



אחריות והתחדשות Responsibility and Renewal

■ Today You Have Become a Nation

It is universally accepted that Israel's primary coagulation into a nation occurred during its years of slavery in Egypt. This long period of suffering was like a melting pot into which the Eternal Nation was poured and shaped, bringing about the ultimate historic milestone of the formation of the Nation of Israel.

The Torah teaches us of the People of Israel's formation in Egypt:

וְאַתֶּם לְקַח ה' וַיּוֹצֵא אֶתְכֶם מִכּוּר הַבְּרִזָּל מִמִּצְרַיִם
לְהִיּוֹת לוֹ לְעַם נַחֲלָה בְיוֹם הַזֶּה.

*And G-d took you and removed you from the iron crucible,
from Egypt, to be a heritage nation unto Him this very day.*

(D'varim 4,20)

An iron crucible is a pot in which metals are boiled and melted, and their imperfections filtered out, leaving pure iron. For the Nation of Israel, the Egyptian bondage was a melting pot in which it was boiled, melted and shaped into the holy nation of G-d.

Even before Bnei Yisrael left Egypt, they were raised to the level of G-d's chosen nation, as Hashem told Moshe clearly (Sh'mot 7,16): ***“Tell Pharaoh: Send away My nation, and they will serve Me in the desert...”*** The words ***My nation*** refer to the future. That is, despite the fact that they are already now a nation chosen for service of G-d, G-d's Name was called upon them only



when they received the Torah and not before. Only at Mount Sinai, when the people took upon themselves to obey G-d's commands and adhere to their covenant with Him, did G-d declare from the heavens:

אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ!

I am the L-rd your G-d! (Sh'mot 20,2)

In short: Israel graduated in Egypt to the level of a nation chosen by Hashem to be ready to stand in the future at Mt. Sinai and hear G-d declare that He is “the G-d of Israel.”

In light of this, how can it be that in the Torah portion of Ki Tavo – which takes place as Israel is about to enter the Holy Land, 40 years after Mt. Sinai – Moshe Rabbeinu declares to Bnei Yisrael:

הַסְכֵּת וּשְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה נִהְיִיתָ לְעַם לַה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ.

Pay attention and listen, Israel:

this very day you have become

a nation unto Hashem your G-d. (D'varim 27,9)

“This very day”? It happened 40 years earlier, at Mt. Sinai!

This is why the classic commentator Rashi does not understand this verse literally, but rather explains it as follows: “You should view each and every day as if it were the day that you entered into this covenant with G-d.” That is, Moshe is telling us the way to relate to the Covenant so that it will be part of us every day.

But Rashi does not explain the secret of how this is done. How are we to sense every day anew that we have just entered into G-d's covenant?

The same question applies to another verse, which was also stated on the eve of the entry into the Promised Land:

הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ מְצַוְךָ לַעֲשׂוֹת אֶת הַחֻקִּים הָאֵלֶּה ...

This very day, Hashem your G-d commands

you to observe these laws... (D'varim 26,16)

Can it be that Hashem is commanding us only for this particular day? No; once again, Rashi explains that the meaning is, “Every day, you should view the laws as if they are new and freshly-commanded.”

But once again, Rashi does not provide the secret as to how to do this! How are we to create the exalted sensation of newness in accepting and carrying out the commandments, every day of the year?



■ **Accepting Responsibility**

Let us take an example from the life of every Jewish boy and girl. Clearly, the day that a young Jew becomes Bar Mitzvah is a very significant day in his life. But, in what way? What precisely marks the transition point between the day before becoming a man, and the day after?

The answer is: The acceptance of responsibility.

The ability to take responsibility is that which defines the transition from childhood to adulthood. Yes, there are various levels of accepting responsibility – but the first stage is the day a boy becomes 13 years old, or a girl turns 12. On this day, they become liable for punishment if they sin, by virtue of the fact that they have become responsible for their actions. They now understand the meaning of, “I commit myself.” When they say they will do something, we can expect them to actually do it.

There is another difference between childhood and maturity. During childhood, the child is given whatever he requires; he need make no effort or commitment on his own. But as he approaches adulthood, he must show increasingly more responsibility, as well as more effort and action. As his level of responsibility increases, so too does the level of independence and authorities given him.

But this is not all. After several years of displaying personal responsibility, he graduates to an even higher level: that of “family responsibility.” At the age of 18-20, when he is ready to marry and build his own family unit, he enters the stage in which he becomes responsible for others.

Finally, in the third stage, one's circle of responsibility extends even past one's family. He may take on responsibility for his friends by guaranteeing their loans, for instance, or by taking on communal or national obligations. He is no longer responsible only for himself, but also for others.

How can this be applied to the formation of the Nation of Israel?

Israel was born as a nation when it left the “womb” of Egypt. It spent its childhood and youth in the wilderness, receiving everything ready-made, just as a child can expect. For instance, Moshe Rabbeinu taught them Torah and knowledge, and had an answer for their every question; if something was not clear, Moshe would simply ask Hashem and the response would soon come.



In addition, the Manna, their primary food, fell from the sky in plentiful amounts every day, landing practically at their door. The pillar of fire at night, and the pillar of cloud by day, were their guides, showing them the route to walk. The well of water accompanied them from place to place, providing them with drinking water on demand. The cloud above them provided them with shade, and they never needed new clothes, simply because the old ones didn't wear out.

The turning point came when they entered the Land of Israel. Here, suddenly, everything stopped. They were abruptly forced to find food and fight their enemies on their own, with only covert help from above. They would now have to build houses, plant trees, appoint a king and a leader, and build the Beit HaMikdash.

This turning point marked the transition from national childhood to adulthood, from total dependence to maturity and independence guided by the Torah and the prophets.

The Medrash Rabba describes it as follows:

The Torah states, “When you come to the Land and you plant a tree for food” (Vayikra 19,23). This can be compared to a chicken that feeds her chicks by placing the food in their mouths – but when they have grown sufficiently and continue to come for their food, the mother no longer supplies them directly, but rather pecks them on their heads, teaching them: “It’s time for you to get food on your own.”

This is what Moshe Rabbeinu told Israel: “From now on, no more well of water, no more Manna, and no more clouds of glory; instead, everyone must take his tools on his shoulders and start planting for himself.”

From now on, what is required is personal responsibility in building and developing Eretz Yisrael.

■ **The Newness of Torah Each and Every Day**

With the entry into the Land of Israel, the Nation of Israel begins a new stage: accepting responsibility to implement the Torah's laws under the new circumstances.

This responsibility for action requires them to look again at the operating instructions. To correctly fulfill G-d's commandments, they must constantly review the requirements, studying the laws deeply and responsibly, so that no mistakes will be made.



Most students do not pay attention to the nitty-gritty details of the material they are studying, viewing them as irrelevant. But when they reach the stage of actually carrying out in practice what they have learned, suddenly many questions arise regarding the details. They must then re-learn the material, such that it becomes “new” for them, as if they were learning it that day for the first time.

This concept will help us understand the verse with which we had difficulty above: ***“This very day, Hashem your G-d commands you to observe these laws...”*** It means that the day they accept responsibility is the day on which they must learn the material again and deepen their practical awareness of Torah and its commandments.

We can now also understand another verse, from the end of Ki Tavo:

אֱלֹהֵי דְבָרֵי הַבְּרִית אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה ה' אֶת מֹשֶׁה לְכַרֵּת אֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל
בְּאֶרֶץ מוֹאָב, מִלְבַּד הַבְּרִית אֲשֶׁר כָּרַת אִתְּם בְּחֹרֵב.

*These are the words of the covenant that
G-d commanded Moshe to forge
with the children of Israel in Moav,
in addition to the covenant He made with them at Horev (Sinai).*

(D'varim 28,69)

Why are there two covenants? What does the second one add that the first one did not have?

The answer is that the first one was at Mount Sinai, when G-d gave the Torah to Israel. This was the start of the learning process: Israel learned its function in the world as the Nation of G-d walking in His path. This learning process lasted for 40 years, with Israel in the position of a student who receives a stipend or a scholarship, as well as a dormitory, health plan, food and more, so that he can study without worries.

The second covenant occurred in the Plains of Moav, where Moshe was speaking to them just as they were about to enter into the Land of Israel. This was the renewal of the covenant in terms of preparation for its actual implementation and acceptance of full responsibility.

This, then, is the source of the sensation of renewal, as if today was the first day of their nationhood. This is the fulfillment of the above verse that Moshe told Israel as they were about to enter the Land: ***“On this very day, you have become a nation unto Hashem your G-d.”***



■ Mutual Responsibility

As we noted above, after one accepts responsibility for himself, there is another level: accepting responsibility for others. The nation of Israel agreed to take upon itself mutual accountability: “*Kol Yisrael arevim zeh bazeh*, All of Israel is responsible for one another” (Sanhedrin 27b). The source for this in the Torah is the following verse of rebuke:

וְקָשְׁלוֹ אִישׁ בְּאַחֵיו...
...and one man will trip over the other...

One man will trip over the other... (Vayikra 26,37)

The Sages there explain that this means that people will be held accountable for the sins of the sins of others. This is the source for the Torah commandment of *tokhecha*, requiring us to admonish our friend or loved one when we see him sinning:

הוֹכַח תּוֹכִיחַ אֶת עַמִּיתְךָ וְלֹא תִשָּׂא עָלָיו חֵטְא.
You shall surely admonish your neighbor,

and not bear sin upon him. (Vayikra 19,17)

This means simply: If you do not rebuke and warn your friend regarding his sin, you bear a portion of responsibility for the sin, and are liable to be punished accordingly.

This is also the basis of the Halakhah that states that one who is required to recite a blessing may simply hear it instead from someone else who is similarly obligated. Interestingly, even if the latter has already recited the blessing and is therefore no longer obligated, he may still “exempt” someone else by reciting it for him. For instance, one who recited Kiddush on the Sabbath, may recite it again for someone else who has not yet heard it.

Why is this? After all, he is no longer obligated; how may he now recite it for someone else who *is*? The explanation is simple: Everyone is responsible for the other; as long as even one Jew has not yet fulfilled his obligation, it is as if everyone has not yet fulfilled their obligation in this regard. Therefore, if one person has not yet fulfilled the mitzvah of Kiddush, then even one who has already recited Kiddush is still “obligated” in the mitzvah, and may recite it for him.

We see this clearly in Parashat Nitzavim:



אַתֶּם נֹצְבִים הַיּוֹם כְּלָכֶם ... לְעִבְרָה בְּבְרִית ה' אֲלֵהֶיךָ וּבְאֶלְתֶּיךָ...
 לְמַעַן הָקִים אֶת־הַיּוֹם לֹו לְעַם וְהוּא יִהְיֶה לְךָ לְאֵלֵהִים...

*You are all standing here... to be brought into
 the covenant of Hashem...*

*so that He will establish you **today** as His nation,
 and He will be your G-d... (D'varim 29,9-12)*

What is so special about this day that it so clearly marks the day that Israel becomes G-d's nation? The answer is provided in the next verse:

וְלֹא אֶתְכֶם לְבַדְכֶם אֲנֹכִי כֹרֵת אֶת הַבְּרִית הַזֹּאת...
 כִּי אֶת אֲשֶׁר יִשְׁנֹו פֹה עִמָּנוּ... וְאֶת אֲשֶׁר אֵינְנוּ פֹה עִמָּנוּ הַיּוֹם.

*And not only with you am I forging this covenant...
 It is being made with those here with us...*

and with those who are not here with us. (verses 13-14)

In other words, this very willingness of this generation of Israel to be so responsible and concerned even for future generations *that are not here with us* – is that which so surely stamps Israel as G-d's eternal people, throughout all generations.

■ The Individual and the Nation

Moshe and the nation agree that the covenant, with its rewards and punishments, will apply to all of Israel, forever. But how can this be done from a moral standpoint? How can one generation create an obligation upon all future generations that have not even been born yet? What exactly is the nature of this national obligation for all generations?

Clearly, an agreement must be agreed to by both sides. What, then, obligates the future generations in this covenant, seeing as they were never asked if they agree? Where is their free choice?

To answer this, let us ask another question, from the discipline of biology. We do not know how many cells there are in a human body; some estimates put the number at 100 trillion. Each cell has a certain lifetime, some as short as one day and others up to a few months. Within several months, in any event, all of the cells in the body are replaced with new ones; the body has become totally “new.”

Let's say that a person took upon himself a certain obligation last year. Can he now come along and say, “I obligated last year's cells – but not the



current version of my body! Today's cells weren't even around when I made this promise!"

Such a claim is obviously groundless. This is because this entity known as "the person" represents the entirety of all his cells, forever, regardless of when each individual thereof was formed or died out. Yes, each cell has its own individual life and existence, but its membership in the entity of "the person" goes far beyond its own individuality. It is a partner in the very essence of "the person," which is not merely a collection of a specific number of cells; it is one entity in which the genetic information that comprises it transcends time-based cellular boundaries.

When the cell dies as an individual, it continues to live as part of the comprehensive entity that is that particular person.

The same is true for the entity called the "Nation of Israel." A nation is much more than just the sum of its people or the number of its generations. It lives forever, even if the individuals therein – its people or generations – die out.

A Jew may die as an individual, but he lives forever within that eternal entity known as G-d's Nation. Israel's genetic code passes from one generation to the next. This is why Moshe can commit the entire nation to the covenant, even those who are not yet born.

This profound understanding now places into bold relief Moshe Rabbeinu's declaration that is the subject of this entire discussion:

לְמַעַן הַקִּים אֶתֶּךָ הַיּוֹם לֹא לְעַם וְהוּא יְהִיֶּה לְךָ לְאֱלֹהִים ...

*So that He will establish you today as His nation,
and He will be your G-d...*

וְלֹא אֶתְּכֶם לְבְדֻכֶם אֲנֹכִי כֹרֵת אֶת הַבְּרִית הַזֹּאת ...

And not only with you am I forging this covenant... (D'varim 29,12-13)

That is to say: The declaration that Israel is a nation is intrinsically bound up with its ability to take on obligations even in the name of those who are not yet born.

■ "For All These, G-d Will Bring You to Judgment"

To complete the picture, let us now delve into a teaching of King Solomon that raises some very difficult questions:



שִׂמַח בְּחַוֵּר בְּיַלְדוּתָהּ וְיִטְיֶבָה לִבָּהּ בַּיָּמִים בְּחַוֵּרוֹתָהּ
וְהִלֵּךְ בְּדַרְכֵי לִבָּהּ וּבְמַרְאֵי עֵינֶיהָ
וְדַע כִּי עַל כָּל אֵלֶּה יִבְיָאָה הָאֱ-לֹהִים בְּמִשְׁפָּט.

*Rejoice, o youth, in your childhood,
and let your heart be glad in your days of youth;
walk in the ways of your heart and what your eyes see -
but know that for all these,
G-d will bring you to judgment.* (Kohelet 11,9)

The first problem is that the verse seems to contradict itself from beginning to end! It first allows the youth to do what he wants, and ends with a grave warning that he will be brought to task for doing just that!

In addition, how can Kohelet guide one to follow his own eyes and heart, when the Torah itself commands precisely the opposite? We recite it in Kriat Shma every day: “*V’lo taturu, Do not stray after your heart and eyes.*” (Bamidbar 15,39)

The Talmud (Shabbat 63b) asks these questions, and the famous Sage Resh Lakish provides an answer. He says that the first part of this verse refers to the joy we must have in our Torah study, while the second part warns that if we do not follow through with good deeds, we will have to face judgment.

Resh Lakish is teaching us a very profound lesson: When a person is studying, no matter how deep or complex the matter might be, it is still only academic and involves no responsibility. It can therefore even be compared to one who rejoices by drinking and making merry.

But the moment one reaches the point of responsibility for his actions, things begin to get much more stringent. When it comes to action, one must pay careful attention to every detail – as if he were standing in judgment before G-d at every single moment.

Once again, we see that the transfer from theoretical study to practical responsibility is very significant, and creates a dimension of a “new beginning.”

■ **Standing in the Other’s Shoes**

In the times of the Mishna and Gemara, only those who reached the age of 40 were allowed to teach and rule on what is permitted and what is forbidden. Accordingly, the Talmudic Sages stated (Tr. Avodah Zarah 5b) that



a student can truly understand his teacher's words and his behavior only when he reaches the age of 40. Why is this?

This is based on another famous teaching of the Mishna (Avot 2,4): "Don't judge your friend until you reach his place," that is, until you stand in his shoes.

In order to understand your teacher and his rulings, one must be "in his shoes" – in the same situation and position of responsibility that he occupies. Only when a person reaches the age of 40 can he actually be in the same position as his teacher – because that is the age he is permitted to teach and issue rulings. Only then does he face the pressures and responsibility that will enable him to understand why his rabbi, facing the same pressures and responsibility, made the decisions he made.

The Sages learned this from the following verses in Parashat Ki Tavo:

וְלֹא נָתַן ה' לָכֶם לֵב לְדַעַת וְעֵינַיִם לְרֹאוֹת וְאֲזְנִיִּים לִשְׁמָעַ עַד הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה.
וְאִוִּלְךָ אֶתְכֶם אַרְבָּעִים שָׁנָה בַּמִּדְבָּר...

*Hashem did not give you the heart to perceive,
or eyes to see, or ears to hear - up until this very day.
And I led you for 40 years in the desert...* (D'varim 29,3-4)

What Moshe is telling the people is that only today, with their entry into the Land of Israel, as they are about to accept upon themselves the responsibility for their actions – only now can they understand all the rulings and decisions that Moshe made. "Only today," Moshe tells them, "can you fully understand me and realize the pressures and responsibility that I faced and that led me to reach the decisions I made."

■ Hashem Sees Each Angle

In conclusion, let us add a delightful thought, in the name of Rabbe Nachman of Breslov, on the topic of not judging others until we are in their shoes.

We know that G-d is called "HaMakom," which literally means "the place." For instance, in the Haggadah of Pesach, when we introduce the Four Sons, we say, *Barukh hamakom, barukh hu*, "Blessed be **the place**, Blessed is He." The generally accepted meaning of this name is that G-d is the place of the world, and not the opposite; the world is not G-d's place. That is, the world does not hold G-d, but He rather holds the entire universe in His "hands," so that it will not collapse.



Earlier, we quoted the Mishna (Avot 2,4): “Do not judge your friend until you reach his **place**.” Here, the word takes on a new meaning: not a physical location, but rather one’s consciousness and awareness. Just as we cannot judge someone until we totally understand his situation, Hashem, too, does not judge a person until He penetrates the person, as it were, and takes into account all the reasons and circumstances and pressures that faced him when he did a particular act.

Rabbe Nachman explains that when we say that G-d is in **every place**, we mean that He is in every point of departure from where a person set off to do what he did. He judges him from the person’s own place and point of departure, for Hashem is there, in every place. This is what makes G-d’s justice so right and true, as Moshe stated in his parting speech in the Song of Haazinu:

אֵל אֱמוּנָה וְאֵין עֹל צְדִיק וְיָשָׁר הוּא.
He is a faithful G-d, without injustice;
He is righteous and upright. (D'varim 32,4)

