

Covenant of the Spirit
Exodus 20: 1-21
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Judaism has a long history of debate. In fact, there's a classic Jewish joke: when you have two Jews, in a room together, you have at least three opinions. Debate and discussion is seen as an act, *l'shem shamayim*, in the service of heaven. It helps us truly discern what God desires us to do

Two thousand years ago, one interesting debate focused on the lighting of the Hanukkah candles. Hanukkah is the holiday that often parallels Christmas. For eight consecutive nights, we light candles, beginning with one and concluding with eight, with one head candle, called the shamash in the middle. Typically, the shamash is used to light each of the candles. What happens, however, if the candles are lit, and one burns out? Must we use the shamash once again to light that candle? Or is it permissible to use one of the other regular candles to rekindle the one that burned out?

This seems like a minor question. Yet, a profound truth is found in the answer. But first the debate. One rabbi says we can only use the shamash. He reasons that when we use one regular candle to light another candle, we diminish the light, the strength, the holiness, of the first candle. Another rabbi--Rav Shmuel--says it is permissible. When we use one candle to light another, we do not diminish light. We do not detract from it. Rather, we increase it. Both lights can burn brightly, and more light is brought into the world. This view became the law.

The same principle applies, I believe, to religion. When we share our light with one another the flame of faith burns brighter. Neither faith is diminished. Rather, they are both enriched. When we share our beliefs and traditions with one another, as we do today, we deepen our own faith while growing in appreciating and gratitude for the God of us all.

Our theme this morning is covenant. I know this has been the theme here at first church over the last month, and Rev Chakoian spoke about it eloquently at our synagogue on Friday night. The Hebrew word for covenant is Brit. It connotes a sacred relationship, a commitment between God and the Jewish people. It began with Abraham. It was affirmed by Moses in the Exodus from Egypt. And it was sealed with the entire people through the giving and acceptance of the Torah, the five books of Moses, at Mount Sinai.

Yet, that is only the beginning. The rabbinic interpreters refer to this brit, this covenant, as a brit olam, an eternal covenant. It is dynamic. It is not frozen in one time and place. It is rooted in the past, yet evolves into the future. We are meant to hear the word of God in the present tense. We are meant to listen for its message for our time. Martin Buber put it such: “The eternal revelation is here and now. I do not believe in a self-definition of God prior to the experience of human beings.... The eternal voice of strength flows, the eternal voice sounds forth to us now.”

Buber’s conception may sound mystical, but it also eminently practical and relevant for us today. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks paints a picture of what it means in action in a beautiful story about an encounter he had. Rabbi Sacks is the chief rabbi of Great Britain, and he was investigating several cutting-edge questions of medical ethics. He met with Lord Robert Winston, one of the

world's leading researchers on In Vitro fertilization, embryo development and the human genome. Sacks visited with him in Dr. Winston's office. In that office, Sacks noticed, wedged between volumes of the latest scientist research, a copy of the Five Books of Moses. Several volumes of commentary, along with a prayer book, sat by them. Lord Winston, it turned out, is a deeply religious man whose faith guides him in the critical work he does. For hi the covenant is ongoing, continuing to guide his work and values.

As people of faith, Christians and Jews, this notion of ongoing covenant matters deeply. We do not live in the past. Rather, we live with the past, drawing from the accumulated wisdom of our tradition in order to build a better future. We see our lives part of a journey that began before us, continues after us, and is carried forward by and through us. That is what it means to be part of a covenant.

Our challenge is to shape the meaning of that covenant, to make sure that it is not defined only by the past, and not solely by what was. The past--the way things used to be--can become an idol. We can worship it amidst the confusion, the speed, the significance of the challenges we face. When we become fearful and confused, when we seek easy answers to complex questions, literalism can replace logic. Obedience can replace openness. Arrogance can replace engagement. Stubbornness can replace spirit.

Recently I came across a story about a great Protestant theologian, Paul Tillich. After he delivered a lecture, a passionate young man ran up to him. Mr. Tillich, he said, do you or do you not believe that every single syllable of scripture is the inspired word of God? Tillich replied, "If the spirit is greater than the letter, yes. If the letter is greater than the spirit, no!"

We are people of the spirit. The future of a meaningful and living faith depends on us. I believe this spirit of openness, this ability to change and grow as part of an eternal covenant, is one of the lessons of the Israelite experience in Egypt. In our biblical reading for the week--known as the Parashat Hashavuah, the Torah portion of the week, read yesterday at the synagogue--we encounter the negotiations between Moses and Pharaoh.

Moses, we remember, has pleaded with Pharaoh to “Let my people go.” Pharaoh has so far refused. At the beginning of a reading, we seem to glimpse a change of heart. During the seventh plague, hail, Pharaoh summons Moses and Aaron and says, “This time I have sinned. The Lord is in the right, and I and my people are in the wrong.” But as soon as the plague is over he changes his mind. “He and his officials,” the text tells us, “hardened their hearts” (9: 34).

Moses and Aaron respond by telling of the next plague, locusts. This forecast seems to change the minds of Pharaoh’s officials. They are ready to relent. They see that Egypt has been devastated by the plagues, and they need to change course. They say to Pharaoh in exasperation, “How long will this man be a snare to us? Let the people go, so that they may worship the Lord their God. Do you not yet realize that Egypt is ruined?”

Pharaoh, however, will have none of it. He will not change course. He will not relent. He will fight Moses and Aaron to the bitter end. What was wrong with Pharaoh? Couldn’t he see what was right in front of him? Was he simply that foolish? Was his hate so great that it blinded him to reality?

These are plausible explanations. Perhaps, however, Pharaoh's story is more complicated than that. In 1984, historian Barbara Tuchman wrote a book entitled "The March of Folly." It looked at a challenging historical phenomenon: Throughout history, intelligent leaders and people have made decisions that led to their and their people's destruction. Tuchman was not trying to understand decisions that, in retrospect, turned out to be wrong ones. We all have those. Uncertainty is a part of life, and sometimes we get it right, and other times we get it wrong. Tuchman, rather, was exploring a different question. The question of why some people make decisions that are unequivocally contrary to their own interests. Her examples range from the Trojan's decision to admit the Greek horse into their city, to the British Empire's loss of the American colonies. In each of these instances, unambiguous warnings of impending disasters were ignored and rejected. Obstinacy replaced reason.

Perhaps the same phenomenon happened with Pharaoh. He clung to a world he knew even as it fell apart in front of him. It was a world where he was seen as a god and absolute ruler. In that context, through the lenses through which he saw the world, relenting to Israelite demands was unthinkable. If he let the Israelites go, he would be showing signs of weakness and capitulation. His power would be undermined. His infallibility would be diminished. His people might rebel. His world would be broken.

Pharaoh's pride, his folly, allows the Israelites to escape. When they arrive at Mount Sinai, they enter into a new kind of covenant. It is a *brit olam*, an eternal covenant, rooted not in might. Not in power. But, rather, as the prophet Zacharia put it, in *ruach*, in spirit. It is this spirit that allows us, Jews and Christians, to see the beliefs and texts of our traditions in a new light, speaking

to us clearly in our time and in our lives. It is this spirit that must guide us we work together, as we learn from one another, in the task of *tikkun olam*, repair of our world, *b'malchut shadai*, with strength and support from the God of us all.

Each of us is part of a covenant. A covenant with God, a covenant with our religious community, a covenant with our families, a covenant with our past and future. We hold up that covenant with our hearts. We hold it up with our hands. And we hold it up, together, with our spirits. Amen.