

Shabbat Morning Nitzavim-Vayeilech 5787

September 5, 2026

Responding to Emery Kupfer and Lucy Gitlen-Richardson

Emery and Lucy, thank you for those thoughtful divrei Torah about the meaning of covenant. Emery, you explored what it means to have free will, especially in the context of covenant. Lucy, you asked why Moses was so sure that the Israelites would break the covenant even though they promised to keep it, and why it's so hard even today to keep promises.

I have to admit, I struggle with these questions too, in particular as this parasha and the Torah more generally, describe our relationship to covenant as linked to reward and punishment, with the threat of G-d's wrath if we disobey. I find this to be particularly problematic given the passage you quoted, Emery, that the Israelites at Sinai and here in our parasha, are making a promise to live by the covenant not just for their generation, but for all subsequent generations of Jews as well.

A rabbi who lived in Spain in the 14th century named Isaac Abravanel describes in his Torah commentary a debate that he had with the other leading Rabbis of his time. They asked, "Who gave the generation of the wilderness which stood at the foot of Mt. Sinai the power of obligating all those who would arise after them...?" In other words, who gave them the right to promise not just for themselves but for us? Abravanel answered that it was like a person who takes out a loan and can't repay it in their lifetime. Their children are going to be responsible for that loan, even if the children weren't alive when the loan was made. Abravanel says that this is like G-d and the Israelites. The Israelites are indebted to G-d for freeing them from slavery in Egypt. Forever. The deal is that in exchange for our people's freedom, we are forever servants of G-d. It's a debt that can never be paid in full. Our freedom is not free. In exchange for our people's freedom, we owe G-d forever. And what we owe is to live in accordance with certain principles. And if you look at the pattern of the mitzvot, we are to live in a way conducive to bringing a future of justice and peace to the world. Harmony among people, fairness in society, and allegiance to a Oneness that contains all life.

20th century Torah scholar Nehama Leibowitz points out that Abravanel's comparison to the person with the loan doesn't really hold up. Because a descendant of a person who made a loan can usually get out of repayment, whereas this promise, the Jewish people's covenant, is inescapable. Abravanel lived in the time of the Spanish inquisition, when Jews were trying to hide and pretend they weren't Jewish so they could avoid

persecution, but it wasn't working. People with Jewish ancestry, even those who converted to Christianity, were being persecuted.

Let's hope that kind of persecution doesn't ever happen again. But in a more positive sense, the Jewish people continue to see ourselves as obligated to this covenant that our ancestors made on our behalf. The key, to me, is how we interpret what that means. First of all, if we imagine that the construct of reward and punishment was needed for the wilderness generation – that's how they thought, that's how they understood the world, and that's what would be motivating for them – (given that Torah is written in human language, according to Rabbi Ishmael and Maimonides), then we see that what's described as reward and punishment and G-d getting angry can equally be understood as intrinsic outcomes. Meaning if you do good things, there will be intrinsic reward. If you treat your neighbor with kindness, they're more likely to treat you with kindness back. If you steal, you're contributing to a culture in which stealing becomes normal, and you're more likely to have your things stolen.

The second key to making covenant work as an ongoing binding promise for every generation is giving every generation the ability to adjust the specifics to meet their moment. In the time of the wilderness, for example, wearing clothing with a mix of linen and wool was apparently a big problem. That mix of fabrics does not seem to have deleterious effects today. There definitely is wisdom to be gained from studying that prohibition, what it meant to our ancestors, and all of the ways it is a metaphor that can have meaning and even guidance for us. But these days, we might want to adapt that mitzvah to focus on the ethical and spiritual questions about clothing today – how our clothing is made, how the workers are treated and paid, what kind of environmental impact clothing manufacture has, how much clothing we really need, etc. If we understand covenant to be a living promise – exactly as the Rabbis did 2,000 years ago when they radically adapted Torah to their generation – if we see covenant as a promise that can be updated and chosen again and again, then it becomes both realistic and moral to expect our generation and future generations to live by it.

This connects to both of your questions, Emery and Lucy, and it shapes how we see the High Holy Days, which start with Rosh Hashanah just one week from today. We have free will. We make choices every day that have consequences. We regularly have the ability, as you said Emery, to use our free will to make choices that won't have good outcomes. With covenant, we're being asked to bring mindful awareness to those choices and to use our free will with as much discernment and wisdom as we can, using Torah – meaning the ongoing process of our people's thinking about these questions – as a guide. And Lucy, you're right, our Sages would like to see us under-promise and

over-perform. Since we cannot predict the future, they'd like us to say less about what we will do tomorrow and focus more on doing the right thing today.

Right now, as we are one week away from the holiest days of the year, we are not supposed to wait for them to come to start thinking about how this applies to our lives. We are supposed to use this time, this month, to look deeply at how we have been using our free will and what promises we have made and broken. We are to take account – honestly, unsparingly – at when and how we have done the wrong thing –either on purpose or by accident. And we are supposed to use our free will to do something brave this week. To pick up the phone and apologize to anyone we've hurt, or anyone we've broken a promise to. Such an act is a good example of intrinsic reward. Making a real apology is hard, but doing it makes us feel so much better. No matter how the other person responds, we know that we genuinely have taken responsibility for what we did and can set about doing it differently next time. Not in an overpromise kind of way, but in an internal, quiet, thoughtful determination kind of way.

People often think of the High Holy Days as negative, heavy, self-blaming. But I don't see them that way at all. I see them as the greatest possible use of our freedom. Here, we're given an opportunity to be the best humans we can be. And by the time Yom Kippur comes and we've accounted for the ways we've fallen short, and we've made amends, and we release ourselves from all misspoken promises, we have this beautiful experience of forgiveness, of being forgiven, of starting fresh and seeing all of the goodness that's in us that is shining through. It's about believing in ourselves and holding up an ideal of who we want to be.

So use this week to contemplate the very questions that Emery and Lucy asked us today. How are you using your free will? What broken promises lie in your past for which you can apologize? And what choices do you really want to be making? May this be a good sweet year for us all.

Shanah Tovah. Shabbat Shalom.