

Ki Savo 2023

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 the Torah writes within the boundaries of human understanding, 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 of the system, 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 stored at a holy site. A periodic public reading would 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 leader 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 its difference.

God does not seek a covenant with Moshe, the head of state, nor Ahron, the Kohen Gadol. God does not even desire 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 individual; it also bestows a second facet to our identity. By elevating common people into vassal-kings, we are all royalty – כָּל-הָעֶדָה כְּלָם קְדוּשִׁים / מִמְּלֶכֶת כְּהֹנִים וְגוֹי קְדוֹשׁ. This also echoes a broader ideological theme that idealized a community of educated and empowered citizens – וְשִׁנְיָתָם לְבָנָיִךְ / וְהִגְדַּתְּ לְבָנֶיךָ.

R’ Shlomo Farhi notes that we take self-identity for granted today, but historically, self-identity was subsumed into 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 apparent at all – בְּשִׁבְלֵי 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.

Living with Newness

4 minute read | Straightforward

One of the critical skills children learn is how to read a clock; what time is it?

Beyond answering the basic question with hours and minutes, there is something deeper behind the question; knowing the time means knowing what to do. The time of day and time of year, the seasons, and the calendar establish the boundaries and time frames upon which our world is built, with specific routines for morning, afternoon, evening, and night, summer, fall, winter, and spring.

Different cultures have established various numeral systems and calendars to measure time. Today, most of the world uses the Gregorian calendar, a fixed calendar determined by how long the earth takes to make one complete orbit around the sun.

The Torah asks us to track time using the moon as a frame of reference; when people spot the new moon, they would report it to the highest court, which declares the beginning of a new month – Rosh Chodesh. It's not Rosh Chodesh because there's a new moon, but because the Jewish leaders say so. It's the very first commandment in the Torah, given to the Jewish People still enslaved in Egypt:

הַחֹדֶשׁ הַזֶּה לְכֶם רֵאשִׁית חֳדָשִׁים רְאשׁוֹן הוּא לְכֶם לְחֹדֶשֶׁי הַשָּׁנָה – This month shall mark for you the beginning of the months; it shall be the first of the months of the year for you. (12:1)

There are lots of mitzvos, so one of them has to come first. But why is establishing the lunar calendar through Rosh Chodesh the first mitzvah as opposed to any other?

The story of the birth of the Jewish People begins at a time of stuckness, with the Jewish People systematically subjugated and oppressed, powerless objects with no choice or control over their circumstances.

Although slavery is illegal in most of the world, it persists today. What's more, slavery isn't just an abstract legal status or even just a phenomenon that still occurs in some dark corner of the world; it's also a state of mind, body, and soul that can happen to anyone. Thankfully, we don't have much primary lived with the experience criminal aspect of actual human trafficking; but if you've ever felt helpless, powerless, or stuck, you have experienced an element of slavery.

When we internalize that forces of change exist and that we have the power to harness and steer them, the possibilities are limitless. This moment can be different to the moments that have come before; this newness is the beginning of all newness – הַחֹדֶשׁ הַזֶּה לְכֶם רֵאשִׁית חֳדָשִׁים רְאשׁוֹן הוּא לְכֶם לְחֹדֶשֶׁי הַשָּׁנָה.

The Shem miShmuel explains that the power of the Exodus story is that its story of freedom on a national level offers us the opportunity to become free of the tendencies and troubles that hound us on a personal level. With the power to change, hard times don't need to be so scary anymore, and the world isn't threatening; it can be full of exciting possibilities. It follows that the first mitzvah is the one that empowers us to change by giving us a symbol of change.

The sense of futility, powerlessness, and stuckness that come from being burnt out or overwhelmed is poison. But as much as stuckness can come from attachment to the past, R' Nachman of Breslev teaches us to avoid dwelling too much on the future and focus on the present day and present moment. As R' Hanoch Heinoch of Alexander teaches, we can attach ourselves to vitality by being present – וְאַתֶּם הַדְּבָקִים ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם חַיִּים בְּלִבְכֶם הַיּוֹם.



The Torah often speaks to us in terms of here and now – הַיּוֹם / וְעַתָּה. Our sages take these references to Teshuva, our capacity and power to change and repent – וְעַתָּה יִשְׂרָאֵל מָה ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ שְׂאֵל מֵעַמְּךָ כִּי אִם-לִירְאָה – Because in one day, everything can change – הַיּוֹם אִם-בְּקִלּוֹ תִשְׁמְעוּ – As R' Baruch of Mezhibozh teaches, forget the past; right now, be a Jew – וְעַתָּה יִשְׂרָאֵל! The Chafetz Chaim takes this to be a reference to introspection – הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ שְׂאֵל מֵעַמְּךָ – what does this moment require?

It follows that our sages wisely guide us to seize every moment; if not now, when? As the Chiddushei Harim observes, every “now” has a different duty, calling for some new, renewed, or entirely other choice or deed. As R' Ahron of Karlin points out, each moment has its resolution; each moment of existence is incomparably unique, never existing before in the history of Creation, and never to be repeated before becoming irretrievably lost forever.

As the Vilna Gaon points out, Moshe speaks in the present tense to offer us all the power to choose – הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה וְקָלְלָהּ. Rashi quotes a Midrash that every day, we should perceive our experience of Judaism as brand new – הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ מְצֻוֶה –

The world tracks time using the sun; the Sfas Emes notes that the nations of world history rise and fall like the sun, lasting only when things are bright. The Jewish People track time using the moon, persisting in darkness, and even generating light among total blackness.

The very first mitzvah is the lunar calendar, the only calendar with a visual cue for changing times; and a powerful symbol of change, a natural metaphorical image of a spiritual reality. It's not just an instruction to count the time but a commandment to rule over time and even natural phenomena. It is a mitzvah to live by and with the power of change and renewal. It is a mitzvah to live presently with this moment and make it count.

Every day, every week, and in truth, every moment, is brand new, brimming with freshness, vitality, and renewal.

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 well-being, 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 mitzvos, and it may not be a stretch to say 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. To the extent we can say that God can 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 – אֲנִי 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 – וְאֵהָבֶתָּ אֹת ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּכָל לִבְבְּךָ וּבְכָל נַפְשְׁךָ וּבְכָל מְאֹדֶךָ

In the agricultural 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 – אֲרַמִּי אֲבֹד אָבִי / וַיֵּרֶד מִצְרָיִם / וַיִּתְּנֵנִי אֶת־הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת – וְשִׂמְחָתָּ בְּכָל הַטּוֹב אֲשֶׁר נָתַן לָךְ ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ וּלְבֵיתְךָ אִתָּהּ וְהִלֵּוּ וְהִגִּיר 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.

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 וּלְבֵיתְךָ.

If this is the happiest anyone will 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 אַפְיֶךָ תֹּאכַל לֶחֶם. Our sages call unearned benefits the bread of shame – נַהֲמָא דְכִיסּוּפָא / לחם של בושה – When a child begins to individuate from the parent and insists on doing it “all by myself,” we recognize the child is 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 בְּלִבְּךָ פָּחִי וְעַצְמִי יָדִי עָשָׂה לִי אֶת־הַחֵיִל 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 וּלְבֵיתְךָ.

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 incorrect!

As R' Yitzchak Hutner notes, מוֹדָה doesn't just mean thanksgiving; it also means to confess. When we thank another, we concede that we need 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 goodness in our lives. Genuine gratitude strengthens relationships by helping us recognize and appreciate how others have affirmed and supported us. 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 could not 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 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 – כְּחַי וְעֵצָם יָדֵי עֲשָׂה לִי אֶת־הַחֵיִל 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 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 to appreciate life's gifts and 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:

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

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:

הַשְׁמַר לְךָ פֶּן־תִּשְׁכַּח אֶת־ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְבַלְתִּי שְׁמַר מִצְוֹתָיו וּמִשְׁפָּטָיו וְחֻקֹּתָיו אֲשֶׁר אֶנְכִּי מְצַוֶּה הַיּוֹם: פֶּן־תֹּאכַל וְשִׂבְעָתָ וּבָתִּים טֹבִים תִּבְנֶה וּשְׂבָתָ: וּבְקִרְוָה וּצְאֻנָּה יִרְבְּנוּ וְכֶסֶף וְזָהָב יִרְבְּהוּ וְכָל אֲשֶׁר־לָהֶם יִרְבֶּה: וְרַם לְבַבְךָ וְשָׁכַחְתָּ אֶת־ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ הַמּוֹצִיאֲךָ 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 – אָרְמֵי אֲבֹד 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 מִצְרַיִמָּה. 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 did it 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 – 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 says you need to ignore what's missing. But there is no limit to what we don't have; if that is where we focus, 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 – הִכַּל נְתוּן בְּעֶרְבוֹן, וּמִצְוֵהָ פְרוּסָה 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 thankful people.

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, and 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 הָיִית הָאָדָם לְבַדּוֹ –

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.

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.

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

Neli

PS - TorahRedux is my pride and joy, the product of thousands of hours of learning, research, writing, editing, and formatting. My business, Hendon Advisors, allows me to dedicate time to TorahRedux, and I welcome your assistance in furthering my goal to keep publishing high-quality Parsha content that makes a difference. I source and broker the purchase and sale of healthcare businesses; I kindly ask for your blessings and prayers. If you are a buyer of healthcare businesses or can make introductions to healthcare operators who might buy or sell, just reply to this email to get in touch.

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.