

"Evolving a Humanist Rainbow Covenant"

Rosh ha-Shanah homily - 9/17/2012

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On this new moon that inaugurates this new year,
we gather here to reflect on our lives, on our past & present,
our possibilities & prospects.

We come together to lay down & put to rest the burdens
of the past year's ^{years'} wrongs we long to right,
to quietly contemplate & confess our misdeeds & mistakes,
to request & bestow forgiveness,
to plant in the soil of regret the seeds of redress & restoration.
We are here to wake up to the blasts of the shophar
& words of crystal prose & poetry that aim to cut through
our excuses & denials, our evasions & self-deceptions
to reveal the ever-present potential within each of us
to cultivate that which is best
& most beautiful & generous & true -
that which is most ideal & god-like - at the core of our being.

We come together today to connect among us
that highest aspect & human potential within each of us.
This connection is the genesis of "covenant" -
a converging of our dreams & drives, our energies & endeavors,
our hopes & handiwork, our visions & ventures.

Such a covenant also links those of us here & now
with our ancestors -
many of whom felt covenant connections & commitments
through which we sense grounding, rootedness,
the particularity of family & legacy, community & culture.

So too does covenant connect us
with our children & grandchildren, our nieces & nephews,
our students perhaps, & w/ all the youth whose lives we touch,
& all those who may yet come to live in this world
that we now steward.

Covenant links us with all life on this planet.

We are the new Noahs navigating - or not -
the ark of "Spaceship Earth."

The great floods of antiquity & pre-history -
devastating as they surely were - left high water marks
in human consciousness & myth that may yet be surpassed
by the truly world-altering high tides that are flowing from
global climate change, the melting of the glaciers & arctic ice.

On Rosh ha-Shanah, for at least two & a half thousand years,
Jews have gathered to renew among us & invoke
a set of covenants. The array of biblical covenants
feature key figures including Noah, Abraham, Moses, & David.
Some covenants are just btwn people, some involve the deity;
some regard only Hebrews, some involve other peoples.

I believe that Humanistic Jews face a challenge
to help lead the way from problem-causing covenants
that are ethnocentric, exclusivist, authoritarian, & hierarchical
toward problem-solving covenants
that are universalist, multicultural, pluralistic, & democratic.

While the convention of the biblical "covenant" or *b'rit*
is rooted in ancient treaties btwn more & less powerful leaders,
the covenant also is the basis of key developments in history
from consent of the governed to contracts & constitutions.
The Hebrew word *b'rit* is linked to others meaning to eat bread,
as well as to Akkadian & Assyrian words meaning to "bind"
as in an agreement. These meanings are linked in the custom of
breaking bread or sharing food after making such an agreement.

(Mendenhall 1955; Klein p85; Brown, Driver, & Briggs pp136-137; Hastings, Grant, & Rowley *Dictionary of the Bible* p183)

This being Constitution Day in the US, I must also observe that ours is the world's first secular constitution separating the authority of the state from that of the church - or any other religious institution.

People in this country have extensive freedom *of* religion - & *from* religion - because of our secular constitution.

This liberty has enabled religious innovation & belief to flourish in this nation, more than in any other industrialized country.

Our congregation is an affiliate of the Society for H Judaism, which is itself a member organization

of the Secular Coalition for America

that advances & defends this liberty,

& advocates for secularists, humanists, & all nontheists.

Now, let's return from the Constitution to its roots in covenants.

First, let's briefly consider the covenants of Abraham & David that focus sharply on the Hebrews.

Then we'll explore more deeply the covenants of Noah & Moses that both have broader scopes.

By the way, I use "Hebrews" to include all the ancient tribes that were for hundreds of years divided into the northern nation of Israel/Yisrael, & the southern nation of Judah/Y'hudah, whose people are called Israelites/Yisraelim & Judeans/Y'hudim. Oddly, both of these Hebrew terms later come to mean all Jews.

The main covenant with Abraham in Gen 17 has the god YHWH giving him the land of Canaan & a great lineage of descendents, while requiring that Abraham & all males of his household & line be circumcised. Though his son Ishmael was circumcised, YHWH chose only his son Isaac to carry forward this covenant.

Yet Abraham also makes a peace covenant with a Canaanite king Abimelekh at the end of Gen 21^(.22-34), in a RhS Torah portion.

In this covenant they pledge to share the land & its water, also promising each other *hesed*, mutual aid & empathy, which the prophets Hosea ^(6.6) & Micah ^(6.8) see as the heart of covenant.

The unconditional & eternal covenant with David in 2nd Sam 7_(.1-17) involves YHWH making David the founder of a dynasty of rulers. Royalists raise this covenant to claim the divine right of kings.

Conversely, constitutional restraints upon rulers draw upon the two-part covenant in 2nd Kings 11_(.17). Here the high priest Jehoiada 1st makes a covenant "btwn YHWH / & the king & the people to be the [servants] _{people} of YHWH, [PAUSE] & [then also secondly] btwn the king [_{Jehoash of Judah}] & the people."

(All Hebrew Bible translations by Rabbi Binyamin Biber.)

Throughout the books of Kings, the writer portrays YHWH judging rulers as doing what was upright or evil in his eyes, & in various cases rewarding or punishing the rulers - or the whole people - for their devotion to YHWH or lack of it. Such covenantal & constitutional accountability grows through the Renaissance, Reformation, & Enlightenment.

Now, let's turn to the expansive covenants of Noah & Moses.

Noah's "covenant of the rainbow" / *b'rit ha-qeshet* is depicted in the story of the flood in Genesis 6-9.

The Hebrew god sees Noah as the most moral person of his time, which is rife with human wrong-doing _(6.13 & 17) that the deity decides to punish & end by flooding the whole earth.

So the god makes a covenant with Noah _(6.18-20) to gather onto a sailing ark a pair of every kind of animal to save them.

Near the end of the story, the deity decides to never again destroy the world & kill so many living beings _(8.21),

& then expands his covenant with Noah

to include all living beings, and the god makes the rainbow as the sign of the covenant to save life & save the world _(9.9-17).

This tale may be seen as relating to that of the garden of Eden, where the first humans lived in nature with their fellow animals.

Here, humankind was "to tend & to defend" the garden.

(Gen 2.15 - *l'-ovdah u-l'-shomrah*)

While tragedy is found in both the tales of Eden & the flood, so too is a measure of hope that humans can steward nature.

Finally, let us turn to the central covenant of the Hebrew Bible, the divine revelation of laws to Moses at Mt Sinai.

Understandably, many Jews & others see the Sinai covenant focusing on the Jews as the god YHWH's "chosen people."

Exodus 19 depicts precisely this

in building toward the dramatic climax of the revelation. [PAUSE]

On the third new moon after the exodus

by the children of Israel from the land of Egypt,

on that day they entered the wilderness of Sinai. ...

(The people of) Israel encamped there facing the mountain,

& Moses ascended to God (the Hebrew is *ha-elohim* = "the gods") ,

& YHWH called to him from the mountain, saying,

"Thus shall you say to the house of Jacob,

declare to the children of Israel: 'You saw what I did to Egypt

& I lifted you up on eagle's wings to bring you to me. Now,

if you shall truly hearken to my voice & observe my covenant,

then you shall be unto me a treasure*

from among all the peoples - for all the earth is mine.

You will be a kingdom of priests & a holy nation to me.' "

(**s'gullah* here in Ex 19.5 translated as "treasure" - see also Deut 7.6; related to Akkadian *sugullu* = cattle & wealth; hence Latin *peculium* = private property from *pecus* = cattle, & *s'gullah* as "peculiar treasure" in King James Bible; see WW Hallo, *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, vol 87 / 1967, p 64, n 1.)

Moses came & summoned the elders of the people

& set before them all these words

that YHWH had commanded him.

All the people answered as one, they said,

"All that was spoken by YHWH we will do."

This passage is followed in Exodus 20 by the Ten Commandments being declared by YHWH (Ex 20.3-14). These are the foundation of

what Ex 24.7 calls the "Book of the Covenant" / *Sepher ha-B'rit*, the oldest collection of laws in the Bible, running from Ex 20-23.

Oddly, the Sinai covenant YHWH offered to the people

he'd just freed from slavery, does not abolish it,

but rather regulates this evil that continues & grows still.

Clearly, we will need a new covenant that will *free us all*.

At the end of Exodus 23^(.32-33) & this Book of the Covenant, YHWH commands the Hebrews not to make any covenant with the neighboring peoples or their gods, which YHWH goes on to say the Hebrews will serve. This biblical passage, like many, is puzzling in several ways. YHWH is portrayed as the supreme god who created & owns all. He made the other peoples & their gods, as we read in Deuteronomy 4.19 & 29.25: YHWH "allotted" (*halaq*) the other gods to all the other peoples of the world. Strangely, YHWH then abhors those gods & the people that worship them: he tells the Hebrews that *he will* annihilate their neighbors & that they should tear down & smash their idols in Ex 23^(.23-24); even worse, in Deut 7^(.1-5) & 20^(.15-18), YHWH *orders the Hebrews* to exterminate their neighboring peoples & take their lands because of the abominations they committed serving their gods which YHWH "allotted" to them.

Such religion-based attacks, enslavement, ethnic displacement, & mass extermination today are called hate crimes, human rights violations, crimes against humanity, & genocide. Fortunately, the Hebrews largely did not obey such commands, instead choosing to intermarry with neighboring peoples & to worship their gods, as we read elsewhere in Exodus 23^(.29), Deuteronomy 7^(.22), Judges 3^(.1-8), & similar passages. Finally, I puzzle at such hateful ethnic exclusivism.

Intermarriage was common among the Hebrews: look to the Bible's many denunciations & prohibitions of it, & its tales of the foreign spouses of Abraham, Moses, David, Solomon, Esther, & others.

(Gen 16.3-4; Ex 2.21; 2 Sam 3.3; 1 Kings 11.1-3)

Consider too the references to the "mixed multitude" of Hebrew & other slaves that leaves Egypt (Ex 12.38 *erev rav*; Num 11.4 *asaphsoph*), & to the non-Hebrew "strangers" who - along with women & the poorest hewers of wood & drawers of water - are participants in the Sinai covenant, as we read in Deut 29^(.10).

(See also Lev 19.33 "as a citizen" / *k'-ezrah*; Lev 24.22 "one standard... for the stranger & the citizen" / *mishpat ehad...* *ka-ger ka-ezrah*; Deut 1.16 "decide justly btwn anyone & your brother or a stranger.")

On Rhs, we read & contemplate such passages from the Torah just as our ancestors have done for over 2500 years.

On this day, as our forebears rebuilt Jerusalem & the Temple, nearly a century after the Babylonians had destroyed them, the Hebrew governor Nehemiah described their gathering:

Ezra the priest brought the Torah before the community, men & women, & all who could listen & understand on the first day of [Tishrei] the seventh month. He read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from dawn until midday.... (8.2-3)

...& the Levites explained to the people the Torah.

[The governor Nehemiah, the priest & scribe Ezra, & the Levites] read from the scroll of the Torah of God, translating & interpreting it,

so the people understood the reading. (8.7-8) ...

Then all the people went to eat & drink, to share with those in need, & to make great merriment for they understood the things taught to them. (8.12)

We are here today to do much the same:
to learn together from the traditions of our ancestors,
of their tales, travails, & insights,
to interpret such teachings for the times in which we live,
& to celebrate together as we start our new year full of hope.
We too are challenged to rebuild & restore our damaged world;
& we are right to take chances on optimism & action,
as only these will enable us to achieve whatever we may.

Yet I have laid out before us to consider these differing constructs of covenant because I believe that those of us who are Jews & Humanists must now work to help create a new rainbow covenant. We can surely appreciate elements of the *Jewish* covenants of Abraham & Moses.

Yet as Humanists we can see that these covenants entail conflicts with others which need not & will not be eternal.

Abraham's covenant makes land claims that will only be resolved through political negotiations, hopefully guided by some measure of the mutual aid & empathy, the *hesed*, with which Abraham is portrayed making his covenant of peace with Abimelekh.

Similarly, Moses is depicted as receiving a revelation of a covenant that sets the conditions for the mixed multitude - of Hebrews & *the sojourning strangers among them* - who escaped slavery into a wilderness to then enter & live in that problematic promised land inhabited by neighbors they are told not to mix with,... but do. Happily too! Better to marry than to murder them. "Make love, not war!" as the old slogan goes. Yet even today, there are Jews who would expel all others from Israel, from the occupied territories, & from all of the "promised land" which, in case you don't know, includes parts of Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Turkey, & Iraq! Talk about crazy trouble: their promised land of "greater Israel" could result in world wars three, four, five, & Armageddon! In spite of a Sinai covenant that impels us to love our neighbors & the strangers among us, there are Jews who hate their neighbors & even seek to expel refugees - which many of us were not so long ago!

I say these things to point out that we are here today because we believe in & value the progressive & Humanist elements of Jewish & *all* cultures. Moreover, most of the families in our Humanistic *Jewish* movement are inter- or multi-cultural. But I too want to celebrate the progressive & Humanist aspects in my wife's & my own *Irish* heritage; my Jewish mother herself had a *non-Jewish Irish* mother. Nu! I perform weddings & do baby welcoming & naming ceremonies for mostly inter- & multi-cultural couples, many of whom are your children & grandkids! I work with a diverse array of students at American University who are progressive Humanists & who've come from families from a spectrum of countries, cultures, beliefs, & practices.

So here's what I propose to you all.

We need to create a new rainbow covenant that draws together & lifts up for all to see & hear & taste & smell & dance to... the most progressive Humanist & eco-sustainable aspects of all the cultures of the world!

Oh, & we need to blog & tweet about it & post it to Facebook, YouTube, etc.

I'm not a mishugene alarmist, but look at our world!

We need to wake up

& get as many of the best & brightest & most inspired people working together *with us*

to save this tumultuous beautiful world - soon! Really soon!

Before any messiah takes another millennium *not* to arrive....

I am *not* saying that I have a rainbow covenant in my pocket to read to you today & then start working on - after lunch. I am saying that we here have done so much good work to move Jewish culture forward - with much more to do - but we need to bring forth the best in *all of our heritages* & we need to create a new Humanist rainbow covenant with new true stories to inspire ourselves & others as we face rising tides from global climate change, globalizing production & consumption, & rising expectations from the mass of have-nots & have-too-littles as we confront the insulated minority who have way too much! We have to democratize & stabilize the world economy using reality- & evidence-based policies - not ideologies - to create a sustainable ark of empathy & cooperation working with science & democracy to really solve our problems & to allow the potential of every human being to flourish.

Any day, the forecast may call for rain,
but every day this year & thereafter
I'm calling for a rainbow!
And I invite you all to create it with me!

Shanah tovah!

Other resources used:

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(All Hebrew Bible translations by Rabbi Binyamin Biber.)

Exodus 19 translation- unused material cut

Moses brought back the people's words to YHWH. ... YHWH said to Moses, "Here I am coming to you in a mass of cloud in order that the people will hear when I am speaking with you, & also in you they will believe forever. ... (Skip to 19.11)

On the third day [!] YHWH will descend - in the sight of all the people - onto Mt Sinai." ... (Skip to 19.16)

And it was on the third day, when it was morning, & there were claps of thunder & bolts of lightning, a heavy cloud on the mountain, & a sound of a shophar very strong.

Moses brought forth the people from the camp to encounter (liqra` t) God, & they stood at the foot of the mtn.

Now Mt Sinai was all in smoke for YHWH had descended upon it in fire; the smoke rose like the smoke of a furnace, & the whole mountain trembled greatly. The sound of the shophar grew much stronger.

Moses spoke & God answered him in a thundering voice.

YHWH descended onto Mt Sinai at the head of the mtn, & YHWH called Moses to the mtn top & Moses ascended.

Ex 20 translation - unused material cut

All the people witnessed in awe the claps of thunder & flashes of lightning, the sound of the shophar,

& the mountain smoking. The people saw & they moved & stood at a distance. They said to Moses,

"You speak with us & we will listen & obey, but let not God speak with us or else we will die."

Moses answered the people, "Be not afraid, for God comes in order to test you & so that awe of him will be upon your faces, so that without sin you shall be."