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A STUDY OF THE PARSHA WITH RABBI SACKS

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I am deeply touched that Covenant & Conversation has been generously sponsored by The Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation in memory of Maurice and Vivienne Wohl ז"ל. Maurice was a visionary philanthropist on a vast scale, driven throughout his life by a sense of Jewish responsibility. Vivienne was a woman of the deepest humanity and compassion, who had a kind word for everyone. Together, they were a unique partnership of dedication and grace, for whom living was giving. Through their Charitable Foundation, they continue to bring blessings to Jewish communities around the world.

— RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS



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The Miracle of a Child

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There is a mystery at the heart of Jewish existence, engraved into the first syllables of our recorded time.

The first words of God to Abraham were: “Go out from your land, your birthplace, and your father’s house . . . And I will make you a great nation . . .” In the next chapter there is another promise: “I will make your children like the dust of the earth, so that if anyone could count the dust of the earth, so shall your offspring be counted.” Two chapters later comes a third: “God took him outside and said, ‘Look at the heavens and count the stars – if indeed you can count them.’ Then He said to him, ‘So shall your children be.’” Finally, the fourth: “Your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations.”

Four escalating promises: Abraham would be the father of a great nation, as many as the dust of the earth and the stars of the sky. He would be the father not of one nation but of many. What, though, was the reality? Early in the story, we read that Abraham was “very wealthy in livestock and in silver and gold.” He had everything except one thing – a child. Then God appeared to Abraham and said, “Your reward will be very great.”

Until now, Abraham has been silent. Now, something within him breaks, and he asks: “O Lord God, what will you give me if I remain childless?” The first recorded words of Abraham to God are a plea for there to be future generations. The first Jew feared he would be the last.

Then a child is born. Sarah gives Abraham her handmaid Hagar, hoping that she will give him a child. She gives birth to a son whose name is Ishmael, meaning “God has heard.” Abraham’s prayer has been

answered, or so we think. But in the next chapter, that hope is destroyed. Yes, says God, Ishmael will be blessed. He will be the father of twelve princes and a great nation. But he is not the child of Jewish destiny, and one day Abraham will have to part from him.

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This pains Abraham deeply. He pleads: “If only Ishmael might live under Your blessing.” Later, when Sarah drives Ishmael away, we read that “This distressed Abraham greatly because it concerned his son.” Nonetheless, the decree remains. God insists that Abraham will have a son by Sarah. Both laugh. How can it be? They are old. Sarah is post-menopausal. Yet against possibility, the son is born. His name is Isaac, meaning “laughter”:

Sarah said, “God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me.” And she added, “Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age.”

Finally, the story seems to have a happy ending. After all the promises and prayers, Abraham and Sarah at last have a child. Then come the words which, in all the intervening centuries, have not lost their power to shock:

After these things, God tested Abraham. He said to him, “Abraham!” “Here I am,” he replied. Then God said, “Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I will show you.”

Abraham takes his son, travels for three days, climbs the mountain, prepares the wood, ties his son, takes the knife and raises his hand. Then a voice is heard from heaven: “Do not lay a hand on the boy.” The trial is over. Isaac lives.

Why all the promises and disappointments? Why the hope so often raised, so often unfulfilled? Why delay? Why Ishmael? Why the binding? Why put Abraham and Sarah through the agony of thinking that the son for whom they have waited for so long is about to die?

There are many answers in our tradition, but one transcends all others. We cherish what we wait for and what we most risk losing. Life is full of wonders. The birth of a child is a miracle. Yet, precisely because these things are natural, we take them for granted, forgetting that nature has an architect, and history an author.

Judaism is a sustained discipline in not taking life for granted. We were the people born in slavery so that we would value freedom. We were the nation always small, so that we would know that strength does not lie in numbers but in the faith that begets courage. Our ancestors walked through the valley of the shadow of death, so that we could never forget the sanctity of life.

Throughout history, Jews were called on to value children. Our entire value system is built on it. Our citadels are schools, our passion, education, and our greatest heroes, teachers. The seder service on Pesach can only begin with questions asked by a child. On the first day of the New Year, we read not about the creation of the universe but about the birth of a child – Isaac to Sarah, Samuel to Hannah. Ours is a supremely child-centred faith.

That is why, at the dawn of Jewish time, God put Abraham and Sarah through these trials – the long wait, the unmet hope, the binding itself – so that neither they nor their descendants would ever take children for granted. Every child is a miracle. Being a parent is the closest we get to God – bringing life into being through an act of love.

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Today, when too many children live in poverty and illiteracy, dying for lack of medical attention because those who rule nations are focused on fighting the battles of the past rather than shaping a safe future, it is a lesson the world has not yet learned. For the sake of humanity it must, for the tragedy is vast and the hour is late.



Beyond the Politics of Anger

(This article by Rabbi Sacks was first published in The Daily Telegraph, 11th November 2016)

This is not politics as usual. The American Presidential election, the Brexit vote and the rise of extremism in the politics of the West are warnings of something larger, and the sooner we realise it, the better. What we are witnessing is the birth of a new politics of anger. It is potentially very dangerous indeed.

No civilisation lasts forever. The first sign of breakdown is that people stop trusting the ruling elite. They are seen as having failed to solve the major problems facing the nation. They are perceived as benefiting themselves, not the population as a whole. They are out of touch and surrounded by people like themselves. They have stopped listening to the grassroots. They underestimate the depth and breadth of popular anger.

That happened in both Washington and Westminster. The governing class fail to see the blow coming. That is how the party of the status quo is defeated by the candidate of the angry party, however incoherent his or her policies actually are.

Therein lies the danger because anger is a mood, not a strategy, and it can make things worse not better. Anger never solves problems, it merely inflames them. The danger down the road, as it has been throughout history, is the demand for authoritarian leadership, which is the beginning of the end of the free society. We shouldn't forget Plato's warning that democracy can end in tyranny.

There is only one viable alternative. It is not a return to the status quo. It is bigger than traditional divisions between the parties. It is the creation of a new politics of hope.

Hope is not optimism. It begins with a candid acknowledgment on all sides of how bad things actually are. Vast swathes of the population in Britain and America have not benefited from economic growth. They have seen their living standards fall, relatively and absolutely. They have watched while traditional jobs have been outsourced to low wage economies, leaving once-thriving industrial centres as demoralised wastelands.

We need a new economics of capitalism with a human face. We have seen bankers and corporate executives behaving outrageously, awarding themselves vast payments while the human cost has been borne by those who can afford it least. We have heard free-market economics invoked as a mantra in total oblivion to the pain and loss that come with the global economy. We have acted as if markets can function without morals, international corporations without social responsibility, and economic systems without regard to their effect on the people left stranded by the shifting tide. We who are grandparents know only too well that life is harder for our children than it was for us, and for our grandchildren it will be harder still.

We need to rebuild our social ecology. When a civilisation is in good order it has institutions that provide support and hope in hard times. In the West these have traditionally been families and communities. Neither is in a good state throughout the West today. Their breakdown led two of the most important thinkers in America, Charles Murray on the right and Robert Putnam on the left, to argue that, for large sections of the population the American dream lies broken beyond repair. The sooner we abandon the politically correct but socially disastrous view that marriage is outmoded, the better.

We need to recover a strong, inclusive sense of national identity if people are to feel that those in power care about the common good, not simply the interests of elites. The West is still suffering from the damage done by multiculturalism, living proof that the road to hell is paved with good intentions. Unless we can restore what George Orwell called patriotism as opposed to nationalism, we will see the rise of the far right, as is happening already in Europe.

The religious voice is important also, and I say this not because I am religious but because historically the great faiths have given people a sense of dignity and worth that was not tied to what they earned or owned. When religion dies and consumerism takes its place, people are left with a culture that encourages them to buy things they don't need with money they don't have for a happiness that won't last. It is a bad exchange and it will end in tears.

All this is big and deep and serious, and it will need us to move beyond the confrontational politics and divisive zero-sum thinking that have so brutalised public debate. Anger is always a hazard of politics in ages of rapid change, but it has not always been as dangerous as it is now. The revolution in information technology has transformed the entire tone of global culture in the twenty-first century. Smartphones and the social media empower groups that might otherwise lack a collective voice. The Internet has a disinhibition effect that encourages indignation and spreads it like contagion.

A politics of hope is within our reach. But to create it we will have to find ways of strengthening families and communities, building a culture of collective responsibility and insisting on an economics of the common good. This is no longer a matter of party politics. It is about the very viability of the freedom for which the West fought for so long and hard. We need to construct a compelling narrative of hope that speaks to all of us, not some of us, and the time to begin is now.



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