



## **Ki Savo 2022**

### **The Covenant of Kings**

3 minute read | Straightforward

One of the most basic and essential rules of interpretation is understanding that the Torah is written in language humans can read and understand – דיברה תורה כלשון בני אדם.

R' Shamshon Raphael Hirsch explains that this means that the Torah writes within the boundaries of human understanding, and not objective truths known only to God.

The Rambam utilizes this theme prominently, famously suggesting that the Torah co-opted animal sacrifices only because they were culturally familiar methods of worship in the Ancient Near East. The Ralbag similarly recognized the value of understanding the ancient world of the Torah to give us enhanced context and understanding of the Torah's teachings.

Apart from animal sacrifices, another ancient practice that would be culturally familiar was the notion of the covenant.

In the Ancient Near East, kings would formalize their diplomatic relations with treaties or covenants. These treaties were drafted between equals and sometimes between a superior and a subordinate state, or suzerain and vassal. The structure of the Torah's covenants has striking parallels to the suzerain-vassal treaties. If we unpack the layers to the structure, we can unlock a deeper appreciation for it.

The main elements of suzerain-vassal treaties are identifying the treaty-maker, the superior; a historical introduction, such as prior beneficial acts the superior has done for the subordinate; the stipulations, typically the demand for loyalty; a list of divine witnesses; and blessings and curses. The treaty was proclaimed in public along with a ceremonial meal, and the treaty was stored at a holy site. There would be a periodic public reading to remind the subordinate citizens of their duties.

The similarity between the Torah's use of covenants and other treaties extant in the Ancient Near East isn't merely interesting trivia – it's political dynamite.

For most of ancient history, the head of state was also the head of the cult – god-kings and priest-kings were standard. The king or the priestly class had a monopoly on the rituals of religion, and the common serfs were passive observers living vicariously through these holy men.

In sharp contrast with that background, the Torah's rendition of a covenant is striking not in its similarity but also in its difference.



## TorahRedux

God does not seek a covenant with Moshe, the head of state, nor Ahron, the Kohen Gadol. God does not even seek a covenant with the Jewish People; the party God treats with is no less than every single individual, which is explosive because it's shocking enough that a God would care about humans in general, let alone each of us in particular. And by making a covenant with us, God goes even further and asks us to be His partners.

A covenant between God and individuals doesn't just illustrate the dignity of every single person; it also bestows a second facet to our identity. By elevating common people into vassal-kings, we are all royalty – כָּל-הָעֵדָה בְּלִבָּם קְדוֹשִׁים / מִמְּלֶכֶת כְּהֹנִים וְגוֹי קְדוֹשׁ. This also echoes a broader ideological theme that idealized a community of educated and empowered citizens – וְשִׁנְיָתָם לְבָנִיךָ / וְהִגְדַּתְּ לְבָנֶיךָ.

R' Shlomo Farhi notes that we take self-identity for granted today, but historically, self-identity was subsumed to community and culture. In a world where the individual self barely existed and mattered very little, it's radical to say that God cares for us individually, because it's not obvious at all – בְּשִׁבְלִי – נִבְרָא הָעוֹלָם. This tension between God as distant yet close is captured in our blessings, where we call Hashem “You” in the second person, indicating familiar closeness, and then “Hashem,” with titles in the third person, indicating distance.

Striking a covenant with individuals democratizes access to God and spirituality, creating a direct line for everybody. Parenthetically, this echoes the Torah's conception of creating humans in God's image – everyone is, not just a few “special” people.

We are all royalty in God's eyes, and we are all God's partners.

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## Gratitude Redux

8 minute read | Straightforward

Emotional states are everything.

While all animals experience emotions, they are predominantly simple; human capacity for complex thought uniquely impacts the context and depth of how we perceive and experience our emotions. Some emotions, like guilt, can come from our understanding of our role in events in the external world.

One of the highest human emotions is gratitude, which affirms that there are good things in the world, gifts and benefits that we have received. Research has shown that gratitude is one of the most powerful predictors of wellbeing, over and above most known factors, including health and wealth.



Gratitude is tightly linked to feeling happy, empathetic, energetic, forgiving, hopeful, optimistic, and spiritual while feeling less depressed, envious, and neurotic.

The Mesilas Yesharim teaches that God’s entire purpose in Creation was to have a counterpart to share the gift of God’s goodness with – humans, created as we are in God’s image and likeness.

It follows that recognizing goodness activates and draws out what’s best in us; gratitude and recognition arguably form the undercurrent of the vast majority of mitzvot, and it might not be a stretch to say perhaps all of Judaism.

The Midrash imagines God walking Adam through Eden. After reveling in how beautiful and wonderful each tree is, God would say that each marvelous one had been designed for human enjoyment. Inasmuch as we can say that God could want anything, God wants humans to enjoy His gifts and recognize and appreciate those blessings.

The first words God says to the Jewish People articulate that God wants to be recognized – אָנְכִי ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ – and not just for higher-order activities such as Creation, but for a specific and personal intervention in their lives, that God had rescued them from slavery. The next thing God has to say is that God cannot tolerate idolatry, where humans would misattribute God’s work to other, lesser powers. Idolatry betrays and demeans the good that God has done, and ranks among the most egregious sins towards God; idolatry entirely undermines God’s purpose for Creation, that God’s goodness to be appreciated and loved – וְאַהֲבֵתָ אֶת ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּכָל לֵבְבְךָ וּבְכָל נַפְשְׁךָ וּבְכָל מְאֹדְךָ –

In the agrarian world of the Torah, there used to be an annual national thanksgiving ritual – the mitzvah of Bikkurim. Farmers would tie a string to the first fruits that sprouted. Then, after the harvest, the Mishna describes how the entire country would sing and dance together at a massive street festival in Jerusalem to accompany the farmers dedicating those first fruits at the Beis HaMikdash to express their gratitude for the harvest – and almost everyone was a farmer.

On arrival, the farmers would present their baskets to the attending Kohen and recite some affirmations, including a brief recital of Jewish history. They’d recount how Yakov fled from Lavan, that his family descended to Egypt, and that God rescued the Jewish People and gave them the Land of Israel – אֶרְמֵי אֲבִד אָבִי / וַיֵּרֶד מִצְרָיִם / וַיִּסְוֶלְנוּ אֶת הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת – The prayer closes with an instruction to the farmer to rejoice – וְשִׂמְחָתָ בְּכָל הַטּוֹב אֲשֶׁר נָתַן לָךְ ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ וּלְבֵיתְךָ אִתָּהּ וְהִלְוִי וְהִגֵּר אֲשֶׁר בְּקִרְבְּךָ –

It’s hard to overstate how central our sages saw the mitzvah of Bikkurim. The Sifri suggests that the merit of Bikkurim is what entitles the people to the Land of Israel; the Midrash Tanchuma says that the merit of Bikkurim fuels the world’s prayers; and the Midrash teaches that the mitzvah of Bikkurim perpetuates nothing less than the entire universe.

But there’s one part that doesn’t quite fit.



## TorahRedux

The farmer would work his field manually; weeding, plowing; sowing; pruning; watering, and guarding it. It redeems no less than an entire year's work when the harvest comes, and ensures food security for the next year!

The farmer has worried for a year, living with anxiety and uncertainty. After the harvest, those troubles are gone; he can sleep easy now, and it might be the one time a year he can undoubtedly pray from a place of love and security, not fear and worry. So it's a strange thing for the Torah to instruct the farmer to rejoice – וְשִׂמְחָתָּ בְּכֹל הַטּוֹב אֲשֶׁר נָתַן לָךְ ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ וּלְבִיטָהּ –

If this is the happiest anyone will realistically be, why does the Torah need to command joy?

Healthy and well-adjusted humans require a sense of satisfaction and self-worth that comes from hard work and self-sufficiency – בְּזַעַת אֶפְיָךְ תֹּאכַל לֶחֶם. Our sages call unearned benefits the bread of shame – לֶחֶם שֶׁל בּוֹשָׁה / נהמא דכיסופא. When a child begins to individuate from the parent and insists on doing it “all by myself,” we recognize the child undergoing a healthy phase of human development. Eternal childishness and helplessness is a sickness, not a blessing. And after all, self-reliance is the American Dream!

But we can take doing it “all by yourself” too far – וְאָמַרְתָּ בְּלִבְךָ פָּחִי וְעַצְמִי נָדִי עָשָׂה לִי אֶת־הַחַיִּיל הַזֶּה –

So perhaps the challenge for the farmer – and us – isn't only in celebrating the blessings – וְשִׂמְחָתָּ בְּכֹל הַטּוֹב; it's that even after taking a bare piece of land and making it fruit all by himself, he has to admit that he didn't truly do it alone – אֲשֶׁר נָתַן לָךְ ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ וּלְבִיטָהּ –

Gratitude has a fundamental connection and interaction with humility. It grounds us and orients us by recognizing that what we are and what we have is due to others, and above all, to God, and so the error of self-sufficiency isn't just that it's morally wrong – it's factually wrong!

As R' Yitzchak Hutner notes, מודה doesn't just mean thanksgiving; it also means to confess. When we thank another, we concede that we needed the assistance of another, admitting our frail weakness and showing our vulnerability. We acknowledge that another has shared gifts with us, big and small, to help us achieve the goodness in our lives. Genuine gratitude strengthens relationships by helping us recognize and appreciate how we've been affirmed and supported by others. But our ego can inhibit us if we don't get it in check, telling us we did it alone.

Gratitude affirms that self-sufficiency is an illusion, perhaps God's greatest gift of all. John Rawls sharply observed that a person cannot claim credit for being born with greater natural endowments, such as athleticism or intelligence, as it is purely the result of a natural lottery. As the Rambam explains, our lives are a gift within a gift; by definition, our starting points cannot be earned, so gratitude should be our first and overwhelming response to everything. Sure, we may deserve the fruits of what we do with our gifts, but the starting point of having any of those things to start with is the more significant gift by far.



By thanking God loudly and in public, we firmly reject the worldview of self-sufficiency or that we did it ourselves – כָּחִי וְעַצְמִי יָדִי עָשָׂה לִי אֶת־הַחַיִּל הַזֶּה – and perhaps the ritual also helps recalibrate our expectations.

It is natural to be pleased with where you are but to want more still. Healthily expressed, we call it ambition, and unhealthily, we call it greed – יש לו מנה רוצה מאתיים – You're glad you got something, even though it wasn't quite what you wanted.

But nothing undermines gratitude as much as expectations. There is an inverse relationship between expectations and gratitude; the more expectations you have, the less appreciation you will have, and it's obvious why. If you get what you expected, you will not be particularly grateful for getting it.

Expectations are insidious because although we can superficially express gratitude, what looks like gratitude might actually be entitlement cloaked in religiosity and self-righteousness. It's a blind spot because you think you're thankful even though you didn't get what you wanted! But that's not joy; it's the definition of resentment.

Getting gratitude right brings out what's best in humans, encouraging us not just to appreciate life's gifts but to repay them or pay them forward. But beyond gratitude's incredible blessings, getting gratitude wrong is catastrophic and is one of the catalysts for all the Torah's curses and prophecies of doom:

פֶּלַח אֲשֶׁר לֹא־עָבַדְתָּ אֶת ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּשִׂמְחָה וּבְטוֹב לֵב מְרֹב כָּל ... Since you did not serve God with joy and good spirit when you had it all... (28:47)

It's a sentiment the Jewish People expressed uncomfortably often in the wilderness, complaining about lack of food and water, about the dangers they faced from the Egyptians as they were leaving, about the inhabitants of the land they were about to enter, and about the manna and the lack of meat and vegetables.

Moshe warns us how his people lacked gratitude in difficult times and warns them of making the same mistake in good times:

הִשְׁמַר לְךָ פֶּן־תִּשְׁכַּח אֶת־ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְבַלְתִּי שְׁמַר מִצְוֹתָיו וּמִשְׁפָּטָיו וְחֻקֹּתָיו אֲשֶׁר אָנֹכִי מְצַוֶּה הַיּוֹם: פֶּן־תֹּאכַל וְשָׂבַעְתָּ וּבָתִּים טִבִּים תִּבְנֶה וְיִשְׁבַּת: וּבְקִרְךָ וּצְאֲנֶךָ יִרְבּוּ וְכֶסֶף וְזָהָב יִרְבּוּ וְרֶגֶב יִרְבּוּ־לְךָ וְכָל אֲשֶׁר־לְךָ יִרְבֶּה: וְרָם לְבָבְךָ וְשָׁכַחְתָּ אֶת־ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ הַמּוֹצִיאֶךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם מִבֵּית עַבְדִּים: – Take care lest you forget Hashem your God and fail to keep His commandments, His rules, and His laws, which I enjoin upon you today. When you have eaten your fill, and have built fine houses to live in, and your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold have increased, and everything you own has prospered, beware lest your heart grow haughty and you forget Hashem your God—who freed you from the land of Egypt, the house of bondage. (8:11-14)

So perhaps the short history of how the farmers got their land recalibrates our thinking. Our enemies might have slaughtered us; but God has given us our lives and security – אַרְמֵי אֲבָד אָבִי. We might have



been spared death, but we could have been enslaved or subjugated to any number of enemies; yet God has given us our labor – וַיִּרְדּוּ מִצְרַיִם. And on top of safety and freedom, we have material abundance – וַיִּתְּנוּ-לָנוּ אֶת-הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת. With that kind of context, it would be ridiculous to think we somehow had it coming or that we did it by ourselves!

We don't practice Bikkurim today, and we're missing out on a vital aspect of Judaism. But we've probably all seen the contemporary analog, though – many businesses frame and hang their first dollar of revenue. It's sentimental, but it's a powerful symbol, and just like Bikkurim, it is a ritual that captures the moment you are overwhelmed with gratitude and joy. By dedicating our first sign of success, the first fruit, the first dollar, we protect ourselves from the hubris that we had it coming or the narcissism that we did it ourselves.

The Hebrew term for practicing gratitude literally means “recognizing the good” – הַכֵּרַת הַטוֹב; gratitude is recognizing the good that is already yours. The things you lack are still present, and in expressing gratitude, no one is saying you need to ignore what's missing. But there is no limit to what we don't have, and if that is where we focus, then our lives are inevitably filled with endless dissatisfaction.

As R' Shamshon Raphael Hirsch explains, almost all the mitzvos of the Land of Israel reflect this sentiment in one way or another. By heavily regulating our use of the land, with Shemitta, Yovel, the Omer, Sukka, and the tithes, the Torah guides us that there is only one Landlord, and we are all here to serve – הַכֵּל נְתוּן בְּעֶרְבוֹן, וּמִצְוֵהָ פְּרוּסָה עַל כָּל הַחַיִּים –

The Jewish people are named after Yehuda, a form of the Hebrew word for “thank you” – תוֹדָה. We're not just the people of the book; we could more accurately be called the grateful people, the people of thank you.

As R' Jonathan Sacks teaches, our blessings and prayers are a daily gratitude ritual; from the first words we say in the morning – מוֹדָה אֲנִי – to everything about life itself: for the human body, the physical world, the earth to stand on, the eyes we see with, and the air we breathe.

The Eliyahu Rabbah notes that the prayer leader repeats the Amidah aloud, and the congregation answers Amen, for all except the Thanksgiving blessing – מוֹדִים אֲנַחְנוּ לָךְ. You can delegate plenty to others, but not saying thank you.

While most of us aren't farmers in the Land of Israel, each of us has a long list of blessings to be thankful for, and although we're sorely missing a national thanksgiving ritual; we can learn its lesson that there is no such thing as self-made.

If there are any good things or accomplishments in our lives, we didn't get them by ourselves; we all got plenty of help.





## TorahRedux

You need to recognize how blessed and fortunate you are, with no void of resentment for the things you don't yet have; to be wholeheartedly and wholesomely thankful, decisively abandoning your expectations and entitlement, truly rejoicing with what you have – איזהו עשיר? השמח בקלקו –

Let gratitude, joy, and happiness spill over beyond the confines of the religious sphere and into the rest of your life – it will deepen and enrich you. Thank God, and perhaps your spouse a little more; your parents, children, colleagues, clients, and community.

We can't make it alone, and we're not supposed to. We need each other; it's a key design feature of being human – לא-טוב היות האדם לבדו –

As the legendary physicist and science educator Carl Sagan once said, to bake an apple pie from scratch, you must first create the entire universe.

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## Quote of the Week

“If you're on the wrong train, every stop is the wrong stop.”

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## Thought of the Week

“Don't worry about being the best. Worry about being the best at getting better. All you can control is your effort. You've got no idea what is going on in the lives of other people and vice-versa. Focus on continual improvement. Let the chips fall where they may.”

– Brad Stulberg

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*I present TorahRedux l'ilui nishmas my late grandfather, HaGaon HaRav Yehuda Leib Gertner ben HaRav HaChassid Menachem Mendel.*

*I hope you enjoyed this week's thoughts. If you have questions or comments, or just want to say hello, it's a point of pride for me to hear from you, and I'll always respond. And if you saw, heard, read, or watched anything that spoke to you, please send it my way - [Neli@TorahRedux.com](mailto:Neli@TorahRedux.com).*

*If you liked this week's edition of TorahRedux, why not share it with friends and family who would appreciate it?*

Neli



## TorahRedux

**PS** - TorahRedux is my pride and joy, the product of thousands of hours of learning, research, writing, editing, and formatting. I have been blessed to operate a niche business that allows me to dedicate a substantial amount of time to TorahRedux, and I welcome your assistance in furthering my goal to keep publishing high-quality Parsha content that makes a difference. I consult for NY home care companies, so if you have a contact in the NY home care industry, please introduce me!

**PPS** - My clients are hiring at all levels. If you or anyone you know is looking for a job in healthcare, please send me a resume and a one-line explanation of what kind of role would be the best fit, and I'll make some introductions. I have successfully helped **1 person** get a job in healthcare so far!

**Redux:** *adjective* – resurgence; refers to being brought back, restored, or revived; something familiar presented in a new way. Not to see what no one else has seen, but to say what nobody has yet said about something which everybody sees.