YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Before Sinai: Jewish Values and Jewish Law**

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<http://vbm-torah.org/archive/sinai/16sinai.htm>

**Shiur #16: Jewish Peoplehood (9): Zionism and Non-Orthodox Jews in the Thought of R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik**

After spending several *shiurim* describing a value of Jewish peoplehood as it is manifested in various areas of Jewish law, we turn our attention to exploring what it demands of us in our daily personal and communal lives. Jewish peoplehood, among the other values of *berit Avot*, is not merely a concept but also a responsibility. The culmination of our investigations, then, is to simultaneously expand the range of commitments that must direct a Jew’s thought and conduct, while also grounding intuitively felt values in a coherent system that gives them force and context.

We previously explored some of the implications of a commitment to Jewish peoplehood—the gravity of intermarriage and the penalty for seceding from communal life—in [*shiur* #6](http://www.vbm-torah.org/archive/sinai/06sinai.htm). In this *shiur*, we will examine R. Soloveitchik’s own applications of his dual covenant framework in his seminal address-turned-essay on Zionism, “*Kol Dodi Dofek*.”

**The Covenant of Fate**

R. Soloveitchik, as we have repeatedly noted, proposes that the Jewish people are bound by two different historical covenants. He dubs the earlier one the “covenant of Egypt” and describes it as a “covenant of fate,” in contrast to the “covenant of Sinai,” which is a “covenant of destiny.” In describing a “covenant of fate,” R. Soloveitchik explains that common suffering and alienation, typified by the Egyptian enslavement, lead Jews to a shared, isolated experience: “The individual is subject and subjugated against his will to the national fate/existence, and it is impossible for him to avoid it and be absorbed into a different reality” (*Kol Dodi Dofek: Listen—My Beloved Knocks*, 52).

At the same time, a community that forms around a shared sense of fate will develop positive expressions of kinship as well—regardless of relation to the tenets of Sinai. R. Soloveitchik enumerates four such expressions, which not only reflect the covenant of fate but also embody its duties:

1. A sense of shared experience: “We are all in the realm of a shared fate that binds together the different *strata* of the nation and does not discriminate between classes and individuals…. We are all persecuted, or we are all saved together” (55-56).
2. A sense of shared suffering: “The suffering of one segment of the nation is the lot of the entire community…. If the Jew… still feels the distress of the nation and the burden of its fate/existence, then his bond to the nation has not been severed” (56-58).
3. Shared responsibility: The Jewish people bear collective responsibility for one another and towards one another. We are held accountable for the wrongdoing of our brethren, both in the eyes of Heaven and the eyes of the world: “Sharing of responsibility is not simply a halakhic-speculative notion, but a central fact in the history of Israel’s relations with other nations…. The identification of the activities of the individual with the deeds of the nation is a fundamental truth of the history of our people” (59-60).
4. Communal cooperation: A nation that finds itself alone, whether by choice or by compulsion, will necessarily turn inward for support: “The obligation of love for another person emanates from the self-awareness of the people of fate, which is alone and perplexed by its uniqueness” (63).

Out of these principles emerges R. Soloveitchik’s general policy about cooperation between the Orthodox and non-Orthodox communities. In a newspaper article from 1954, two years before R. Soloveitchik delivered “*Kol Dodi Dofek*,” he outlines the twin covenants of Egypt and Sinai and spells out the consequences:

When we are faced with a problem for Jews and Jewish interests toward the world without, regarding the defense of Jewish rights in the non-Jewish world, then all groups and movements must be united…. In the crematoria, the ashes of the *chasidim* and pious Jews were put together with the ashes of the radicals and the atheists. And we all must fight the enemy, who does not differentiate between those who believe in God and those who reject Him. (*Community, Covenant and Commitment: Selected Letters and Communications*, 145)

Regarding our “fate,” we share a common identity that is not strained by heterogeneous levels of commitment or varied interpretations of the Revelation at Sinai. Orthodox Jews can and ought to cooperate broadly with Jews of all stripes (and with each other), confidently and without reservation, when protecting and advancing our common interests. Regarding our religious “destiny,” however, R. Soloveitchik advises against joint activity: “With regard to… our spiritual-religious interests such as Jewish education, synagogues, councils of rabbis… it is my opinion that Orthodoxy cannot and should not unite with such groups which deny the fundamentals of our *weltanschauung*.”

Furthermore, bonds of fate do not only allow for cooperation but demand it. Thus R. Soloveitchik castigates the American Jewish community, including himself, for its failure to stand up for European Jewry during the Holocaust:

Let us pose a simple question: Did we not sin with respect to the first covenant, the Covenant of Shared Fate … with regard to our obligation to participate in the pain of the nation and to see and feel its suffering: as it is said, “And He witnessed their burdens” (*Shemot* 2:11)?… It is an extremely painful chapter. We all sinned by our silence in the face of the murder of millions. (“*Kol Dodi Dofek*,” 77-78)

In the fledging Jewish state, R. Soloveitchik sees yet another challenge, and perhaps an opportunity to redeem past errors: “In the crisis that the Land of Israel is [at present] passing through, Providence is again testing us…. Come, let us pray ‘for our friends’ (*Iyov* 42:10). Let us feel for the suffering of the *Yishuv*” (78-80).

R. Soloveitchik was also forthright that faithful adherence to *berit Sinai* neither exempts from nor guarantees active commitment to *berit Avot*:

One may observe the Torah and mitzvoth and be fully within the covenant of Sinai, yet at the same time profaning the Patriarchal sanctity… Unfortunately, that type of Jew, who rebels against the Patriarchal covenant, is emerging here also. True, he is religious and careful to observe mitzvoth, but his fate consciousness is not Jewish. (*The Rav Speaks: Five Addresses on Israel, History, and the Jewish People*, 147-148).

Observing the 613 *mitzvot* in all of their minutiae is necessary but not sufficient for a dutiful Jewish life. Awareness of our existential “otherness”; concern, in that context, for the welfare of the greater Jewish community; participation in its causes; mobilization of resources for its needs and cooperation with Jews across the spectrum towards these goals are all within the calling of *berit Avot*.

**The Limits of “*Kol Dodi Dofek*”**

On the one hand, R. Soloveitchik’s insights regarding the dual nature of Jewish identity were groundbreaking for their time and continue to inform and inspire. While some focus upon his insistence on Orthodox isolation regarding religious matters, R. Reuven Ziegler notes the novelty of his approach to the non-Orthodox community:

[Other] Orthodox approaches do not lend much dignity or legitimacy to non-observant Jews. With his idea of two covenants, Rav Soloveitchik offers a religious theory of Jewish identity for non-observant Jews, one that sees them as having a dignified and legitimate (though not fully ideal) place within the Jewish world and within the halakhic world-view: they are partners in the covenant of fate but not in the covenant of destiny. (*Majesty and Humility: The Thought of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik*, 287)

Thus R. Soloveitchik gives the Orthodox community a mandate for joint enterprise with other denominations regarding a wide range of Jewish affairs. This message, derived from *berit Avot*, is straightforward enough, yet cannot always be taken for granted. To cite one example: *Mori ve-rabbi* R. Aharon Lichtenstein writes how he was once asked whether Orthodox Jews should participate in a joint *Yom Ha-sho’a* service with the non-Orthodox community: “Shocked, I responded that, as far as I knew, the Nazis had not differentiated. Could we? In my stupefaction, I realized that we had an educational charge to fulfill” (“Beyond the Pale? Contemporary Relations with Non-Orthodox Jews,” *Varieties of Jewish Experience*, 149).[[1]](#footnote-1)

However, though I personally identify with R. Ziegler’s characterization, I concede that I don’t find that strong a statement in my own reading of R. Soloveitchik’s published works. The “covenant of fate,” as R. Soloveitchik relates to it in various contexts, does not seem to afford its participants a “dignified and legitimate place.” To the contrary, the experience of fate is entrapping, frightening and isolating: “Man does not find the experience of fate satisfying. On the contrary, it causes him pain. The feeling of isolation is very destructive” (*Kol Dodi Dofek*, 85). Participation in the covenant of fate does not mean being ennobled by a set of shared, albeit limited values, but jointly suffering from the same inexorable loneliness, “devoid of reason and direction” (85).

In a penetrating essay, Prof. Gerald Blidstein similarly notes that “the Jew of fate” in “*Kol Dodi Dofek*” “is largely defined by the historical role imposed on the people of Israel as objects of persecution” (“On the Jewish People in the Writings of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik,” in *Exploring the Thought of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik*, 302). Furthermore, the covenants of Egypt and Sinai in “*Kol Dodi Dofek*” are mutually complementary, but not from positions of equal standing:

Egypt and Sinai, the Jew of fate and the Jew of destiny and purpose, clearly reflect a hierarchical order. Sinai will build on Egypt, and Jewish historical fate is a permanent feature of Jewish existence, but precious little in the way of Jewish values will emerge from the victimized identity of bondage…. Despite this positive appropriation of the Covenant of Fate and of the historic fact of Jewish peoplehood, there is also a deep ambivalence, or better, unease, which is only hinted at by these two disparate symbols of Egypt and Sinai.[[2]](#footnote-2) (305-306)

Regarding Zionism, Prof. Blidstein notes that the covenant of fate focuses on “the Jew as victim,” so that “it is almost as though the moving force behind ‘*Kol Dodi Dofek*,’ then, is the Holocaust and only secondarily the declaration of the State of Israel” (304). In “*Kol Dodi Dofek*,” American Jewry is encouraged to support Israel out of empathy for other Jews and out of a vision for adding destiny to fate, but not out of a common purpose shared with secular Zionists of building a Jewish country.[[3]](#footnote-3)

**Conclusion**

In summary, *berit Avot*, as it appears in R. Soloveitchik’s published comments on Zionism, certainly broadens the contemporary, committed Jew’s religious mandate, but only in a certain context and to a limited degree. I am not at all certain that this fully captures R. Soloveitchik’s relation to Jewish peoplehood,[[4]](#footnote-4) and it is conceivable that he, too, would afford it more positive content.[[5]](#footnote-5) With or without R. Soloveitchik’s outright endorsement, though, can we push the envelope further? In light of our own analysis of *berit Avot* that builds upon R. Soloveitchik’s core framework, can we define an ambitious, common agenda for “Jewish peoplehood” that is neither captured by nor depends upon *berit Sinai*? We will take up this challenge in the next *shiur*.

1. Regarding R. Soloveitchik’s general position about cooperation with the non-Orthodox, see p. 148, including note #31. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. R. Ziegler also references Prof. Blidstein’s critique (296), with regard to R. Soloveitchik’s particular vision for the State of Israel. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In closing, R. Soloveitchik asks, “What should be the relationship of religious Zionism to its secular counterpart?” (81) The answer that emerges from the end of the essay is that the former should replace the latter, rather than absorb any of its ideology: “Only religious Zionism with its traditional and authentic perception has the power to ‘repair the perverted’ (Ecclesiastes 1:15)” (84). In “*Kol Dodi Dofek*,” the secular Zionist leadership is as bereft of the “fate” experience as that of “destiny.” Prof. Blidstein notes similar, hostile stances present in R. Soloveitchik’s published addresses to Mizrachi conventions (306-307). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. In analyzing R. Soloveitchik’s ideology, I have admittedly limited myself to his published material, out of both a lack of personal exposure to the Rav and a desire to work off of a verifiable record. The possibility of a gap between oral or written statements and actual conduct is not lost upon me, and in this context I note the following comment by R. Lichtenstein: “If pressed to consider, for instance, the lives and thought of Rav Kook and the Rav, respectively, I believe, it would be fair to conclude that, while perhaps neither was thoroughly consistent, Rav Kook was, philosophically, far more tolerant but, as a public figure, tolerated less; the reverse was true of the Rav” (“The Parameters of Tolerance,” *Leaves of Faith: The World of Jewish Living*, 113). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. When I discussed “*Kol Dodi Dofek*” with *mori ve-rabbi* R. Mosheh Lichtenstein, he noted that “fate” and “destiny” need not be wholly synonymous with the concepts of *berit Avot* and *berit Sinai*, respectively. That is, perhaps each of these covenants contains elements of “fate” and “destiny.” While R. Soloveitchik stresses the “fate” element of *berit Avot* for his purposes in “*Kol Dodi Dofek,*” there can also be a positive destiny to pursue within *berit Avot* (as well as a compulsory “fate” element to *berit Sinai*—see *Shabbat* 88a). Contrast, for instance, the presentation in “*Kol Dodi Dofek*” with the following comment:

   The Sinaitic covenant tells the Jew what to do and how to act as a member of the covenantal community. The patriarchal covenant teaches the Jew how to feel as a member of that community and how to experience being a Jew. **It is a great experience**, but not everyone knows how to experience his Jewishness. (*Abraham’s Journey*, 201)

   R. Soloveitchik continues, “The patriarchal covenant created not only a covenantal personality but also a covenantal historical **destiny**” (202). This clearly strikes a different tone from that of “*Kol Dodi Dofek*.”

   In this context, R. Soloveitchik’s deliberate use of the term “covenant of Egypt” (*berit Mitzrayim*) instead of “*berit Avot*”—a distinction that I have glossed over until now—might be significant. In contrast to God’s revelations to the *Avot*, which chart a grand destiny for their progeny, the bondage in Egypt—during which time the legacy of the *Avot* was largely forgotten (see Rambam *Hilkhot Avoda Zara* 1:3)—emphasizes the “fate” experience that unites Jews through common loneliness and suffering.

   However, I am not sure that this distinction between “*berit Avot*” and “*berit Mitzrayim*” will hold consistently across R. Soloveitchik’s published works. For example, when he asks, “What is the content of the Patriarchial covenant?” in an address to a Mizrachi convention, his answer largely echoes the negative, “fate” definition of “*Kol Dodi Dofek*:” “The Patriarchal covenant is realized within Jewish consciousness because others point at him and say: ‘He is a Jew!’” (*The Rav Speaks: Five Addresses on Israel, History, and the Jewish People*, 147). In the same address, the State of Israel’s contribution to *berit Avot* is in strengthening Jewish identity abroad (149-152). True, R. Soloveitchik was speaking to Diaspora Jews about their own Zionism, but the omission of a positive vision for *berit Avot* within a Jewish state, I think, is still noteworthy. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)