

A SECOND HAGGADAH MYSTERY AND ITS HISTORY

D'var Torah by Dr Menashe Tahan

The Haggadah covers thousands of years of history. It is bound, therefore, to contain a number of mysteries. Solving these can deepen our insight into the Haggadah, into our history and into our faith. As a result, Seder nights can become a more profound and joyful experience. I thought that it might be interesting to investigate a covenant quoted in the Haggadah, named "The Covenant Between the Portions" or "Between the Pieces".

According to the book of Genesis (Chapter 15), this covenant was sealed between God and Abraham. In the Covenant, God revealed to our Patriarch all that would happen to his descendants. In fact, he relayed to him the story of the Exodus long before it took place: "And the Lord said to Abraham, "know for sure that your children will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, and they shall enslave them there, and they shall afflict them for four hundred years. But then I will judge the enslavers and after that they will leave with great wealth." (Gen 15:13-14).

This story is recounted in the Haggadah for the noble purpose of teaching children one of the major principles of our faith: that of God's absolute hegemony over history. God himself designs and plans history in advance for his own purposes. History is, therefore, the arena in which the will of God operates. It is not merely a collection of haphazard incidents, but has aims and meanings as it unveils the grand design of the Lord.

This is indeed a sublime principle. Yet the question is whether relating this theological lesson alone was the main reason for mentioning the Covenant in the Haggadah, or did its inclusion, perhaps, serve an additional purpose? Does this principle truly require a treaty to be built around it? And what are the "portions" or "pieces" associated with the Covenant? What function do they fulfil?

Indeed, on reading Genesis Chapter 15, the Covenant's significance becomes apparent. This lies in its promise of nationhood. This pledge was astonishing as

Abraham and Sarah were very old and childless and Sarah was barren. Yet God assured Abraham of that saying: "Look now towards heaven and count the stars if you are able to", "So shall your descendants be" (Gen 15:5). This was an unimaginable assurance. But Abraham believed it, as it is said: "He believed in the Lord and the Lord counted it to him for righteousness." (Gen 15:6).

In addition to this, the Covenant includes another momentous pledge, the promise of a national territory, a homeland, as the Covenant states: "I am the Lord that brought you out of Ur of the Chaldees to give you this land (i.e. Canaan) to inherit it." (Gen 15:7).

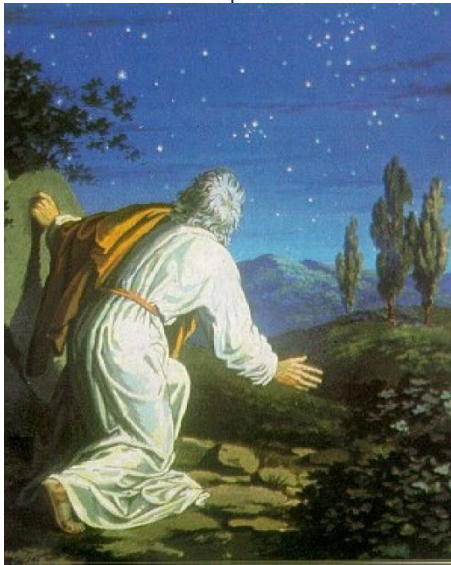
Once more this was an astounding promise, as the Patriarch was a wanderer and tent-dweller, ever on the move. He had no roots in Canaan nor elsewhere and was much dependent upon the goodwill of local inhabitants. The pledge of a national territory, therefore, was a remarkable revelation for him. He was absolutely stunned, immediately asking: "O Lord God, by what shall I know that I shall inherit it?" (Gen 15:8). Unbelievably, he seems to be requesting that the Lord provide proof. Is it possible that Abraham did not believe God or trust in his promise? This is not feasible. The history of Abraham is actually a story of faith and trust in the Lord never to be matched by another person in human history. If we consider, for example, the pledge of plentiful descendants, we find that Abraham was promised this on several occasions and always believed it without hesitation. The first was in Haran when he was 75 years old, and this was repeatedly vowed by the Lord until Abraham was 100. It was then that the miracle happened - Sarah bore Abraham a son and heir, Isaac. But Isaac was barely a young boy when Abraham received the divine command to take "Your son, your only son that you love" (Gen 22:2) and sacrifice him in the land of Moriah. What a disaster! What a tragedy! Yet, typically, Abraham obeyed God's call instantly without question. Luckily, though, he was stopped just in time by an angel. This episode marked the

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climax of Abraham's life, and proved that he was a man of utmost loyalty to the Creator, a man with ultimate faith and trust. Given this, what could have happened to make Abraham so uncertain that he should ask God for evidence to support his promise of a homeland? What might have been the reason? It was uncharacteristic of Abraham. A mystery for sure. But this mystery is closely followed by another, as God's response to Abraham's request is more enigmatic still. Why?

Because God asked Abraham to take some young animals: a heifer, a she-goat, a ram and some birds, and to sever the animals in two, placing the halves one against the other. A vulture came down upon the carcasses, but Abraham drove it away. Later, when it became very dark, "there appeared a smoking furnace and a flaming torch that passed between the severed pieces. On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abraham saying: "To your descendants I have given this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river Euphrates." (Gen 15:17-18). The promise itself is entirely unambiguous, but what is the significance of the furnace, the torch and the severed pieces? This question remained unanswered until archaeological research solved the puzzle. Investigators discovered that there had existed an ancient practice of treaty-sealing by means of the severing of animals. This was a dominant legal requirement in antiquity. Archaeologists have found several examples of this ritual among the people of the Near-east, such as the Sumerians, the Acadians, the Hittites and even the ancient Greeks. They all believed that when the contracting parties walked between the severed pieces of the slaughtered animals they thereby accepted the covenant obligations and invoked upon themselves the fate of the animals if the terms of the pact were violated. An example of this is the 14th century BCE stele from the Sumerian town of Laggash. This stele is in fact a peace treaty sealed between Laggash and the town



of Omah declaring that the parties had sworn an oath to adhere forever to the terms of the pact. Significantly, the stele contains images of vultures swooping on to a heap of human carcasses and making off with severed arms and heads. It seems, therefore, that this served as a type of curse. It is as if the treaty warns that he who violates the terms of the agreement, may find that his body becomes prey to the birds of heaven and the beasts of the field. There is clear indication from this, that the covenant between God and Abraham, therefore, followed a legal form of treaty-making, well established in antiquity. Only those who passed between the severed pieces would be bound by an agreement. Abraham, however, did not participate in this activity. Only the furnace and the torch, which represent God, passed between the portions, implying that God alone bound himself by solemn oath to give the land to Abraham, while Abraham remained a passive beneficiary. The Covenant specifies neither Abraham's age nor the location where it was sealed. This omission is most likely deliberate and signifies that the Covenant is eternally valid and free of all dependence on time and place.

But why should Abraham be given the land of Canaan? The answer is because, as we have seen before, he was a righteous man, faithful to the will of God. God himself describes Abraham in the most favourable terms: "He obeyed my voice, and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes and my laws." (Gen 26:5). Therefore, God grants him a reward, a gift which is offered unconditionally and for eternity. It is astounding how closely Abraham's Covenant resembles the treaties, grants and customs of the ancient near-Eastern nations. It is as though it were modelled on one of their royal grants. These grants were gifts bestowed upon individuals who had distinguished themselves in loyal service to their kings. In the same way, Abraham was granted the land of Canaan because he was such an obedient servant, who "obeyed God and followed His mandate." (Gen 26:5; 22: 16-18).

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But it is not only in the practice of the custom itself, but also in the terminology employed, that the Covenant resembles the ancient royal grants. For example, archaeologists found a royal grant given by the Assyrian king Ashurbanipal (669 – 633 BCE) to his loyal servant Balta. This document reads: "Balta... whose heart is whole to his master, stood before me with truthfulness, walked in perfection in my palace... and kept the charge in my kingship...I considered his good relations with me and established, therefore, his gift". This is a reflection of the wording in the Covenant, in which God describes Abraham using identical phrases, i.e. "he kept my charge" (Gen 26:5), while the Torah states that Abraham: "walked before God" (Gen 24:40; 48:15), exactly like Ashurbanipal when describing Balta. Similarities with the Covenant have also been found among the Hittite's grants. Issued to loyal servants, these were, likewise, unconditional. In one, the Hittite king declares to his vassal: "after you, your son and grandson will possess the land. Nobody will take it away from them; if one of your descendants sins, the king will prosecute him... but nobody will take away either his home or his land in order to give it to a descendant of somebody else." As in the covenant, the land will eternally belong to his lineage.

A pertinent question is however, whether the Covenant was actually required? Is it imaginable that Abraham had limited trust in God and was, therefore, compelled to request a formal commitment from him? The answer is: absolutely not. If Abraham believed in the promise of nationhood, then why would he not trust in the pledge of a national territory to house that nation? This and the fact that both the grant of Canaan to Abraham and sealing the Covenant with him were formulated and performed according to the customs of the ancient world, imply that the covenant was not sealed in order to quell any suspicions or uncertainties held by Abraham. Its aim must have been different. Sealing was, probably, directed, not at Abraham, but performed as a signal to all the nations and the rulers of the ancient world, warning them blatantly, telling them: "Listen carefully. I am the Lord God, the creator of the universe, the king of kings. I have decided, in accordance with the custom of your kings, that you well know and practise,

to bestow a gift to my most loyal servant, Abraham, the man who 'walked before me, kept my charge, obeyed my voice, my commandments, my statutes and my laws'. The gift will be the land of Canaan, to be a national home for him and his descendants, unconditionally, for all time. I have consolidated my promise by sealing a Covenant with him according to the Sumerian international law, with which you too are familiar. Do not ever dare to refute, dispute or challenge him or his descendants as to the ownership of this territory. It belongs to them eternally. Thus decreed the Lord."

The Covenant between the portions is the most phenomenal contract ever sealed in the history of mankind for the benefit of a nation. It is the tool by which the Torah protected the people of Israel and secured them a national home. The pieces of the Covenant were but the stamp which sealed the transfer of the land of Canaan to the hands of Abraham and the people of Israel for good. It is the device by which the Holy Land became ours, long before we became a nation. It is because of the Covenant that we, later, owned the land during the time of the Judges and during the first and the second temples. It is owing to it that the land belonged to us even when we were scattered around the globe for two thousand years. Then it was just under lease. It was also the banner around which we rallied in our struggle to establish our homeland in the modern state of Israel.

It seems true that history repeats itself. In ancient times there were so many nations in Canaan, namely: the Qeni, the Qenizzi, the Hitti, the Perizzi, the Emori, the Girgashi, the Yevusi, etc. They all wanted to drive the Israelites out of the Land. They failed. Nothing has changed since. Similarly we now have the Azati, the Levanoni, the Suri, the Parsi, etc. They also want to expel the Jewish people from the Land. They are certain to fail. Little do they know that the Covenant, like the people of the Covenant, is for ever. It is eternal.