

## Covenant, Not Contract

Sermon, *Rosh Hashanah* 2018 | Rabbi Michael Holzman

In a 2005 commencement address at Kenyon College, the late writer/philosopher, David Foster Wallace opened with the following story:

*There are these two young fish swimming along and they happen to meet an older fish swimming in the other way, who nods at them and says, "Morning boys. How's the water?" And the two young fish swim on a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes, "What the [heck] is water?"<sup>1</sup>*

I share this story because this morning we read what the tradition calls the Akedah. It begins with the words, "God tested Abraham," and then recounts how God commanded Abraham to sacrifice his son, Isaac. Abraham listened and when the angel stopped him at the last minute, it seems that that he had passed the test. The Angel says, "I swear that because you have done this thing, and you did not withhold your son, your only one, I will bless you greatly . . ."<sup>2</sup>

That is where Wallace's story about the fish is so helpful. The Akedah seems to be about power and freedom, about who is commanding Abraham to do this awful thing. And about why he obeys. But while we worry about freedom, the real problem is that Abraham failed to see the water. In his time, daily survival depended upon gods that provided fertility, so sacrificing one child testified to the belief in a god that would provide more. Abraham was blind to that water, so he acted.

Which makes me wonder about the water we fail to see. And I wonder what commands we are hearing, and if we are willing to sacrifice our children. Our water was created about three hundred years ago, when thinkers of the Enlightenment shook the bedrock of human civilization. Led by a Jew named Baruch Spinoza, they posited that we are individuals, free beings, and sovereign selves. They created the idea that no external King or Priest or Rabbi has the right to impinge on that sovereignty without our permission. We give that permission in the form of a contract specifying the expectations and limiting liability and terms. Behind these contracts, big ones like the Constitution of the United States, and little ones like those terms and conditions boxes we check without thinking, we preserve our freedom, our personal sovereignty. That's our water.

The problem is that this 300 year old water has changed. We are living on the threshold of another civilization-shaking time. Because on the other side of those contracts we now find an algorithm, or someone with a PhD in Persuasive Design or Behavioral Economics, or some entity that has figured out ways to nudge and guide our choices. We are entirely outclassed by forces able to reach down into our most primordial brain

stem<sup>3</sup> and stimulate feelings of pleasure and gratification until we happily click along thinking we are free.

UVA Philosopher Matthew Crawford illustrates with a modern casino, describing individual video stalls so comfortable, with buttons and screens so perfectly shaped, with software so finely tuned to the user, that one designer said, “The more you tweak and customize your machines to fit the player, the more they play to extinction.”<sup>4</sup> Yes, to extinction. Sounds like sacrifice to me. We all know the deal when we walk into a casino. We know the contract. I risk my money, in the hopes of winning it big. But what if the casino now knows how to manipulate and exploit me until the contract is a farce and my free choice is extinct? Then where is my freedom?

This is happening all around us, online, with our entertainment, our schools, the economy and our politics.

The most amazing example of this came when Mark Zuckerberg testified before congress. As he spoke about the vulnerability of his software to exploit its users, he kept apologizing to the Facebook Community. Look at the irony. What kind of community has 2 billion members? Not only does his software deceive us but he is manipulating one of the most important words in the human language. When words like “community” lose their meaning, then we begin drowning in manipulation. This kind of thinking affects all of us, whether we see the water or not. And it shapes the world we live in today. Wallace’s message is to notice the water. This sermon is not a rant against contracts or modern technology. Some contracts are good, like the one I have with my insurance company or my credit card. I do not trust them and my contract protects me. And some algorithms are good, they discover things like traffic patterns or infection rates, or a vacation spot to recommend in my news feed. These things are benign and I can see that water. But this sermon is a wake up call urging us to see the water, to see how the water has figured out how to keep kids glued to fortnite for days and days, how to jack up college applications by stoking teenage and parent fear, and how to squeeze extra airline fees out of us by making the boarding line into a game of finely sorted status. None of these things are hidden. None are illegal, but as the water shapes us over time, even if we are aware of it, we become endlessly cynical, hooked on instant gratification, and uncontrollably anxious about being duped.

And then, like Abraham, if we just swim along in the water, will we really be in control of our choices?

The portion says “God tested Abraham.” The ancient and medieval tradition praises Abraham as passing that test. Instead, I argue that he failed. So when the Angel says, “I swear that because you have done this thing and you did not withhold your son” that is not a compliment, but rather an indictment. [hands on hips] Abraham, because you could not see the water, I am going to have to give you . . . a blessing. What? A blessing? Isn’t that a reward? If he failed then why did Abraham receive a blessing?

Well, look at the blessing! The blessing is not riches or power or victory. The blessing is us. The blessing is that all the future generations will be here today, on Rosh Hashanah. The blessing is something eternal called covenant. The angel believes Abraham needs to discover covenant to counteract the water of his day.

Covenants are like contracts in that both are voluntary agreements to give up a little bit of personal Sovereignty for the sake of association with something outside the self. Both are necessary.

But Contracts and Covenants are opposites in almost every other way. In a contract each party looks out for the self, and in a covenant the parties are concerned for each other. Contracts assume some degree of mistrust, covenants generate trust. Contracts build in power differentials, while in covenants power is shared. Contracts can be executed immediately with the stroke of a pen or the check of a box, while covenants build slowly over time and require steady, repeated, sometimes boring, action. And Contracts are static relying upon the explicit terms at the outset, while covenants evolve, asking participants to continue learning and renewing the relationship.<sup>5</sup>

In these differences covenants provide three things absent from contracts. First, they are based upon an inherited tradition, one that is malleable and invites improvisation. Second, covenants contain inherent values that challenge internal assumptions. And third, covenants connect the present moment, to a hope for the future.<sup>6</sup> We cannot obtain these three things as individuals, consumed with freedom, and protecting personal sovereignty with walls of contracts. Covenantal thinking is an island in the increasingly exploitative waters that surround us. Covenant can replace cynicism with hope. With inherited tradition, inherent values and a vision of the future, covenant replaces the preoccupation with freedom with a connection to something bigger than self.

I want NVHC to be a covenantal island. A place that builds covenantal thinking inside of all who enter these doors, so that we can contend with the growing exploitation that surrounds us.

I always try to illustrate my sermons with a dramatic story that captures the message, and as I racked my brain this year to come up with an amazing story about covenant, I realized I cannot describe the scope and power of covenant in one story. Covenant happens in tens of thousands of tiny stories.

I saw this back in February at the end of an adult ed class, when a squadron of people volunteered to give a ride to an elder student who can no longer drive and did not want to miss a chance to study Torah.

I saw it all school year last year as one particular boy entered Torah Corps and proudly declared that he would never be able to read Torah, and that he was only there because

his mom made him come. And then, through the year, he sat with older teens, and each of the clergy, and our youth advisor, and eventually calmed down and realized that he was capable of learning. On his Bar Mitzvah day, he hit it out of the park and total strangers were crying at the service.

I saw it during our last Israel trip, when a traveler stayed up all night and missed a day of touring to spend the day in the hospital with his roommate, previously a stranger.

I saw it after a wedding I did last June when the parents of a couple came to me and thanked me for helping their kids overcome their traumatic twenties and become adults.

I saw it last October when people who had grown cynical with politics went with VOICE to Get Out the Vote and raised voting rates in those precincts by over 30% in the 2017 statewide elections.

Cantor Caro, Rabbi Wainer and I have the privilege of seeing this happen all the time. We see it in office volunteering, choir singing, backpack stuffing, paper-bag stapling, hypothermia-meal-cooking, Cornerstones-supporting, student-mentoring, campership raising, preschool planning, Israel studying, service greeting, shamash orchestrating, Torah chanting, Tot-Shabbat goldfish sharing, and the thousand other tiny moments we encounter in this community.

Covenant grows over time, slowly, in boring and unpredictable fashion. Nobody plans out their day and says, "By the end of today I will agree to do something totally inconvenient and unexpected and it will turn out to be the most meaningful part of my week."

Nobody expects to stuff into already crowded schedules all the things we do here, and nobody expects to begin relationships with strangers, and nobody expects those relationships to grow over decades, and nobody expects to have a life altering conversation in a simple class at the synagogue, and nobody expects the greatest life raft their teen will ever have will be the Tuesday night Tamid program, and nobody expects a series of phone calls can help someone cope with widowhood or trauma or illness, and nobody expects to serve on a committee, task force, working group, volunteer team, board or any other form of leadership and discover it can be transformative.

I cannot illustrate Covenant with one story because Covenant does not work that way. Covenant happens in truly countless, fuzzy, unexpected, personal, cumulative, and quietly powerful moments, all the time.

And over time we wake up one day and realize that we have changed. And we can swim in the sea of contracts and obsessive personal freedom and exploitative designs and we are no longer cynical, or anxious or afraid of being the fool.

Over the course of this year, we will be exploring the concept of covenant in services, classes, discussions and programs. We will examine everything about NVHC from how we care for the sick, to how we educate our kids, to how we raise money to pay for this place, all through the lens of covenant. We need covenant, because NVHC and Judaism and religion in general exist to transform us in ways that we cannot predict, expect or even sometimes explain. I want us to be evangelicals not for the word of Moses or Jesus or Mohammed. The particulars of the religion are less important than the fact of being in this place in a house of covenant and doing the things that religious people do: study, pray, meditate, form community, meet strangers, hear disagreements, seek meaning, do acts of kindness, work toward justice. This is the purpose of this place.

We have tried to capture the miracle of covenant in the posters you will see in the hallway outside the sanctuary. On those posters are comments left over the past months by members of this community, some anonymous and some with names, sharing ways that Judaism and NVHC have changed lives. Read the posters. We invite you to add your responses on sticky notes we have in the lobby, or by emailing us after you leave.

We want to begin our year by reflecting on how this place, and the covenant we each have with this place can help us be fuller and healthier human beings.

And then do not be surprised if you are invited to have a conversation about covenant, so that we can better define what this place means for us right now and what we want it to become. If you want to help, there is a red sign up sheet in the lobby.

If Rosh Hashanah is the birthday of the world and an invitation for us to help create that world, then we need to be aware of the water surrounding us. We need to see that if we are not careful, the water will eventually guide us, like Abraham, to decisions we will regret.

Then we need to get out of the water, find an island of covenant and learn to think differently. We need to raise our eyes, see the ram's horn stuck in the thicket, and hear the Angel offering us the blessing of covenant that can help transform our lives and our world. Shana Tova. May all of us be sealed for a good year.

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<sup>1</sup> Wallace, David Foster, "This is Water," NY, Little Brown and Co., 2005

<sup>2</sup> Gen 22:16

<sup>3</sup> I heard this expression from Tristan Harris on the Ezra Klein Show podcast from 2/19/2018

<sup>4</sup> Crawford, 96, 101

<sup>5</sup> ideas for the nature of love from Byron Sherwin

<sup>6</sup> Hecllo, Hugh, On Thinking Institutionally. Chapter 4