

Unit 7 - Conclusions

Lesson 38 – Perek 27 - Berit Reaffirmation Ceremony

Background:

This chapter describes an elaborate ceremony which Bnei Yisrael must perform upon crossing the Jordan. The purpose of the ceremony is for Bnei Yisrael to reaffirm their commitment to the Berit and promise to do their part by fulfilling the Mitzvot. The details of the ceremony are familiar from similar ceremonies in the Torah as well as in the ancient Near East.

Activity:

1. Read Beresheet 31:43-54 and describe the ceremony performed by Ya'akov upon making a treaty with Lavan.

1. Set up stone pillar
2. Offer sacrifice (54) ate and drank (46)

2. Now read Shemot 24:3-11 and describe the ceremony performed right after Ma'amad Har Sinai.

1. Moshe wrote down God's words
2. Built alter with 12 pillars, offered sacrifices (pasuk 8 emphasizes that the blood symbolizes the Berit), ate and drank (end of pasuk 11)
3. Read Sefer haBerit

3. Ask students to read through Debarim Perek 27 and make a list of the basic parts of the ceremony it describes.

1. Set up large stones and write the Torah on them
2. Build an alter, offer sacrifices, and eat
3. Read blessings and curses

What elements these three ceremonies have in common? Why are these ceremonies similar?

All of these ceremonies involve setting up pillars, offering sacrifices, and eating from those sacrifices. The ceremonies in Shemot and Debarim also share writing down words and reading them out loud. All of these are deal-making ceremonies. The first one is between two people while the second and third are between Bnei Yisrael and Hashem. In order to impress upon the people that they are making a serious and long-lasting commitment, they must perform the commonly practiced ceremonies that initiate any covenant relationship.

What ceremonies to we do today that are similar?

After an important business deal or after a wedding ceremony we are also accustomed to have the parties involved share a festive meal. Both of these agreements also involve

writing stipulations, having witnesses, and sometimes reading the contract out loud (like reciting the ketubah).

Advanced Discussion:

We see that Moshe commands Bnei Yisrael to perform covenant-affirmation rituals upon their entering Israel. These rituals were used throughout the ancient Near East whenever two people or two nations wanted to make a deal with each other. This understanding leads us to another amazing discovery that helps us understand the structure and meaning of Sefer Debarim. Archeologists in recent decades have dug up copies of treaty contracts in the Middle East dating from Biblical times. These are contracts between one king (suzerain) and his colonies (vassals) demanding that the vassals be loyal to the king. After analyzing many such documents scholars notices that they all share certain basic elements which are:

1. Identification of Treaty Maker
2. Historical Introduction
3. Stipulations or Demands
4. Deposit of Treaty
5. List of Divine Witnesses
6. Curses and Blessings

Here are example citations one such document made between Ramses II of Egypt and the king of Hatti written in 1280BCE:

<u>Treaty Between Egypt and Hatti in 1280BCE</u>	
1. Identification of Treaty Maker	These are the words of the Sun Mursillis, the great king, the king of Hatti-land, the valiant, the favorite of the storm-god, the son of Suppilumiumas, the great king..."
2. Historical Introduction	Aziras, your grandfather, and Du-Teshub, your father, remained loyal to me as their lord... Since your father had mentioned to me your name with great praise, I sought after you...and put you in the place of your father.
3. Stipulations or Demands	If anyone utters a word unfriendly to the king of the Hatti-land before you; Duppi-Teshub, you shall not withhold his name from the king.
4. Deposit of Treaty	A duplicate of this treaty has been deposited before the sun-goddess or Arinna...In the Mitanni land, a duplicate has been deposited before Teashub...At regular intervals they shall read it in the presence of the king of the Mitanni land and in the presence of the sons of the Hurri land.
5. List of Witnesses	We have called the gods to be present, to listen, and to serve as witnesses: the sun goddess of Arinna...the sun-god, the lord of heaven, the storm-god, the lord of the Hatti-land...the mountains, the rivers, the Tigris and Euphrates, heaven and earth, the winds and clouds.
6. Curses and Blessings	Should Duppi-Teshob not honor these words of the treaty and oath, may these gods of the oath destroy Duppi-Teshob together with his person, his wife, his grandson, his house, his land...But if he honors these words...may these gods of the oath protect him with his person, his wife, his son, his grandson, his house and his country.
<u>Treaty Format in Ten Commandments</u>	
1. Identification of Treaty Maker	אנ' כי יה' זה אל ה'יך
2. Historical Introduction	אשר הוצאתיך מארץ מצרים מבית עבדים:
3. Stipulations or Demands	ל' א' יתנה לך אל' הים אחרים על פני...וכי ל' אשר לרעך
4. Curses and Blessings	כי אנ' כי יה' זה אל' ה'יך אל קנא פ' קד' עון אבות על בנים ועל שלשים ועל רבעים לשנאי: וע' ש'ה קוד' לאלפי' לא' ה'י ו'לש' מרי' מצותי...למען יאריבו ימיך ו'למען ייטב לך על האדמה אשר יה' זה אל' ה'יך ב' תו' לך:

If we look carefully at the ten commandments we see that they too contain the first four elements of the treaty structure. The ten commandments looks like a widespread covenant contract only with a significant change; this is the first time we know of when such a covenant was used between a nation and God. The Torah uses the formula that Bnei Yisrael would immediately recognize as a covenant document in order to emphasize that just as a vassal can only be loyal to one king, so too Bnei Yisrael is to be loyal to only one God.

The other elements not found in the ten commandments are found at the end of Debarim. In fact, the entire Sefer Debarim is structured as an expanded covenant document. Moshe's first historical speech would make up the historical introduction and Moshe's second Mitzvot speech would be a long elaboration of Hashem's demands for His nation. The last three elements are completed in the last few chapters of Sefer Debarim as can be seen in this chart:

Covenant Format	Ten Commandments	Sefer Debarim
1. Identification of Treaty Maker	"I am the Lord your God..." 5:6	
2. Historical Introduction	"...who took you out of Egypt..." 5:6	Moshe's First Speech
3. Demands	The commandments	Moshe's Second Speech
4. Deposit of Treaty	tablets placed in ark 10:5	Scroll placed besides the ark – 31:25-26
5. Witnesses		Heaven and Earth 30:19, 31:28, 32:1
6. Curses and Blessings	"I am a jealous God..." 5:8	27:11-28:68

In sum, Sefer Debarim is written as a contract between Hashem and Bnei Yisrael. It contains all of the elements that would be expected in such a contract. This goes hand in hand with the formal covenant ceremony Bnei Yisrael is to performed upon entering Israel.