

# COVENANT & Conversation

A STUDY OF THE PARSHA WITH RABBI SACKS

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— RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS



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## Freedom & Truth

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Why did Moses tell Pharaoh, if not a lie, then less than the full truth? Here is the conversation between him and Pharaoh after the fourth plague, *arov*, “swarms of insects” (some say “wild animals”):

*Pharaoh summoned Moses and Aaron and said, “Go, sacrifice to your God here in the land.” But Moses said, “That would not be right. The sacrifices we offer the Lord our God would be detestable to the Egyptians. And if we offer sacrifices that are detestable in their eyes, will they not stone us? We must take a three-day journey into the wilderness to offer sacrifices to the Lord our God, as He commands us.” (Ex. 8:21-23)*

Not just here but throughout, Moses makes it seem as if all he is asking is for permission for the people to undertake a three day journey, to offer sacrifices to God and (by implication) then to return. So, in their first appearance before Pharaoh, Moses and Aaron say:

*“This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: ‘Let My people go, so that they may hold a festival to Me in the wilderness.’”*

*Pharaoh said, “Who is the Lord, that I should obey Him and let Israel go? I do not know the Lord and I will not let Israel go.”*

*Then they said, “The God of the Hebrews has met with us. Now let us take a three-day journey into the wilderness to offer sacrifices to the Lord our God, or He may strike us with plagues or with the sword.” (Ex. 5:1-3)*

God even specifies this before the mission has begun, saying to Moses at the burning bush: “You and the elders of Israel will then go to the king of Egypt. You must tell him, ‘The Lord, God of the Hebrews, revealed Himself to us. Now we request that you allow us to take a three day journey into the desert, to sacrifice to the Lord our God’” (3:18).

The impression remains to the very end. After the Israelites have left, we read:  
*The king of Egypt received news that the people were escaping. Pharaoh and his officials changed their minds regarding the people, and said, “What have we done? How could we have released Israel from doing our work?” (14:5)*

**“The heroes of the Bible are not figures of myth. They are not people possessed of a sense of destiny, determined from an early age to achieve fame.”**

At no stage does Moses say explicitly that he is proposing that the people should be allowed to leave permanently, never to return. He talks of a three day journey. There is an argument between him and Pharaoh as to who is to go. Only the adult males? Only the people, not the cattle? Moses consistently asks for permission to worship God, at some place that is not Egypt. But he does not speak about freedom or the promised land. Why not? Why does he create, and not correct, a false impression? Why can he not say openly what he means?

The commentators offer various explanations. R. Shmuel David Luzzatto (Italy, 1800-1865) says that it was impossible for Moses to tell the truth to a tyrant like Pharaoh. R. Yaakov Mecklenburg (Germany, 1785-1865, Ha-Ktav v'ha-Kabbalah) says that technically Moses did not tell a lie. He did indeed mean that he wanted the people to be free to make a journey to worship God, and he never said explicitly that they would return.

The Abarbanel (Lisbon 1437 – Venice 1508) says that God told Moses deliberately to make a small request, to demonstrate Pharaoh's cruelty and indifference to his slaves. All they were asking was for a brief respite from their labours to offer sacrifices to God. If he refused this, he was indeed a tyrant. Rav Elhanan Samet (Iyyunim be-Parshot Ha-Shevua, Exodus, 189) cites an unnamed commentator who says simply that this was war between Pharaoh and the Jewish people, and it was it is permitted, indeed sometimes necessary, to deceive.

Actually, however, the terms of the encounter between Moses and Pharaoh are part of a wider pattern that we have already observed in the Torah. When Jacob leaves Laban we read: “*Jacob decided to go behind the back of Laban the Aramean, and did not tell him that he was leaving*” (Gen. 31:20). Laban protests this behaviour: “*How could you do this? You went behind my back and led my daughters away like prisoners of war! Why did you have to leave so secretly? You went behind my back and told me nothing!*” (31:26-27).

Jacob again has to tell at best a half-truth when Esau suggests that they travel together: “You know that the children are weak, and I have responsibility for the nursing sheep and cattle. If they are driven hard for even one day, all the sheep will die. Please go ahead of me, my lord” (33:13-14). This, though not strictly a lie, is a diplomatic excuse.

When Jacob’s sons are trying to rescue their sister Dina who has been raped and abducted by Shechem the Hivite, they “*replied deceitfully*” (34:13) when Shechem and his father proposed that the entire family should come and settle with them, telling them that they could only do so if all the males of the town underwent circumcision.

Earlier still we find that three times Abraham and Isaac, forced to leave home because of famine, have to pretend that they are their wives’ brothers not their husbands because they fear that otherwise they will be killed so that Sarah or Rebecca could be taken into the king’s harem (Gen. 12, 20, 26). These six episodes cannot be entirely accidental or coincidental to the biblical narrative as a whole. The implication seems to be this. Outside the promised land Jews in the biblical age are in danger if they tell the truth. They are at constant risk of being killed or at best enslaved.

Why? Because they are powerless in an age of power. They are a small family, at best a small nation, in an age of empires. They have to use their wits to survive. By and large they do not tell lies but they can create a false impression. This is not how things should be. But it is how they were before Jews had their own land, their one and only defensible space. It is how people in impossible situations are forced to be if they are to exist at all.

No one should be forced to live a lie. In Judaism, truth is the seal of God and the essential precondition of trust between human beings. But when your people is being

enslaved, its male children murdered, you have to liberate them by whatever means are possible. Moses, who had already seen that his first encounter with Pharaoh made things worse for his people – they still

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had to make the same quota of bricks but now also had to gather their own straw (5:6-8) – did not want to risk making them worse still.

The Torah here is not justifying deceit. To the contrary, it is condemning a system in which telling the truth may put your life at risk, as it still does in many tyrannical or totalitarian societies today. Judaism – a religion of dissent, questioning and “arguments for the sake of heaven” – is a faith that values intellectual honesty and moral truthfulness above all things. The Psalmist says: “Who shall ascend the mountain of the Lord and who shall stand in His holy place? One who has clean hands and a pure heart, who has not taken My name in vain nor sworn deceitfully” (Ps. 24:3-4). Malachi says of one who speaks in God’s name: “The law of truth was in his mouth, and unrighteousness was not found in his lips” (Mal. 2:6). Every Amidah ends with the prayer, “My God, guard my tongue from evil and my lips from deceitful speech.”

What the Torah is telling us in these six narratives in Genesis and the seventh in Exodus is the connection between freedom and truth. Where there is freedom there can be truth. Otherwise there cannot. A society where people are forced to be less than fully honest merely to survive and not provoke further oppression is not the kind of society God wants us to make.

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Otherwise there  
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