



Engaging Israel: Foundations for a New Relationship

The Shalom Hartman Institute Video Lecture Series

Lecture 9: Background Reading 14

David Hartman, "Widening the Scope of Covenantal Consciousness"
A Heart of Many Rooms, pp. 235-239

Forward-looking technological consciousness can never fully define Jewish identity in Israel, since the very geography of the country brings the forward-moving thrust into confrontation with the historical aspirations and memories of the Jewish people. Jerusalem has always been the vehicle through which Jewish hopes and dreams were expressed. Israel invites powerful ideological passions, since it connects a Jew to the larger historical memories of Jewish experience. One cannot avoid meeting the prophetic social vision of Isaiah when living and working in Israel.

It is thus understandable that urgent practical questions of security and the economy do not exhaust what preoccupies Israelis. They get excited about spiritual and religious issues that seem strange to the outsider who sees Israel as a besieged country fighting for its survival. Governments fail in Israel over questions of religious principle, such as alleged violations of the Sabbath and "Who is a Jew" legislation. The disturbing questions that perplex Israeli society reflect a need to clarify how to apply the Jewish tradition in a modern society.

In Israel, in contrast to the diaspora, the synagogue and Jewish family life cannot sufficiently generate the spiritual religious vitality needed to make Judaism a viable option for modern Israelis. It is not accidental that the national literature of the country is the Bible. This does not mean, however, that at present a biblical religious passion infuses the country, but only that the parameters of Judaic spirituality in Israel mirror the larger historical and political perspective of the biblical outlook. We find many people identifying with biblical heroic types and with prophetic moral and messianic aspirations, even though they lack an appreciation of the theological foundations of the biblical worldview.

INTIMACY AND ACTION

One can distinguish several modes of relational intimacy between God and Israel deriving from the Sinai covenant. One very powerful symbol of intimacy between God and His people is the Temple: "Let them make Me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them" (Exod. 25:8). The sacrifices

expressed the ongoing relationship between God and Israel, as well as the attempt to restore it whenever it was disrupted by sinful behavior.

A second mode of intimacy with God, as developed by the tradition, was the three great pilgrimage festivals of *Pesah* (Passover), *Shavuot* (Weeks), and *Sukkot* (Tabernacles). Whereas the sacrifices and prayer express the feeling that God is directly involved in one's personal life, the festivals express the relationship of the historical community of Israel (*K'nesset yisrael*) with its God. In every generation, the Exodus, the receiving of the Torah, and the sojourn in the desert are appropriated by the community as its own experiences.

Another very powerful expression of covenantal intimacy is the Sabbath.

The Israelite people shall keep the Sabbath, observing the Sabbath throughout the ages as a covenant for all time: it shall be a sign for all time between Me and the people of Israel. (Exod. 31:16-17)

Thus far, covenantal Judaism has been described in terms of direct relational intimacy with God. There is, however, another aspect of the covenant that is vital today, despite its having been overshadowed by the symbolic and ritualistic modes of relational intimacy. Besides the *covenant of intimacy* there is also a *covenant of social and political action*. In the Bible, God gave not only ritualistic commandments but also commandments related to how to build social, economic, and political structures that mirror the Divine Presence in the world. The covenantal drama is not limited to moments of participation in symbolic holy time; it also extends to *hol*, mundane everyday life.

In Leviticus 19, the concept of a holy community includes a vast range of activities not only related to symbolic times and rituals. "You shall be holy" (Lev. 19:2) implies not merely observing the Sabbath, abhorring idolatry, and eating sacrificial food (19:3-8) but also making provision for the poor, outlawing theft and fraud, and pursuing justice (19:9-15) as well as many other demands, both ritual and social. The religious impulse that infuses this chapter expresses God's demand to be present in the totality of human activities.

Leviticus 19 and 25 act as correctives to any attempt at identifying holiness with separation from the everyday rhythms of life. Holiness has to be embodied in the political framework of the community. It is not an invitation to single individuals to pursue their own private spiritual quests.

The covenantal experience can thus be divided between moments when the reality of divinity is felt in a direct, personal way (holy time, prayer) and situations when God-awareness lacks the immediacy and intensity of religious worship.

LEARNING AND PRAYER

When the last king of Judah and the leaders of the people were exiled to Babylon, Jeremiah prophesied a return within seventy years. And they did return, but not in the way envisaged by Jeremiah and Ezekiel. The contrast to the triumphal entry of Joshua is even more striking. After the

exile, there were no conquering armies, no collapsing walls of Jericho. Instead of twelve tribes, only a small band of individuals returned to Jerusalem. A new Temple was built, but it was a modest structure instead of the grand building with its institutions described in detail by Ezekiel.

Faced with repeatedly disappointed or only partially fulfilled expectations, the covenantal community could have reacted in various ways. It could have lost faith in the plausibility and effectiveness of the covenantal promises. Or it could have postponed all its expectations to some "great day of the Lord" when God would redeem the world. The way chosen by Ezra and Nehemiah was to seize the limited opportunities offered by an imperial ruler friendly to his Jewish subjects (compare Nehemiah 2 and Ezra 7).

Rabbinic Judaism continued in the spirit of Ezra when it gave the community new ways of expressing their covenantal identity under difficult historical conditions. The rabbinic period saw an expansion of collective experiences, such as prayer and the public reading of the Torah, which reinforced covenantal consciousness. Through liturgical celebrations, Jews reminded one another that their memories were not illusions. The synagogue and communal prayer became a framework for sensing the presence of God within community. After the Temple was destroyed and the sacrifices ceased, any ten Jews who gathered together in prayer bore witness to the ever-present sanctifying power of God in their midst.

The community, wherever it found itself, now became the active carrier of God's presence in history. God became portable, as it were, through having become embodied in the halakhic life of the community. Sanctification of God was manifested not only by the grand historical drama of Ezekiel or by heroic acts of martyrdom but also by the personal lives of pious Jews whose actions made God beloved by their fellows. As the Mishnah, the Talmud, and the subsequent halakhic literature emerged, Jews became increasingly a community of learning as well as a community of prayer. God was present not only when Jews engaged in prayer but equally when they engaged in Torah study.

Although the creation of the State of Israel created the social and political conditions for restoring the full scope of covenantal Judaism (in terms both of relational intimacy and social, political action), nevertheless, as a result of centuries of exile we developed a rabbinic leadership skilled at guiding Jews only within the framework of the covenant of intimacy.

Many contemporary talmudic scholars are highly competent in dealing with halakhic minutiae that express the passion of the covenant of intimacy. But they are often silent or reticent before the larger demands of the covenant of social and political action. Their covenantal consciousness is directed toward religious celebration within the confines of the family, the school, and the synagogue but not within the larger social and political realms. The challenge to articulate a Judaism that can be mirrored in the total life of a nation is postponed to the messianic era. Many religious leaders believe that our task today is to expand on those covenantal symbolic and ritualistic mitzvot that reinforce our unique identity and separation from the surrounding nations and religions. The biblical demand that we become "a holy nation" is reduced to mitzvot dealing with marital relationships, sexual modesty, dietary laws, Sabbath and festival observance, and so on.