Before anything ever existed, there was God, God’s angels, and huge masses of rocks and water with no place to go. The angels looked around and asked God, “Why don’t you clean up this mess?”

So, God collected the rocks, put them together in clumps, and said, “Some of these clumps of rocks will be planets, some will be stars, and some of these rocks will just be rocks.” Then, God collected the water and said, “Some of these pools of water will be oceans, and some will become clouds, and some of this water will just be water.”

The angels looked around and said, “Well, God, It’s neater now, but is it finished?” And God answered, “Not yet!”

On some of the rocks, God placed growing things, creeping things, and even some things that only God knew what they were. And, when God had done all this, the angels looked around and asked, “Is the world finished now?” And God answered, “Not yet!”

Then, God made a man and a woman from some of the water and dust and said to them, “You know, I am tired now. Please finish up the world for me; really, it’s almost done.” But the man and the woman said, “We can’t finish the world alone! We don’t even know where to start!”

“I know you can do this,” God answered them. “But, I promise you this: If you keep trying to finish the world, I will be your partner.”

The man and woman asked, “What’s a partner?” and God answered, “A partner is someone you work with on a big thing that neither of you can do alone. If you have a partner, it means you can never give up, because your partner is depending on you. Even on the days you may think I am not doing enough, and on the days I may think you are not doing enough, we are still partners and we must not stop trying to finish the world. That’s the deal.” And they all agreed to that deal.

Then, the angels asked God, “Is the world finished yet?” and God answered, “I don’t know. Go ask my partners.”

The Notion of Covenant

At the heart of Jewish tradition is the notion of covenant, the relationship between humanity and God that is defined by a reciprocal agreement.
that states that if humanity commits itself to be in relationship with God, God will commit God’s self to be in relationship with humanity. This, of course, also means that if God commits God’s self to be in relationship with humanity, humanity will commit itself to be in relationship with God. For many of our philosophers, this relationship is dynamic and continuously evolving and can be challenged. It is founded on the notion that everyone is accountable for each other and in partnership with each other. So, when thinking about our relationship with God, I choose to believe that God doesn’t depend on the angels.

God depends on us to be angels. Judaism teaches us that humanity was created b’tzelem elohim, which, for me, means that a spark of the divine is within each of us. It may be God who provides the sparks and ignites it, but it is our responsibility to keep the flames going.

In terms of the classroom experience, gone are the days when rules are posted on the bulletin board the first day of class and, the next day, students return with a form indicating that they have discussed these rules with their parents. Today, many classes are adopting a model that strives to create a more democratic community. The social contract, as it’s being called in secular communities, is not about rules, but rather expectations, boundaries, and principles that govern this community. The goal of the social contract is to empower its members to do everything they can to improve themselves and their class. Rules are simply those statements on the front bulletin board of the classroom.

A social contract is a living and breathing document that is a concrete part of a student’s learning experience. Social contracts take the abstract concepts of what is and what is not appropriate in the classroom and translates them into actual ideas and behaviors. The intent is that if both the students and teachers take ownership of the contract from the onset, its effectiveness will be greater. In other words, if the students feel that rules are being imposed on them, the contract no longer can positively influence behavior. By taking ownership in the contract, students are more likely to hold themselves and others accountable.

**The Class Brit**

In Jewish settings, the social contract can be thought of as a class *brit*. When explaining what a *brit* is and how it functions, teachers can refer to numerous biblical texts that outline how the *brit* manifested itself between the people and God. What is evident from these verses is that the *brit* is a sign of the relationship; it is an indication of a mutual promise between two parties. In *parashat Nitzavim*, we learn that the *entire* community stood at Mount Sinai as Moses delivered the Ten Commandments, and that *entire* community—elders, men, women, children, and even strangers are part of the covenant. With these ideas in mind, a classroom *brit* can function as an extension of the covenant set forth in our Torah. Adhering to the classroom *brit* not only represents a commitment to the class itself, but also serves as a reminder of what it means to be Jewish and live out values such as *kavod* (respect), *derekh eretz* (appropriate behavior), *g’milut chasidim* (acts of lovingkindness).

In designing a class *brit*, the class must first determine a set of expectations and principles that guide how the class and community are structured. It is important that this list be as short as possible. The longer the list, the more difficult it will be for the class to remember. In addition, the list should convey positive messages rather than negative. It might be instinctual for teachers to begin these principles with “Do not...,” but by stating classroom expectations negatively, it may encourage negative behavior.
Of course, depending on the ages of the students, the process of creating a brit may require more guidance. For younger grades, structure the class discussion about brit with questions, such as (1) What are some important things for all of us to do to make a good class? (2) What are you hoping to learn and experience in the class? Teachers then can use these responses to formulate classroom principles. For older grades, the class can be divided into groups and brainstorm ways in which the class can best form a community. In each case, it is important for students to hear how the teacher is committed to the class as well.

Developing clear consequences for brit violation is essential to the success of the brit. Regardless of what the actual consequence is, students need to understand fully what they did in violation of the brit and have opportunities to reflect upon their actions. As a result, the violation can likely be avoided in the future.

In order for a class brit to endure, the students in the class need to remind themselves of its principles on a frequent basis. It is important for the students to hold each other accountable and recognize when individuals are demonstrating their commitment to the brit. These affirmations not only positively impact the individual being recognized, but also encourage others to behave appropriately as well.

Furthermore, the brit should be periodically reexamined to assess its effectiveness. There are numerous instances in our Hebrew Bible when individuals have questioned their relationship with God – Abraham, Moses, and Job– and when God questioned God’s relationship with the people – the story of the flood. Questioning the brit is not about defying it. It is about assuring that it continues to help the classroom community grow and to aid students and teachers in improving themselves as well.

Fostering the growth of community means that students and teachers are interested not only in themselves, but also in others. Creating a classroom brit reminds us that an aspect of being God’s partners is for us to partner with each other. With this partnership in mind, a successful classroom community can emerge.

Footnotes:

