



אהבה ושבועה Love and Oath

■ Choosing G-d's People

When the Nation of Israel entered the Land of Israel after 40 years of wandering in the desert, it faced two simultaneous war-fronts. Certainly its chief battle was the conquest and inheritance of the Holy Land from the Seven Nations. No less important, however, was the spiritual battle: seeking out and destroying all vestiges of idol worship, the source of all abominations committed by the occupiers of the Land.

Commanded to destroy the idols, the Nation of Israel is not at all like the other nations. It is unique in character, and unique in its destiny. The Torah tells us:

כִּי עַם קְדוֹשׁ אַתָּה לַה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ, בְּךָ בָּחַר ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ
לְהִיּוֹת לוֹ לְעַם סֻגְלָה מִכָּל הָעַמִּים אֲשֶׁר עַל פְּנֵי הָאָדָמָה.

*For you are a holy nation unto Hashem your G-d,
He has chosen you to be a treasured nation
from among all the nations on the face of the earth.* (D'varim 7,6)

As we read this verse, two simple questions face us: Why? What was the special merit of this generation that led to its choice as G-d's special, treasured nation and the one to receive the Torah? And the next generation as well: In what special merit were the children of those who left Egypt chosen to enter the Land and inherit it?

By delving into these questions, we will gain great insights into G-d's ways and His relationship with Israel.



It would only be natural for the generation selected to conquer the Holy Land from the Seven Nations to reason as follows: “Our own good deeds, together with the evil of the nations currently in the Land, clearly tip the scales towards us. It is only logical that *we* should be chosen to inherit the Land from *those others* who deserved punishment.”

This might be logical - but it is precisely what Moshe tells them *not* to think. In Parashat Ekev we read:

אל תאמר בלבבך בהדף ה' אלהיך אתם מלפניך לאמר,
בצדקתי הביאני ה' לרשת את הארץ הזאת ...

Do not say to yourself, when Hashem your G-d drives them out before you, “It is for my righteousness that Hashem has brought me to inherit this land...” (9,4)

Why not? Simply put, because you were not so righteous:

לא בצדקתך ובישר לבבך אתה בא לרשת את ארצם ...

It is not because of your righteousness or integrity of heart that you come to inherit their land. (verse 5)

זכור אל תשכח את אשר הקצפת את ה' אלהיך במדבר
למן היום אשר יצאת מארץ מצרים עד באכם עד המקום הזה
ממרים הייתם עם ה'.

Remember, do not forget, how you angered Hashem your G-d in the desert. From the day you left Egypt, until your arrival in this place, you were defiant of Hashem. (verse 7)

This is one side of the equation, but on the other hand, the evil of the Gentile nations overflowed to the point that there was simply no choice but to throw them out of the Land:

... כי ברשעות הגוים האלה ה' אלהיך מורישם מפניך ...

It was because of the wickedness of these nations that Hashem your G-d enables you to inherit them...

In short: The Canaanite/Emorite nations deserved to be thrown out, as the Land could no longer bear them and their sins – but Israel did not necessarily deserve to take their place. Why then was Israel, of all nations, chosen to inherit them? The verse continues:

ולמען הקים את הדבר אשר נשבע ה' לאבתיה לאברהם ליצחק וליעקב.
*in order to establish that which G-d vowed to your forefathers,
to Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov.* (verse 5)



The answer is clear: When the Children of Israel do not have their own merits, G-d's promise to their forefathers kicks in. The Divine oath alone, even without Israel's merits, can tip the scales in favor of the Jewish Nation.

But why did Hashem choose specifically this generation of Jews to fulfill His oath? The answer is found in Parashat Va'etchanan, where Moshe tells Israel:

כִּי מֵאַהֲבַת ה' אֶתְכֶם וּמִשְׁמֵרוֹ אֶת הַשְּׁבָעָה אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּע לְאַבְרָהָם
הוֹצִיא ה' אֶתְכֶם בְּיַד חֲזָקָה ...

For because of G-d's love for you, and because of His fulfillment of the oath he swore to your forefathers, He removed you [from Egypt] with a mighty hand... (7,8)

This generation is particularly beloved. Thus, we see on the one hand G-d's love for the generation and His oath to our forefathers, and on the other hand, the evil of the Gentiles – the combination that paves the way for Israel to inherit Eretz Yisrael.

But we must still explain: Why is G-d's oath alone, without His love, not sufficient?

■ G-d's Commitment

This question leads us to the beginning of Parashat Ekev, where Moshe emphasizes that even with both G-d's love and His oath, Israel's successful conquest of the Land is still not guaranteed. The opening verses in Ekev appear to imply that everything is dependent upon our fulfillment of His commandments!

וְהָיָה עֵקֶב תִּשְׁמְעוּן אֶת הַמִּשְׁפָּטִים הָאֵלֶּה, וּשְׁמַרְתֶּם וַעֲשִׂיתֶם אֹתָם,
וּשְׁמַר ה' אֱלֹהֵיךָ לְךָ אֶת הַבְּרִית וְאֶת הַחֶסֶד אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּע לְאַבְרָהָם. וְאַהֲבָה...

If you abide by these laws and preserve and fulfill them, Hashem your G-d will preserve the covenant and the kindness He vowed to your forefathers. And He will love you... (D'varim 7,12-13)

If we keep the laws, we will be blessed – but what if not? The next chapter tells us, most starkly:

וְהָיָה אִם שָׁכַח תִּשְׁכַּח אֶת ה' אֱלֹהֵיךָ ... אֲבָד תֵּאבְדוּן.
כַּגֹּיִם אֲשֶׁר ה' מֵאַבִּיד מִפְּנֵיכֶם, כֵּן תֵּאבְדוּן עֵקֶב לֹא תִשְׁמְעוּן בְּקוֹל ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם.

And if you forget Hashem your G-d... you will be destroyed. Just like the nations that G-d destroys before you, you will be lost, if you do not hearken to the voice of Hashem your G-d. (8,19-20)



Does this not contradict what we learned above in Va'etchanan, that even when we are not worthy, the fulfillment of the Divine vow takes precedence? To help us navigate this maze, let us consult the classic commentator Rashbam (R. Shmuel ben R. Meir, grandson of Rashi) and his explanation of the following verse from the end of Va'etchanan:

ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ הוּא הָאֱלֹהִים הָאֵל הַנֶּאֱמָן
 שֹׁמֵר הַבְּרִית וְהַחֶסֶד לְאֲהַבָיו וְלִשְׁמֵרֵי מִצְוֹתָיו לְאֶלֶף דּוֹר.
*... Hashem your G-d is the Lord, the loyal G-d,
 Who preserves the covenant and kindness for 1,000
 generations, for those who love Him
 and observe His commandments.*

(D'varim 7,9)

Rashbam explains that this verse tells us how the requirement that we observe the Torah squares with G-d's oath to give us the Land in any event: "Hashem preserves the covenant – meaning He will *keep it in waiting* for the generation that observes the Torah."

That is, the verse does *not* mean that G-d will keep the covenant for the benefit of the next 1,000 generations. Rather, the activation of this eternal covenant is dependent on a generation that keeps the mitzvot; until then it is on hold. And how long will Hashem wait? Even up to 1,000 generations, if necessary!

We now understand the continuation of the passage, the above-quoted opening of Parashat Ekev:

וְהָיָה עִקֵב תִּשְׁמַעוּן אֶת הַמִּשְׁפָּטִים הָאֵלֶּה וּשְׁמַרְתֶּם וַעֲשִׂיתֶם אֹתָם
 וּשְׁמַר ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ לָךְ אֶת הַבְּרִית וְאֶת הַחֶסֶד אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּע לְאַבְתֵּיךָ:
*And if you hearken to these laws and observe them,
 Hashem your G-d will keep the covenant for you...
 that He vowed to your forefathers.*

(verse 12)

That is, if your generation hearkens to the laws, Hashem will apply to it the Covenant He made with our forefathers. Based on the Rashbam's commentary – that G-d's oath is held in abeyance until activated by a righteous generation – we can now proceed to explain where G-d's love for us fits into the picture.



■ G-d's Love for Israel

We read at the end of Parashat Ekev how Moshe Rabbeinu turns to the Children of Israel, in his final speech of love-filled rebuke before he dies, and says:

מְמַרִים הָיִיתֶם עִם ה' מִיּוֹם דַּעֲתִי אֶתְכֶם.

*You have been rebellious towards G-d ever since
the day I have known you.* (9,24)

Moshe is actually asking: “Since your deeds clearly do not render you deserving, and since the covenant between G-d and the Patriarchs can therefore not be activated, how did you deserve to be rescued from Egypt and receive the Torah? And in what merit do you expect your children to enter the Promised Land?”

Moshe himself provides the answer, elsewhere in his speech: “*Because of G-d's love for you*” (D'varim 7,8). This unconditional love for Israel, Moshe explains, transcends the lack of mitzvah observance necessary for the fulfillment of the oath G-d made to their forefathers. This answers our question regarding why Divine love was needed in addition to the oath.

In sum: G-d's vow to the Patriarchs means that only their children, the Children of Israel, can receive Eretz Yisrael; no other nation, no matter how righteous, can ever inherit the Land. However, the specific generation of Israel that will receive it is dependent on either its deeds, or Divine love that transcends the deeds.

■ The Three Promises

Let us look again at this Divine oath, given to Avraham Avinu when Hashem charged him regarding *Brit Milah* (ritual circumcision). G-d made three clear promises, comprising three elements:

וְהִפְרַתִּי אִתְּךָ בְּמֵאד מְאֹד... לִהְיוֹת לְךָ לְאֱלֹהִים וּלְזַרְעֶךָ אֲחֵרִיךָ.
וְנָתַתִּי לְךָ וּלְזַרְעֶךָ אֲחֵרִיךָ אֶת אֶרֶץ מִגְרִיךָ אֵת כָּל אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן לְאֶחְזַת עוֹלָם...

1. *I will multiply you very greatly ...*
2. *to be G-d for you and for your descendants.*
3. *And I will give to you and your descendants
the land of your dwelling, the entire Land of Canaan,
for an eternal inheritance...* (B'reshit 17,6-8)



The three promises are: A great population increase; descendants who will be crowned as the Nation of G-d; and the Land of Israel for future generations. These three same elements guide Moshe Rabbeinu, as well, in his parting speech to Israel, in the above verses from the end of Va'etchanan.

At this point in time, the first promise has already occurred, in Egypt. Israel has reached the tremendous number of 600,000 adult men, and they have become a nation. However, they are not yet a Nation of G-d, the second element of the Divine pledges. To reach this status, Israel must merit the Exodus from Egypt and the giving of the Torah.

Moshe's above question to Israel is: "You are most certainly G-d's Nation; He said as much when He sent me to tell Pharaoh, '*Send out My Nation so that they will serve Me*' (Sh'mot 7,26). But how did this actually happen, considering your rebellious behavior? You attained the status of 'nation' – but why is this generation, of all generations, the one to merit a miraculous Exodus from Egypt, the receiving of the Torah, and the exalted status of G-d's Nation?"

Moshe further asks: "You were all under 20 years of age when you left Egypt; everyone older has died. How have you merited to be the generation to inherit Eretz Yisrael?"

Moshe answers his own questions, as we saw:

כִּי מֵאַהֲבַת ה' אֶתְכֶם וּמִשְׁמֵרוֹ אֶת הַשְּׁבֻעָה אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּע לְאַבְתֵּיכֶם ...

*Because of G-d's love for you,
and His upholding of the oath He gave your fathers...* (D'varim 7,8)

The reason G-d chose this generation is because of the convergence of two factors: G-d's love, independent of any external considerations, and the oath to Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov. With this combination, this generation of Israel receives all of the following: The Exodus from Egypt amid great miracles and signs; being crowned G-d's nation by receiving the Torah; and the privilege of fighting for and inheriting the Land of Israel.

But since one of these two factors - G-d's love - is dependent exclusively on G-d Himself, who can guarantee that it will continue to obtain in future generations as well? "It is impossible to know for how long G-d's love for you will last," Moshe is saying, "if there are no good deeds to support it and back it up. Only He will determine this."



Let us sharpen this point. Obviously, G-d is committed to His oath to the Patriarchs; no other nation will ever be “G-d’s People” or receive Eretz Yisrael. However, He never specified a particular generation in which He would fulfill it. Only a generation of people who are “*lovers of G-d and guardians of His commandments*” (D’varim 7,9) will merit the fulfillment of the oath. But it could also be that Hashem will love a particular generation, without us even knowing why and without need for proof of piety or good deeds. This unexplained love for the Jewish People could activate the covenantal oath on its own.

In fact, this is what happened to the generation of Moshe Rabbeinu. It was privileged to enjoy great population growth, be rescued from Egypt, receive the Torah, and be called “G-d’s Nation” – as per the first two parts of the Divine promise to Avraham Avinu. Similarly, regarding the third part, the promise to inherit Eretz Yisrael – the youth of that generation, those who were under 20 years old during the Exodus, merited it. Here, too, G-d’s love was that which activated the oath. However, it could be that in the future, G-d’s love will remain hidden and not openly manifest.

Divine love, then, is not guaranteed; only the merit of keeping the Torah is an eternal guarantee that G-d will activate His promise to our Patriarchs. As we saw above in the beginning of Ekev: “*And if you hearken to these laws and observe them, then Hashem your G-d will keep for you the covenant... that He vowed to your forefathers.*” (verse 12)

■ Israel’s Love for G-d

G-d’s love for Israel will help us understand one of our most cardinal mitzvot, and possibly the most difficult of them all: The commandment to love Hashem. It appears in Parashat Va’etchanan, and we recite it in Kriat Shma twice a day:

וְאַהַבְתָּ אֵת ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּכָל לְבָבְךָ וּבְכָל נַפְשְׁךָ וּבְכָל מְאֹדְךָ.
*You shall love Hashem your G-d with all your heart,
all your soul, and all your essence.* (D’varim 6,5)

How can the Torah command us to feel an emotion such as love? Is there a key by which we can hope to fulfill this commandment? Let us look at the verse before it - the verse of Shma Yisrael:

שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ ה' אֶחָד.
Hear O Israel, Hashem is our G-d, Hashem is One. (verse 5)



This fundamental verse means as follows:

“Understand, Israel! Hashem, the Creator and ruler of the entire world, He is our G-d. He declares that we are His special nation and that He is our G-d. In what merit? Because of His love for us, and His selection of us from among all the nations to be His nation. And just as He is One and nothing is second to Him, we are similarly His special and singular people.”

Given Hashem’s love for us, how can we not love Him in return? After all:

כַּמִּים הַפָּנִים לַפָּנִים כִּן לֵב הָאָדָם לְאָדָם.

*As in water, face answers face [the face you show it is reflected back],
so too is the heart of a person to another.* (Proverbs 27,19)

It is only human to reflect and return the emotion that is showed to us. This is why the command to love G-d follows Shma in the very next verse: *ואהבת - You shall love G-d...*

And since He is the One and Only G-d, and since His love is directed singularly towards us, we will also concentrate and direct all our love towards Him. As the verse states, we must love G-d בכל לבבך, with all our heart and emotions, and בכל נפשך, with all our soul, i.e., rational will, and בכל מאדך, with all of our physical property.

How can we manifest and prove this love? By loving His commandments, binding them on our arms, engraving them in our minds, and posting them on our doorposts:

וְקָשַׁרְתֶּם לְאוֹת עַל יָדְךָ וְהָיוּ לְטֹטְפוֹת בֵּין עֵינֶיךָ.

*Tie them [words of Torah] as a sign on your hand,
and as totafot between your eyes.*

וְכָתַבְתֶּם עַל מְזוֹזוֹת בֵּיתְךָ וּבִשְׁעָרֶיךָ.

*You shall write them on the doorposts
of your home and gates.* (verses 8-9)

It was with this in mind that our Sages formulated the blessing that we recite just prior to the morning Kriat Shma. The blessing begins with the words אהבתנו (אהבה רבה) meaning “You have eternal/great love for us,” and then continues with the words “Hashem our G-d” – as if to explain that the reason “You love us eternally” is because “You are our G-d,” as we have shown.



The passage ends with this blessing: “*Barukh*, You are the source of blessing... Who *chooses* His nation with *love*” – and therefore, we return our love to Him in the very next sentences: “*Shma Yisrael, Hear O Israel ... And you shall love Hashem your G-d.*”

The blessing before the evening Kriat Shma is similar. We say: “Your love for us will not depart from us forever.³ You are the source of blessing, Who loves His nation Israel.” And as a result, we also return love for Him: “*Hear O Israel... love Hashem your G-d.*”

■ The Blessing of Avot

With what we have learned so far, we can proceed to explain the first blessing in our Amidah (Sh'moneh Esreh) prayer: the Blessing of the Patriarchs, known as *Birkat Avot*. Unlike other blessings, one who recites it without proper concentration should, ideally, repeat it, even if he has completed the entire Amidah.

It begins with the standard format: “*Barukh* – You are the source of blessing, Hashem our G-d...” We thank and praise Him for having chosen us to be His nation and being our G-d. The blessing then continues with the mention of His relationship to the Three Patriarchs:

1. The G-d of Avraham, as Hashem said to him: “*I am E-l Sha-dai, walk before Me and be complete*” (B'reshit 17,1)
2. The G-d of Yitzchak, as Hashem instructed him: “*Live in this land, and I will be with you and I will bless you*” (26,3)
3. The G-d of Yaakov, as Hashem told him: “*I am E-l Sha-dai; be fruitful and multiply*” (35,11)

These are the same three elements mentioned above, in a different order:

- Population increase (G-d of Yaakov)
- G-d's Nation (G-d of Avraham)
- Inheriting the Land of Israel (G-d of Yitzchak)

Birkat Avot continues by indicating the conditions for Redemption: “He brings a Redeemer to their children's children, on behalf of His Name, with love” – i.e., on behalf of G-d's oath in His Name, and out of G-d's love for that generation. The source for the exact wording is found in Moshe's words to Israel:

3. The Ashkenazi version reads, "Do not remove Your love for us forever."



כִּי מֵאַהֲבַת ה' אֶתְכֶם וּמִשְׁמֵרוֹ אֶת הַשְּׁבָעָה אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּע לְאַבְתֵּיכֶם ...
*For [it is] from G-d's love for you and His upholding
of the oath that He swore to your fathers ... (D'varim 7,8)*

And so, the essence of the Blessing of the Patriarchs in our prayers is the essence of this very lesson; thrice a day we repeat the very fundamentals of our existence and future.

