with you, my faithful love promised to David”* (Isaiah 55:3).

Each of us has the ability to participate in God’s covenantal promises when we follow Him in faith, obedience, and humility. In Micah 6:8, the prophet teaches: *“He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. In addition, what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.”* If we can do that, then we enter into our own, unique, covenant with God and rejoice in His everlasting promises passed down from the legacy of Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David.

apply it...

- 1. REFLECT UPON THE RAINBOW.** Next time you see a rainbow, take some time to consider God’s love, mercy, and relationship with all humanity and to remember the seven Noahide Laws. (Genesis 9:16, Revelation 4:3)
- 2. REAFFIRM YOUR PART OF THE COVENANT.** Rededicate yourself to your covenant with God. Remember your role, remind yourself of God’s promises, and be inspired by the covenantal relationship you have with Him. (Isaiah 54:10, 1 John 2:17)
- 3. CREATE AN OHT, A SIGN.** Designate an item, a quote, a verse, or a weekly ritual as your own personal *oht* of your relationship with God. (Exodus 3:12; John 2:11)
- 4. BELIEVE GOD’S PROMISES.** Commit to trusting in God’s promises in good times and challenging moments. (Proverbs 3:5-6; John 14:1)
- 5. READ AND RE-READ YOUR CONTRACT.** The Bible is our contract. By consistently reading the Bible, we are ever aware of what we must do, what God has done, and what He has promised to do in the future. (Isaiah 55:11; Hebrews 4:12)