

Key words

Mosaic covenant

Conditional covenant

Mitzvot

Torah

Idolatry

Intercede

Ethical

Key concepts

The Mosaic covenant was established between God and the Israelites at Mount Sinai. It is a conditional covenant in which there are responsibilities from both parties within the agreement. In particular, God promised to be God of the Israelites only if they obeyed a set of divine laws. In return, the Israelites could expect God's protection and that God would never abandon them because they were now a divinely chosen people.

One of the most significant things about the Mosaic covenant is that it was made with the whole nation rather than with an individual as in the case of Abraham. Under the Mosaic covenant, the law was given to the Jewish people, and such is its significance that the practices of Jews today can be seen as a development of those laws into a distinct lifestyle.

Exodus tells us that Moses went to the summit of Mount Sinai alone where he received and recorded the laws of God. Tradition has it that the laws of God were originally written upon tablets of stone. The written text, believed by many Jews to be the actual words of God to Moses, exists today in the Torah. The covenant was formalised by means of a sacrificial ceremony.

However, the people strayed from their promises to God and indulged in idolatrous behaviour by means of the creation of an idol, a golden calf, which was worshipped in pagan ways. In anger, Moses smashed the tablets upon which the Ten Commandments were written as a demonstration that the people had broken their part of the covenant.

Nevertheless, Moses interceded for the people, the covenant was renewed, and the people received the assurance that God's love included the capacity to forgive. A new edition of the tablets acted as a symbol of renewal.

Key quotes

'Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all the nations you will be my treasured possession.' (Exodus 19:5)

'Moses then wrote down everything the Lord had said.' (Exodus 24:4)

'The Lord said to Moses, "Chisel out two stones like the first ones, and I will write on them the words that were on the first tablets, which you broke."' (Exodus 34:1)

'Then the Lord said to Moses, "Write down these words, for in accordance with these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel" ... and he (Moses) wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant – the Ten Commandments.' (Exodus 34:27-28)

Issues for analysis and evaluation

Key questions, arguments and debates

Is the covenant a means of religious control?

At the time of Moses, religious control could have been regarded as advantageous as the terms of the covenant provided a framework for daily life. Nowadays, many regard keeping the mitzvot as a discipline rather than a control mechanism. It could be said that keeping the requirements of the covenant is a means of communicating with God and acknowledging responsibility as partners in the covenant which God made with them through Moses.

To what extent does the covenant have legal value?

Is the Torah more than just a 'legal' rulebook? Should it be seen in the wider sense as a guide for the establishment of a moral and ethical code of conduct? For many Jews, the laws are outdated and are not representative of the issues faced in modern-day life. Spirituality is in danger of being suppressed if Judaism becomes just a set of rules. However, the laws bring holiness into the world and set the Jews apart as examples of the way in which God wants people to live.