

PARASHAT HASHAVUA

PARASHAT VA'ERA

**The Covenant of Circumcision and the Covenant Between
the Pieces¹**

By Rav Yoel Bin Nun

And God spoke to Moshe,

and said to him, "I am the Lord;

and I appeared to Avraham, to Yitzchak, and to Yaakov as God Almighty [in the covenant of circumcision],

but by My name the Lord I made Me not known to them.

And I have also established My covenant with them, to give them the land of Canaan, the land of their sojournings, wherein they sojourned.

And moreover I have heard the groaning of the children of Israel, whom the Egyptians keep in bondage; and I have remembered My covenant [between the pieces]. Therefore, say to the children of Israel: I am the Lord, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from their bondage, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm, and with great judgments;

and I will take you to Me for a people, and I will be to you a God;

and you shall know that I am the Lord your God, who brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians.

And I will bring you in to the land, concerning which I lifted up My hand to give it to Avraham, to Yitzchak, and to Yaakov; and I will give it you for a heritage: I am the Lord." (*Shemot* 6:2-8)

God's speaking to Moshe at the beginning of *Parashat Va'era* seems like a new beginning, as the whole mission that had begun with the revelation at the burning bush ended in great despair, with deep frustration, and with Moshe's going back to God and saying: "Why is it that you have sent me?" Now it is like a new beginning. There is no mention of a place, there is no background, there is no story: "And God spoke to Moshe, and said to him, 'I am the Lord!'" – as if everything was starting just now. This second beginning will ultimately lead to the exodus from Egypt, and this beginning holds fast to the two covenants that were made with Avraham: the covenant between the pieces and the covenant of circumcision.

The covenant between the pieces is the covenant made with the nation that would one day arise from the seed of Avraham. In the days of Avraham, there was not yet a nation, and therefore this covenant was made in a deep sleep, at night, and it is explicitly stated in it: "To your seed have I given this land" (*Bereishit* 15:18). It also says: "To inherit it" (*ibid.* 15:7) – but not immediately, not in the days of Avraham, but rather at the end of four hundred years, when there will already be a nation.

The covenant of circumcision, on the other hand, was made with Avraham while he was still alive and active, during the day and not at night (and so is the *halakha* regarding circumcision for future generations – during the day and not at night). Avraham made the covenant himself, with himself, on himself, on Yishmael his son, and on all the members of his household, and later on his son Yitzchak when he was eight days old. The covenant of circumcision was established and kept since the days of Avraham, and therefore it is stated about it: "And I have also established My covenant with them..."

The land in the covenant of circumcision is the land of Canaan as a "land of their sojournings," and sojournings (*megurim*) – like *ger*, "stranger" – are temporary, rather than permanent. Thus it is stated there at the end of the passage dealing with circumcision: "And I will give to you and to your seed after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession" (*ibid.* 17:8). The meaning of the land of Canaan as a land of sojournings for an everlasting possession cannot be inheritance, or sovereignty, or control, or conquest – but rather a deep connection with the uniqueness and sanctity of the land, as it is, whoever the current rulers are, be they Canaanites, Egyptians, Babylonians, Romans, Arabs, or Ottoman Turks. It makes no difference, for the covenant of circumcision is everlasting. The connection between the children of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov to the patriarchs, to the Machpela Cave, to the covenant of circumcision is the covenant that shapes the family of the patriarchs and to each and every one of their descendants who connects himself to the family of the patriarchs and to the land, as the land of the patriarchs. This connection depends not on history or on politics. Rather, it is an eternal, unique bond that does not change. The Machpela Cave remains the tomb of the patriarchs even when the people of Israel live in Egypt or in any other land of exile.

It is by the power of the covenant of circumcision and of the land of Canaan that Yaakov tells his children to take him out of Egypt and bury him in the land of Canaan. From this, R. Ashtori ha-Parchi, author of the *Kaftor Va-Perach*, and, much later, the *Chatam Sofer*, learn that the sanctity and uniqueness of the land does not depend on the conquest of Yehoshua, on the return of Ezra, on any other historical-halakhic condition, on the "first consecration," or on the "second consecration." It simply exists eternally.

In my opinion, all of this stems from the covenant of circumcision, and this is what preserves the Jewish family with its unique, eternal connection to the patriarchs and to the land of the patriarchs.

The covenant between the pieces, in contrast, depends on historical conditions. It depends on the exodus from Egypt, which will create a "people" – "the people of the children of Israel" (1:9). The first to recognize them as a people was Pharaoh. The people of the children of Israel who will go out from Egypt will return to the patriarchal land and take possession of it as the land of their inheritance, in order to realize in it the covenant between the pieces. In the days of the patriarchs, the covenant between the pieces was hidden, concealed, in a deep sleep, in a vision, set aside for the future. But now the time has arrived, the moment of the exodus from Egypt, when there is already a people – "the people of the children of Israel" – and the time of the covenant of the pieces has arrived. In this place, at this renewed beginning of the mission, Avraham's two covenants join into a single covenant of the exodus from Egypt.

¹ This *shiur* is a continuation of the VBM *shiur* on [Parashat Lekh Lekha](#). It is an edited version of *Shirat Ha-Torah* on *Parashat Va'era*; a more comprehensive discussion is found in my book, *Pirkei Ha-Avot Be-Sefer Bereishit, Ha-Aretz Ve-Eretz Canaan Ba-Torah*.

Some of the words and phrases in the opening verses of *Parashat Va'era* are taken from the covenant of circumcision, while others are taken from the covenant of the pieces. Let us read these verses precisely:

"And God spoke to Moshe" – This is the language of the covenant of circumcision, where we read, "And God spoke to him, saying, 'As for Me, behold, My covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations'" (*Bereishit* 17:3-4).

"And he said to him, I am the Lord" – This is the covenant between the parts, in which it is stated, "I am the Lord that brought you out of Ur Kasdim" (*ibid.* 15:7).

"And I appeared to Avraham, to Yitzchak, and to Yaakov, as God Almighty" – This is the covenant of circumcision, as it is stated in that covenant: "I am God Almighty; walk before Me and be wholehearted" (*ibid.* 17:1).

"But by my name the Lord I made Me not known to them" – This is the covenant between the pieces, where it is stated: "I am the Lord" (*ibid.* 15:7). Why did God not make Himself known to them by that name? Because the covenant of the pieces was made in deep sleep, in a vision, at night, and it was not known until then – it was not known to the patriarchs, as it was not fulfilled in their time, and was also not meant to be fulfilled in their time. This is how Rashi interprets these words: "It is not written here: '[My name the Lord] I did not make known (*hodati*) to them,' but: '[By My name the Lord] was I not known (*nodati*) to them.' That is, I was not recognized by them in My attribute of 'keeping faith,' by reason of which My name is called 'the Lord' [which denotes that I am certain to substantiate My promise], for indeed, I made promises to them but did not fulfill them [during their lifetime]." The time had not yet arrived for the covenant between the pieces to be fulfilled, and therefore, "I am the Lord" was not known to the patriarchs, nor was it known until now to the world at large.

"And I have also established My covenant with them, to give them the land of Canaan, the land of their sojournings, wherein they sojourned" – This entire verse is taken from the covenant of circumcision! There it is explicitly stated: "And I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your seed after you, throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God to you and to your seed after you. And I will give to you, and to your seed after you, the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan for an everlasting possession" (*ibid.* 17:7-8).

"And moreover I have heard the groaning of the children of Israel, whom the Egyptians keep in bondage; and I have remembered My covenant" – between the pieces! For only there is it stated: "Surely know that your seed shall be a stranger in a land that is not theirs, and shall serve them; and they shall afflict them..." (*ibid.* 15:13); and there it is stated: "And also that nation, whom they shall serve, will I judge, and afterward shall they come out with great substance" (*ibid.* 15:14). It is clear from this that the words, "My covenant," refer to the covenant between the pieces, and that the two verses opening with the word *ve-gam* ("and") refer to the two covenants.

If so, the verses of *Va'era* combine the covenant of circumcision with the covenant between the pieces, the covenant of the family with the covenant of the nation – the covenant of the family of the patriarchs, whose covenant of identity is the covenant of circumcision, with the covenant of the nation and the land that will only be fulfilled in the future with the exodus from Egypt and the people of Israel's entry into their land as sovereigns, as taking possession of the land "to inherit it." The

joining together of these two covenants is the essence of this passage.

Rashi is the only commentator who interpreted the passage in this manner; he cites the verses in *Bereishit* extensively, and the parallels in the verses prove his words (although Rashi does not always clarify which covenant is being referred to). If we follow the wording of the verses, we understand that we are dealing here with two covenants that are combined into one.

"Therefore say to the children of Israel, I am the Lord, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from their bondage, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm, and with great judgments" – This is all a fulfillment of the covenant between the pieces, for "I am the Lord" was stated in the covenant between the pieces, "afterward they shall come out with great substance" was stated in the covenant between the pieces, and the bondage and the suffering were mentioned in the covenant between the pieces. Thus, this entire verse is a fulfillment of the covenant between the pieces.

But the next verse goes back to the covenant of circumcision:

"And I will take you to Me for a people, and I will be to you a God" – "to be a God to you and to your seed after you" is stated in the covenant of circumcision (*ibid.* 17:7). This is the climax of the *mitzva* of circumcision, and this is the meaning of the covenant – "to be a God to you and to your seed after you." The bond of identity between the family of the patriarchs and God who reveals Himself to them lies in the expression, "I am God Almighty" (*ibid.* 17:1). But in anticipation of the exodus from Egypt, the time came to join the family covenant to **the national covenant**, the covenant of the circumcision to **the covenant between the pieces**. Therefore the verse continues: "And I will take you to Me for a people, and I will be to you a God; **and you shall know...**" – for in the covenant of the pieces it is stated: "Surely know" (*ibid.* 15:13). But what must we know?

"And you shall know that I am the Lord your God, who brought you out from under the burden of the Egyptians." It is here that the phrase, "I am the Lord your God,"² appears for the first time in the Torah, and henceforth, it will be the clearest expression of the exodus from Egypt. We say it every day (twice!) at the end of the last passage of the *Shema*: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, to be your God; I am the Lord your God" (*Bamidbar* 15:41). This expression is precisely the combination of the two covenants that were made with Avraham – the covenant of circumcision: "To be a God to you, and to your seed after you" (*Bereishit* 17:7) with the covenant between the pieces: "I am the Lord that brought you out of Ur Kasdim" (*ibid.* 15:7) – **"I am the Lord your God, who brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians!"**

"And you shall know" – "surely know" – this is what we must know!

The last verse completes the fulfillment of the covenant between the pieces in the land: "And I will bring you in to the land, concerning which I lifted up My hand to give it to Avraham, to Yitzchak, and to Yaakov; and I will give it you for a heritage: I am the Lord!" "I am the Lord!" This is the way that the covenant between the pieces opens. "The land" is an expression taken

² This deliberate joining of the two covenants in the book of *Bereishit* to the extent that one expression contains both of them completely refutes the "critical" distinction between different "sources," especially in the passages dealing with the covenant, which is a central test.

from the covenant between the pieces – "To your seed have I given this land" (*Bereishit* 15:18; in the covenant of circumcision it says "the land of Canaan"). The most important thing is the term "heritage, for "to give you this land to inherit it" is the expression that characterizes the covenant between the pieces. This verse is not referring to visiting the land, or merely to living in it as a family, like the patriarchs did, or like the Jews of all generations did in all the lands of their exile. But rather, "I will bring you in to the land" like a sovereign nation, like a nation that inherits its land and realizes the covenant between the pieces as an independent nation that was created from the descendants of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov during the exodus from Egypt.

Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov appear here twice, at the beginning and at the end:

"And I appeared to Avraham, to Yitzchak, and to Yaakov, as God Almighty" – this is the covenant of circumcision; "And I will bring you in to the land, concerning which I lifted up My hand to give it to Avraham, to Yitzchak, and to Yaakov; and I will give it you for a heritage: I am the Lord!" – this is the covenant between the pieces.

All this can be likened to a river flowing on the earth's surface, winding its way through the mountains, making its own channel, but parallel to it flows an underground river, hidden from view, fed by groundwater. The river out in the open is the family covenant of circumcision, while the hidden river is the covenant between the pieces, which throughout the period of the patriarchs was hidden in the bosom of the future. Now, in a certain place the river bursts into new expanses, into a new landscape, and the change on the surface of the earth brings the underground river to burst to the surface in a series of large springs. The original river turns into a grand river, where even ships can sail. Sometimes it also has a new name, but it is really built from the river that had been in the open and from the hidden river that burst through, and the two joined into one.

Indeed, understanding this passage is not easy. Much ink was spilled in the attempt to explain it. Many commentators explained it as referring to the difference in the level of prophecy between the patriarchs and Moshe; so understood the Rambam, the Ramban, and others. We adhered to the expressions, the words, the allusions in the verses, and followed in the footsteps of Rashi.

If this passage was so difficult for the commentators, all the more so must it have been difficult for the Israelites suffering in Egypt. The mission that emerged from the burning bush was accepted by them at the time: "And the people believed; and when they heard that the Lord had remembered the children of Israel, and that He had seen their affliction, then they bowed their heads and worshipped" (*Shemot* 4:31). But then came great despair, even that of Moshe, because of the decree concerning the straw and because of the aggravation of the bondage.

God's first words in *Parashat Va'era* first meet up with a solid wall! An inability to hear, an inability to accept, an inability to understand. When we read the passages in order, we understand that the children of Israel could not listen to this passage, because of the decree concerning the straw and the despair and frustration that had already come upon the first mission from the time of the revelation at the burning bush. But when we read this passage on its own, as a new beginning, we can certainly say that this combination of the two covenants into a single covenant was so wondrous, so inconceivable, that the Israelites did not listen to it, because they did not understand and could not accept it. As mentioned above, to this day this passage is considered difficult by all the commentators, and all the more so must it have been

difficult for the Israelites in their suffering. Therefore it says at the end of the passage: "But they hearkened not to Moshe for impatience of spirit and for cruel bondage."

The Children of Israel Do Not Hear - How Then Will Pharaoh Hear?

The order here is the opposite of the order that we found in *Parashat Shemot*. There, Moshe's argument with God preceded the mission, including his claim of being "slow of speech and of a slow tongue." When Moshe reached the children of Israel, they listened and believed, but then came the great crisis of the decree concerning the straw, with all the frustration and despair, and with "why is it that You have sent me?" (5:22). In our passage, on the other hand, God's words to Moshe are very lofty; they include everything, and they combine the two covenants into one, into a wondrous and deep vision that is too distant to grasp. Moshe goes to the people of Israel, who do not listen to him, and only then does the discussion begin: "How then shall Pharaoh hear me, who am of uncircumcised lips!"

Who are Aharon and Moshe? – The difference between *Shemot* and *Va'era*³

God's answer to Moshe's question will be exactly the same as the one given at the end of the revelation at the burning bush: Aharon your brother. But this answer will only come at the next stage, because the Torah takes a break here and stops to explain to us who Moshe and Aharon are, and once again in total contrast to what we find in *Parashat Shemot*. The story in *Parashat Shemot* about the birth of Moshe, about his growing up in the house of Pharaoh, and about his flight to the land of Midyan, is entirely a story of women (already in the story of the midwives, who saved him from Pharaoh), and almost entirely without names – "the daughter of Levi," "his sister," "the daughter of Pharaoh," and afterwards "the seven daughters" of "the priest of Midyan," who saved his life and gave him a home. This is the story that led to the revelation at the burning bush.

The story of *Parashat Va'era* leads to Moshe and Aharon together, as sons of Amram and Yocheved, and here the male genealogy rules. In order to know and understand who are Moshe and Aharon together and where they come from, the Torah relates the genealogy of the tribe of Levi (which begins with the descendants of Reuven and Shimon only in order to reach the descendants of Levi), and from the descendants of Levi to the family of Amram, to Aharon and Moshe, and to the family of Aharon. It is not by chance that Moshe's wife and children (who alone were mentioned in *Parashat Shemot*) are not mentioned here, and this too highlights the contrast between the two *parashot*.

The verse that opens the genealogy (6:13), in my opinion, comes to summarize God's official words to Moshe and Aharon in all these *parashot*, with the general goal of the exodus from Egypt, as the heading of the genealogy.⁴ Only afterwards

³ The profound differences between the mission in *Parashat Shemot* (the revelation at the burning bush) and the speech and plagues in *Parashat Va'era* cannot be considered "different sources" of the "stories" of the bondage in Egypt, because the Divine name is the focus of both passages together with mention of the patriarchs. The linguistic distinction between *ani* and *anokhi* is evident in both of them, and the major differences between them are well explained in the Torah as two stages in the mission and in the confrontation with Pharaoh. It even stands to reason that much time passed between the two *parashot*, as Moshe was young at the revelation at the burning bush, but 80 years old when he stood before Pharaoh at the time of the plagues that afflicted Egypt.

⁴ This is not reflected in the common custom dividing the Torah reading for those called up to the Torah, as the second person called up begins his

does the Torah return to the argument between God and Moshe about his uncircumcised lips and the question of how Pharaoh will listen to him. I therefore interpret the verse, "These are the heads of their fathers' house" (6:14), as a continuation of the previous verse, which explains in the words "to Moshe and to Aharon" the purpose of the genealogy, which does not include all of Israel, but rather aims at Moshe and Aharon.

All of the allusions in this masculine genealogy, which is filled with names, marriages, and births, are so different from the feminine story in *Parashat Shemot* – where the midwives who outsmart Pharaoh, and so too Moshe's mother and sister and Pharaoh's daughter, and Moshe is unable to suffer even a minor injustice like the daughters being pushed off to the end of the day at the well in Midyan. When Pharaoh invoked force, even Moshe despaired, and in *Parashat Va'era* there begins the great power struggle, which Moshe did not want, but Pharaoh chose.

The command and the speech in *Parashat Va'era*, with the joining of the covenants, are also different than those at the revelation at the burning bush, where there are "signs," but no covenants.

For example, at the revelation at the burning bush, one of the key words is "*anokhi*," "I":⁵ "I (*anokhi*) am the God of your father, the God of Avraham, the God of Yitzchak, and the God of Yaakov" (3:6). Moshe responds with the question: "Who am I (*anokhi*) that I should go to Pharaoh?" (3:11); and God says to him: "... This shall be the token to you, that I (*anokhi*) have sent you" (3:12); in the continuation as well the entire debate is conducted through the word *anokhi*.

In contrast, in *Parashat Va'era*, the key word is "*Ani Hashem*," "I am the Lord." The Torah distinguishes between "*Ani Hashem*" and "*Anokhi*...", and in general, there is a difference between "*ani*" and "*anokhi*" in the Torah. "*Ani*" expresses the simple and ordinary, that which is clear to all – and in our context: "And you shall know that I (*ani*) the Lord your God" (6:7). In contrast, "*anokhi*" is used where there is a gap, tension, or fear, where there is need for a promise, a commitment, an oath, and in a call where there is a binding demand.

Yaakov appeared before Yitzchak at his mother's command, and said with great trepidation: "I (*anokhi*) am Esav your firstborn" (*Bereishit* 27:19); whereas Esav said simply: "I (*ani*) am your son, your firstborn, Esav" (ibid. 27:32), as if he were asking him: "What kind of question is that?" When Yaakov set out for Padan Aram, he was told in a dream first about what was known from his forefathers: "I (*ani*) am the Lord, the God of Avraham your father, and the God of Yitzchak. The land whereon you lie, to you will I give it, and to your seed." However, with regard to the great fear of Yaakov, who was about to leave the land, he was told in the continuation: "And behold I (*anokhi*) am with you, and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back into this land; for I will not leave you, until I have done that which I have spoken to you of" (ibid. 28:13-15).

When Yaakov went down to Egypt, he was told: "I (*anokhi*) will go down with you into Egypt; and I will also surely bring you up again" (ibid. 46:4). Based on this, Yaakov said before his death: "Behold I (*anokhi*) die, but God will be with you, and bring you back to the land of your fathers" (ibid. 48:21). And so also Yosef said before his death: "I (*anokhi*) die; but God will

surely remember you, and bring you up out of this land to the land which He swore to Avraham, to Yitzchak, and to Yaakov" (ibid. 50:24).

The mission at the revelation at the burning bush is formulated (almost) entirely in the style of "*anokhi*." Only once is the word "*ani*" used there in reference to the future, and in the style of *Parashat Va'era*: "And I (*ani*) know that the king of Egypt will not give you leave to go, except by a mighty hand. And I will put forth My hand, and smite Egypt with all My wonders which I will do in the midst thereof. And after that he will let you go" (*Shemot* 3:19-20). Indeed, the first mission came to a dead end because Pharaoh opted for an aggressive confrontation, and Moshe went back to God, and said: "Why is it that You have sent me" (ibid. 5:22). The new speech in *Parashat Va'era* that begins with the words "I (*ani*) am the Lord" will not face another crisis of despair. Even though each plague will end with an Egyptian refusal, with a failure to achieve the goal at that moment, the continuum of the "strong hand" filled Moshe and Aharon with confidence, and the pressure shifted to Pharaoh.

In *Parashat Va'era*, when Moshe said: "Behold I am of uncircumcised lips, and how shall Pharaoh hearken to me?" (6:30), the answer came: Your brother Aharon will deal with and solve the problem of the uncircumcised lips, and "I am the Lord" – I will reveal Myself to Egypt through a chain of plagues, until "the Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord," until "I bring out the children of Israel from among them" (7:5).

Translated by David Strauss

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portion at verse 14: "These are the head of their fathers' houses." But in my opinion, this is the plain meaning of the text.

⁵ See my book (written together with R. Shaul Baruchi), *Mikra'ot Le-Parshat Yitro*, pp. 183-184, for an explanation of the use of the word "*anokhi*" in the first of the Ten Commandments.