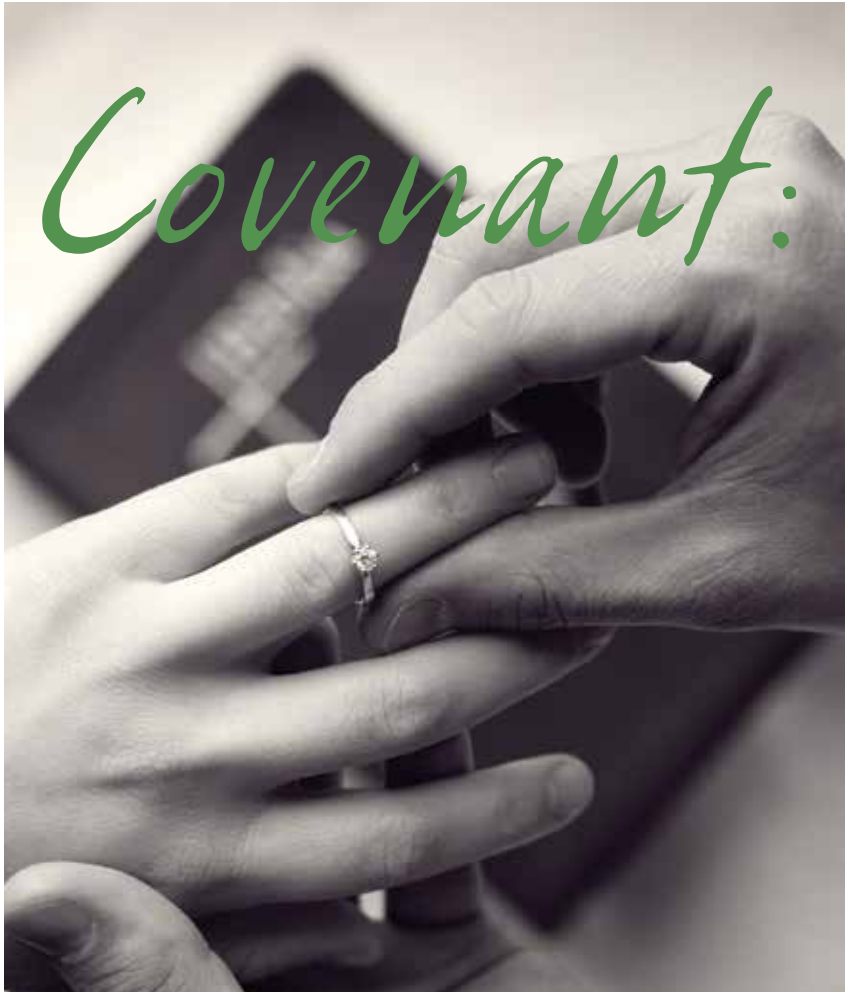


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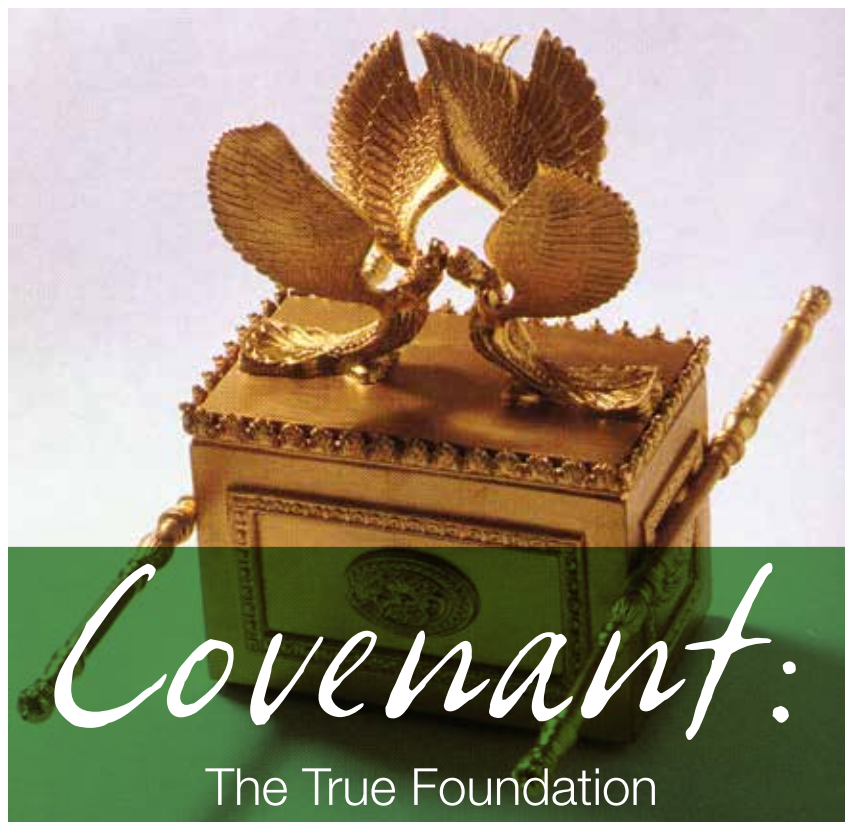


Covenant:

The True Foundation

By Rev. Cheryl L. Hauer *Vice President*

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Covenant:

The True Foundation

IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO KNOW how many pages have been written, words spoken and questions asked in man's search for a true understanding of personal relationship with God. Belief is the central element, some have said, without which no relationship can exist. Others have posited that obedience is the essential component without which belief is rendered valueless. Still others have stressed the difference between belief and faith. Faith, they have determined, is the fundamental factor, turning to Hebrews 11:6 for confirmation. *"Without faith"* the Scripture says, *"it is impossible to please Him."* But I believe we have to dig a little deeper, going a step beyond faith alone to find the foundation upon which true faith is built. I think we'll find that foundation is covenant.

While neither Christians nor the ancient Israelites were the first to engage in the ritual of covenant making, theirs is the first example of a covenant entered into at the invitation of the God of the universe, binding mankind to Him and conversely, God Himself to man. The idea of religion or a system of faith as covenant with God is peculiarly Jewish. At Sinai, Israel became the people of God, pledged to obedience, while the Lord became the God of Israel, pledged to love and protect His people.

What Exactly Does that Mean?

Covenant is most often defined as a formal, solemn agreement between two parties; a contract or pledge; a promise, treaty or bond. As I have visited Christians around the world, I have often asked them what their understanding of covenant is. Invariably, their answers are in complete agreement with the standard dictionary definition. Most frequently, the answer is promise, even though promises are easily made and even more easily broken. Unfortunately, the same is true for a treaty. Even a cursory glance at history reveals the alarming ease with which treaties have been broken throughout the ages. The third answer, contract, is by its very nature self-limiting, either being fulfilled or abrogated and bound by parameters of time, location and terms. Obviously, none of these answers embody the fullness of God's intention when He invited mankind to join with Him in a covenant that would last as long as the sun and the moon and the stars remain in the heavens (Jer. 33:19–22).

In his treatise on covenant, Oxford scholar Norman Solomon points out that the concept of covenant has been misunderstood and incorrectly defined throughout the ages. Many have viewed it as if it were some sort of unique object to be possessed, quarreled over and given or taken away. However, Solomon says, a correct understanding of the biblical definition of covenant makes it clear that it is a metaphor or way of describing a relationship, not the name of a unique metaphysical object.

It is a relationship through which the parties are bound together, voluntarily deciding to share a fate. They have chosen to link their destinies together, accepting responsibilities to and for one another. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks calls it "politics without power, economics without self-interest." The miraculous covenants that God entered into with Abraham and later with the Israelites at Sinai, Sacks says, are what turned law into love and love into law. He gives the following definition:

At the core of Jewish faith is the idea of covenant, the mutual commitment between God and the people Israel. But the covenant embodies a specific tension. On the one hand, it is immune to history. Its text, the *Torah* [Gen.–Deut.], and the way of life it commands, are Divine, eternal, immutable, unchanging. On the other hand, the covenant [must be] realized in history. [Israel] is thus peculiarly poised between timelessness and time.





The Book of the Covenant

The people of the ancient Near East were no strangers to laws of conduct. The Sumerians, Babylonians, Assyrians and other people groups of the region had codes that governed behavior. The people often believed that their king had been chosen by a god to rule over them, and therefore his judgments had to be obeyed. Each of these codes generally began with the words, "Thus you shall do..." Those kings, like the capricious gods whom they believed had chosen them to rule, were not as interested in the well-being of their citizens as they were in protecting their personal, political and economic power and their image as lawgivers. They borrowed ideas from other legal systems and often carried the laws in their heads as personal possessions rather than publishing them for their citizenry. Laws were sometimes even kept secret when a person was on trial for breaking one that he or she did not know existed. Though imposed with the power of deity, such legal systems were often based on nothing more than the political whim of a human king or the traditions of a state.

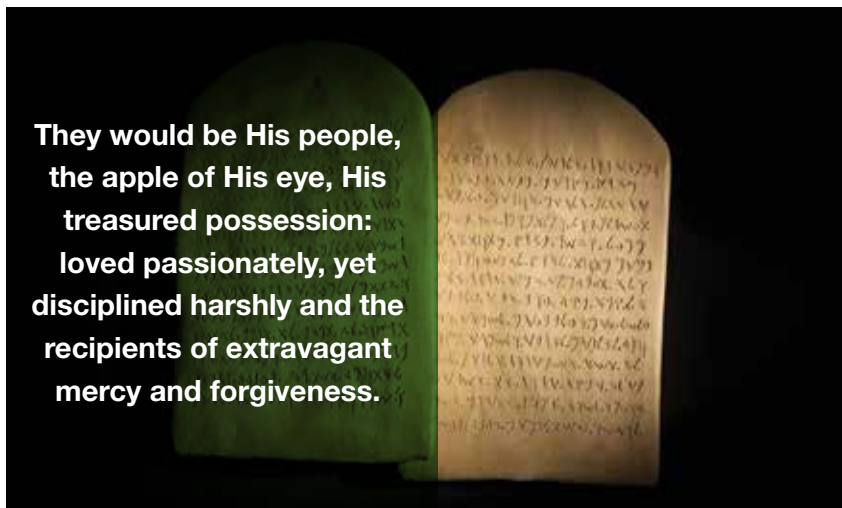
In contrast, the biblical code of conduct found in the book of Deuteronomy is unique in form, origin, concept and underlying principles because it is a part of the covenant. These instructions were given by God as an act of love. He is a God who cares passionately about His children and chose to instruct them in how to live to please Him and enjoy His favor. The sages taught that the Ten Commandments, or Ten Words in Hebrew, were the fundamental steps toward the life of holiness and blessing all parties were bound to when they entered into the covenant, while the rest of the Book of the Covenant further explained and clarified them. And rather than the slavish obedience demanded by other Near Eastern legal codes, God's people were to follow His instructions because they loved Him.

Finally, unlike other Near Easterners of the day who suffered uncertainty and fear under the capricious leadership of self-centered human beings, God's children could walk in the confidence that His love for them was eternal. I will never leave you or forsake you, He said, guaranteeing that He would keep His promises even when they strayed from theirs.

Long Before Sinai

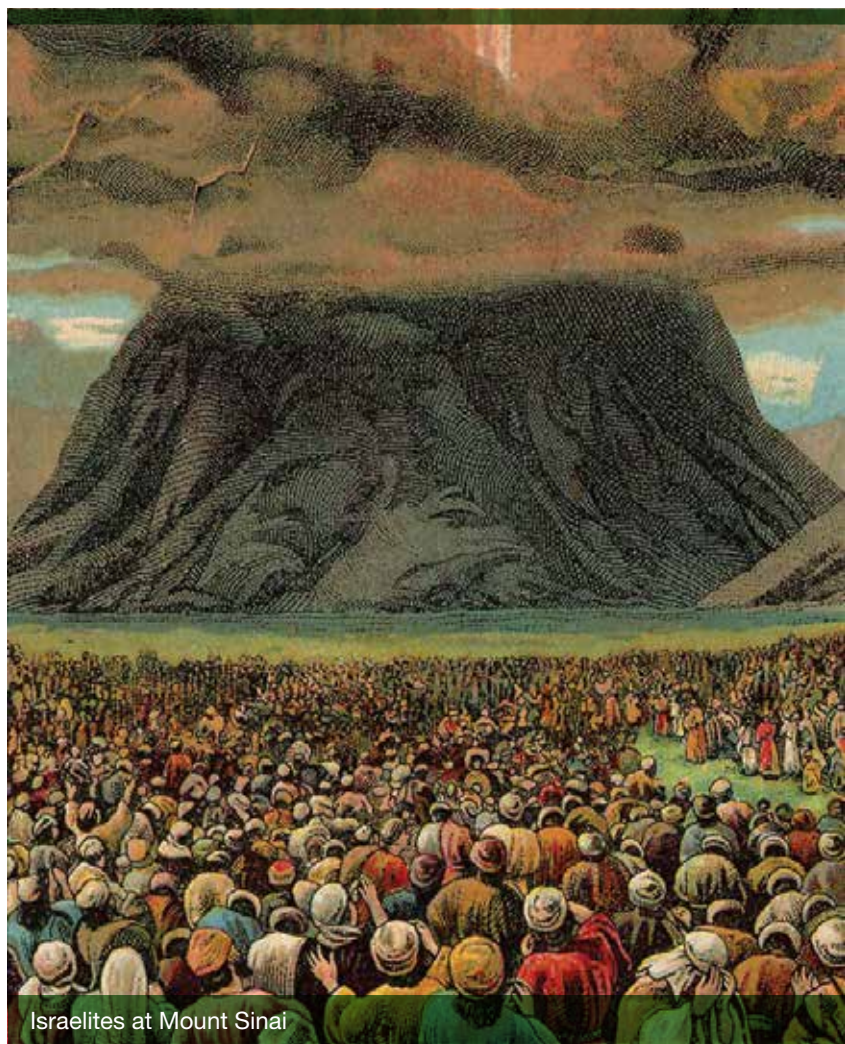
The Mosaic Covenant sealed at Sinai was not, of course, the first time God drew His people into a covenant relationship. Generations before, He had spoken to a man named Abraham (Abram), a man he called friend (Isa. 41:8), and invited Him to “walk between the pieces” (Gen. 15:9–20, Jer. 34:18). This was the custom of the day when two parties entered into covenant, a bond that was traditionally sealed with blood. The pagan tribes who surrounded Israel in Abraham’s day also had a custom of entering into contractual agreements, which they sealed by cutting into each other’s arms and sucking blood from each other, rendering them “brothers of covenant.” The Hebrews, however, did not engage in such a ritual. Instead they sacrificed the animals as listed in Genesis 15:9 and placed the pieces in parallel rows. They then recited the terms of the covenant as they passed together between the pieces, a much more civilized action but bloody nonetheless. Each party to the covenant pledged communal accountability, knowing that failure to keep their terms of the covenant could result in death. The ritual ended with a meal for which the sacrificed animals were roasted and eaten with great celebration.

In the Genesis 15 account, however, God passed between the pieces alone after causing Abraham to fall into a sleep-like state. As Abraham looked on, two clearly recognizable symbols of deity appeared and traveled the bloody path without him. The message that this sent to Abraham and countless generations after him was profoundly important then and remains so today. God was clear that this would be a covenant of love, assuring Abraham that He would be God to him and to his descendants after him (Gen. 17:7). But an integral part of this relationship would be the Land of Israel given to Abraham and his descendants in perpetuity as part of the covenant. In other words, the covenant was not only eternal, but also unconditional. The eventual possession of the Land of Israel by Abraham’s descendants was as sure as the myriad of stars that twinkled in the heavens above the bloody ritual. Abraham had no terms to meet.



**They would be His people,
the apple of His eye, His
treasured possession:
loved passionately, yet
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Just as the rainbow is a symbol of the covenant that God made with Noah, circumcision the symbol of the covenant in Genesis 17 and *Shabbat* (Sabbath) the symbol of the covenant at Sinai, some believe that the Land of Israel is the symbol of the covenant cut in Genesis 15. Regardless, through that ritual, God entered into a very special relationship with Abraham and his descendants after him. They would be His people, the apple of His eye, His treasured possession: loved passionately, yet disciplined harshly and the recipients of extravagant mercy and forgiveness. The rabbis teach that the covenant relationship revealed in Genesis 15–17 was renewed at Sinai. After the *Torah* (Gen.–Deut.) was given, Moses sprinkled the blood of the covenant sacrifice upon the people and upon the altar of the Lord to seal the union between Israel and God (Exod. 24:6–8).



Covenant as Process

Rabbi Irving Greenberg describes the *Torah* (Gen.–Deut.) as the constitution of the ongoing relationship of God and the Jewish people. As one reads the Scriptures, it becomes clear that much of it seems unattainable, the stuff of infinity and eternity. A God beyond measure, a destiny that will outlast history, a slate of seemingly unattainable expectations and concepts, Greenberg says, which are simply not commensurate with the limited, fragmented and imperfect world we inhabit. That, however, is where covenant comes in. It is through those covenant promises that the unattainable becomes the attainable, the eternal and the temporal intersect and God's promises indeed become reality.

As mentioned earlier, the covenant is to be realized in history. Israel was created for the very specific purpose of serving as a unique model of covenantal society, and the Book of the Covenant is rife with instructions on how to accomplish that destiny. The Jewish people are told how to love God, how to honor Him and bring glory to His name, how to relate to one another, how to love a neighbor, how to conduct business in a truly ethical manner, how to bring peace to the world, how to love and be loved, how to care for the poor and needy, how to react to the stranger and the alien, how to be a friend, a brother, a father, a mother and how to model godliness to a world that has precious little interest. Such lofty goals must be achieved in finite steps, and the covenant makes it possible to move toward that perfection, one step at a time.

Each generation, Greenberg says, will do its part to live up to the principles found in the Book of the Covenant, advancing toward that final goal and leaving the journey for the succeeding generation a step or two shorter. Through the covenant, the ideal and the real are betrothed to each other, and their dynamic relationship will continue until God's final goals become reality. In the meantime, the Jewish people will continue to see themselves as part of a chain stretching from the very beginning when God spoke to His friend Abraham to its culmination when He sets all things right.

Certainly God's interaction with mankind has been one of process as well. Rabbi Sacks believes there is much in history that points to the reality and process of the covenant, even or perhaps especially those times that were the darkest for the Jewish people:

The affirmation of Jewish life after the Holocaust is itself a testimony that the covenant survives and that the voice of God continues to be heard, however obliquely and obscurely by the contemporary heirs of those who stood at Sinai.

Sometimes when we read the pages of the Bible, it is easy to forget that the events of a couple of pages actually happened over a couple of centuries. Today, we are witnessing the actualization of processes begun millennia ago as God is fulfilling covenant promises that have been the hope of the Jewish people for countless generations.

“And they shall rebuild the old ruins, they shall raise up the former desolations, and they shall repair the ruined cities, the desolations of many generations. Strangers shall stand and feed your flocks, and the sons of the foreigner shall be your plowmen and your vinedressers” (Isa. 61:4–5).

"...and the nations shall know that I am the LORD," says the Lord GOD, "when I am hallowed in you before their eyes. For I will take you from among the nations, gather you out of all countries, and bring you into your own land" (Ezek. 36:23b-24).

"Moreover I will make a covenant of peace with them, and it shall be an everlasting covenant with them; I will establish them and multiply them, and I will set my sanctuary in their midst forevermore. My tabernacle also shall be with them; indeed I will be their God and they shall be My people. The nations will know that I, the LORD, sanctify Israel, when My sanctuary is in their midst forevermore" (Ezek. 37:26-28).

"Behold, I will gather them out of all countries where I have driven them in My anger, in My fury, and in great wrath; I will bring them back to this place, and I will cause them to dwell safely. They shall be My people, and I will be their God" (Jer. 32:37-38).

"And I will make an everlasting covenant with them, that I will not turn away from doing them good; but I will put My fear in their hearts so that they will not depart from Me. Yes, I will rejoice over them to do them good, and I will assuredly plant them in this land, with all My heart and with all My soul" (Jer. 32:40-41).



The prophet Ezekiel

Bound Together Eternally

It is indeed an awesome thought that God bound Himself to the terms of covenant in the same way that He expected His people to respond. They would commit *to each other*, they would love and respond *to each other*, they would be faithful *to each other*, and as much as His people cleaved unto Him, He would cherish and protect them. Of course, it had to be this way, since His people were made in His image. If they were committed to model covenantal life for mankind, if they were to be a picture of His faithfulness, He too was committed to be that reality for them. This concept is beautifully illustrated in a song that is sung on *Yom Kippur* (Day of Atonement):

For we are Your people	and You are our God
We are Your children	and You are our Father
We are Your servants	and You are our Master
We are Your congregation	and You are our portion
We are Your inheritance	and You are our destiny
We are Your sheep	and You are our Shepherd
We are Your vine	and You are our Guardian
We are Your handiwork	and You are our Maker
We are Your beloved	and You are our Lover
We are Your treasure	and You are our God
We are Your people	and You are our King
We acknowledge You	and You acknowledge us



Yom Kippur at the Western Wall

As Christians, it is our incredible blessing and privilege to be in covenant with that same God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The Book of the Covenant is as important and as foundational to us as it is to Judaism and should be as much a part of our worldview as it is that of the Jewish people. It is so important that it is second only to the book of Psalms in being quoted by Jesus (Yeshua). The concepts of how to live our lives, how to honor the Lord and how to show the world what it means to know, love and be loved by God are the bedrock of the Christian faith. It is also imperative that we understand and are mindful of what it actually means to be in a covenantal relationship. We are *pledged* to the Lord and He to us. We are *bound together* eternally, and as we cleave unto Him, He quiets us with His love and rejoices over us with singing.



To quote Rabbi Sacks one last time:

What is the secret of Jewish survival? Faith suggests an answer. At Sinai, Israel and God entered into a solemn and mutually binding pledge: the covenant. Israel would dedicate itself to God. God, in turn, would protect Israel. The Jewish people would exist, in Jeremiah's words, as long as the sun and the stars shone in the sky and the waves roared in the sea. Israel would be God's witness, and their eternity would mirror His. Jews survived for a simple reason. Interwoven in our history was something larger than history: Divine Providence.

At the heart of that providence is a love that defies imagination—a love that is constantly guiding and protecting even when it isn't seen, speaking even when it isn't heard, loving even when it isn't loved in return—and a faithfulness that will see His every goal and desire accomplished, even when He has no cooperation. It is an eternal oneness that can only be met with a grateful cry: "Thank You, thank You, thank You." It is covenant.

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Scripture is taken from the New King James Version, unless otherwise noted.

TERMINOLOGY:

Many of our readers are seasoned supporters of Israel while others are just beginning to understand the importance of standing with God's chosen nation; some prefer the use of Hebrew names and terms, while others are comfortable with more traditional Christian terminology. Because we want to show respect to all of our readers while providing an enjoyable educational experience, we are making every effort to use both terms whenever possible. The following are some of the most common examples:

- Jesus (Yeshua)
- *Tanakh* (Old Testament or OT) – *Tanakh* is an acronym used in Judaism which stands for *Torah*, *Neviim* or Prophets and *Ketuvim* or Writings.
- Writings of the Apostles (New Testament or NT)
- *Torah* (Gen.–Deut.)

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