

The covenantal process continues. In Parashah Noach HaShem establishes an eternal covenant with all living beings after the flood. Symbolized by the rainbow, it ensures the survival of creation and sets basic moral boundaries for all human beings. Now, HaShem chooses another nonconformist with unusual potential, a young man named Abram, and establishes a covenant specifically with him and his descendants through his wife Sarai. Both are eternal covenants introduced by HaShem, and both are not truly reciprocal, but rather, unilateral divine promises. However, in form and intent they are vastly different. In the first, Noach's offering of whole animals is simply a spontaneous gesture of gratitude, worship, and appeasement. It is not part of the covenantal process per se; it only precipitates it. It is actually HaShem's response that marks the first turning point in divine-human interaction. The covenant with Abram builds on the Noachide Laws, singling out one family to embody their potential, thus setting the stage for the first truly reciprocal covenant with all Yisrael at Sinai. It is noteworthy that Abram is not called to dominate the nations, but to bless them (12:3). This is a profound departure from the creation stories, where the first humans are told to subdue and have dominion over the earth and its creatures. The Noachide Laws set the first limitations on these powers, but they still ensure the dominion of humanity over the rest of nature (9:2-3). Much later, with the groundbreaking mitzvot that derive from the Ten Commandments, HaShem will call on us to be "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exodus 19:6), to teach, to serve, and to sanctify. HaShem's covenant with Abram introduces this new paradigm in 3 stages: Promise of land, nationhood, and blessing (Ch. 12); covenant ritual "between the pieces" of calves, goats, and rams – animals that will later be used for Temple offerings (Ch. 15); covenant of *brit milah* (circumcision), the physical mark of covenantal identity (Ch. 17). Abram's offering of split animals is rooted in ancient Near Eastern practice of the covenantal parties walking between the pieces to invoke a curse, i.e., may what happened to this animal happen to me if I break this covenant. However, in this covenant only HaShem, represented by a smoking furnace and a flaming torch, passes through the pieces to initiate our unique relationship. In the process, HaShem takes Abram far into the future, informing him of the enslavement and redemption of his descendants (15:13-14). Parallels to Sinai in this narrative are evident. Although Abram is locked in a divinely induced sleep (*tardemah* – same word as Adam's sleep in 2:21) and the Israelites are wide awake at Sinai, both are overcome by dread, both involve divine presence in the form of fire and smoke, both emphasize the incomprehensible otherness of HaShem, and both mark covenantal thresholds where divine presence overwhelms human senses. The Abrahamic covenant ensures that the relationship between HaShem and Israel will never be nullified, even if Israel fails (17:10-14). At this juncture, the only obligation we have other than the Noachide Laws is circumcision. Our moral and ritual obligations that define us as a people will begin at Sinai, but they rest upon the covenants with Noach and Abraham, covenants that will profoundly shape the moral, legal, and spiritual foundation of Western civilization. They are covenants for and with imperfect people intended to help them create life-affirming societies that will benefit all of creation. Our patriarchs and matriarchs are anything but perfect. Like us all, Abra(ha)m and Sarai/Sarah have strengths and weaknesses. In the land disputes between the herdsmen of his nephew Lot and his own herdsmen, Abram compromises for the sake of peace. In dealing with the king of Sodom he refuses to enrich himself at the expense of the people. His trust in HaShem leads him to set out on an unknown journey, and then to circumcise himself and all of the males in his household. And later, he models exemplary hospitality. But he also exhibits lack of trust by fleeing to Egypt when there is famine in Canaan, and then compounds it by lying about his relationship with Sarai, exposing her to potential adultery in Pharaoh's harem. The Ramban (Nachmanides) teaches that this lack of trust is the reason we later had to experience exile and slavery in Egypt. He also condemns Sarah for her similar lack of trust in forcing Hagar to bear a child for her, and then dealing harshly with her both when she is pregnant and after Ishmael and Isaac have been born. Indeed, it is easy to find fault with them both, but there are plausible reasons for their behavior. Every healthy organism has a strong will to live and will do all it can to defend itself. Facing famine in Canaan, Abram does what any reasonable person would do; he flees with his wife to Egypt, where there is food. And knowing the prevailing culture, he engages in subterfuge in order to save his own life – a pattern of deceit that runs in the family, as we will read in the coming weeks. Sarah also has legitimate fears. HaShem has prevented her from bearing children herself, so she resorts to a practice that is fully acceptable in her culture and acquires a child through her servant, thus ensuring that she will live on even though she is barren. When the inevitable rivalry arises, the behavior of both women is understandable. Impatience aside, could their faith in HaShem's promise to make them into a great nation simply have inspired both to do everything humanly possible to ensure success? Our choices are based on our understanding, which, after all, has its human limitations. HaShem's covenants do not call on us to be perfect. They offer us ethical rules to help us live in a world of imperfect people just like us. And that is enough.

Shabbat shalom!