

# COVENANT & Conversation

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 Power of Ruach

**Beshalach 2017 / 5777**

In September 2010, BBC, Reuters and other news agencies reported on a sensational scientific discovery. Researchers at US National Center for Atmospheric Research and the University of Colorado have shown through computer simulation how the division of the red sea may have taken place.

Using sophisticated modelling, they demonstrated how a strong east wind, blowing overnight, could have pushed water back at a bend where an ancient river is believed to have merged with a coastal lagoon. The water would have been guided into the two waterways, and a land bridge would have opened at the bend, allowing people to walk across the exposed mud flats. As soon as the wind died down, the waters would have rushed back in. As the leader of the project said when the report was published: "The simulations match fairly closely with the account in Exodus."

So we now have scientific evidence to support the biblical account, though to be fair, a very similar case was made some years ago by Colin Humphreys, Professor of Materials Science at Cambridge University, and Professor of Experimental Physics at the Royal Institution in London, in his book *The Miracles of Exodus*.

To me, though, the real issue is what the biblical account actually is. Because it is just here that we have one of the most fascinating features of the way the Torah tells its stories. Here is the key passage:

*Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and all that night the LORD drove the sea back with a strong east wind and turned it into dry land. The waters were divided, and the Israelites went through the sea on dry ground, with a wall of water on their right and on their left. (Ex. 14:21-22)*

The passage can be read two ways. The first is that what happened was a suspension of the laws of nature. It was a supernatural event. The waters stood, literally, like a wall.

The second is that what happened was miraculous not because the laws of nature were suspended. To the contrary, as the computer simulation shows, the exposure of dry land at a particular point in the Red Sea was a natural outcome of the strong east wind. What made it miraculous is that it happened just there, just then, when the Israelites seemed trapped, unable to go forward because of the sea, unable to turn back because of the Egyptian army pursuing them.

**“It happened just there, just then, when the Israelites seemed trapped, unable to go forward because of the sea, unable to turn back because of the Egyptian army pursuing them.”**

There is a significant difference between these two interpretations. The first appeals to our sense of wonder. How extraordinary that the laws of nature should be suspended to allow an escaping people to go free. It is a story to appeal to the imagination of a child.

But the naturalistic explanation is wondrous at another level entirely. Here the Torah is using the device of irony. What made the Egyptians of the time of Ramses so formidable was the fact that they possessed the latest and most powerful form of military technology, the horse drawn chariot. It made them unbeatable in battle, and fearsome.

What happens at the sea is poetic justice of the most exquisite kind. There is only one circumstance in which a group of people travelling by foot can escape a highly trained army of charioteers, namely when the route passes through a muddy sea bed. The people can walk across, but the chariot wheels get stuck in the mud. The Egyptian army can neither advance nor retreat.

The wind drops. The water returns. The powerful are now powerless, while the powerless have made their way to freedom.

This second narrative has a moral depth that the first does not; and it resonates with the message of the book of Psalms:

*His pleasure is not in the strength of the horse,  
nor His delight in the legs of the warrior;  
the Lord delights in those who fear Him,  
who put their hope in His unfailing love. (Psalm 147:10-11)*

The elegantly simple way in which the division of the Red Sea is described in the Torah so that it can be read at two quite different levels, one as a supernatural miracle, the other as a moral tale about the limits of technology when it comes to the real strength of nations: that to me is what is most striking. It is a text quite deliberately written so that our understanding of it can deepen as we mature, and we are no longer so interested in the mechanics of miracles, and more interested in how freedom is won or lost.

So it's good to know how the division of the sea happened, but there remains a depth to the biblical story that can never be exhausted by computer simulations and other historical or scientific evidence, and depends instead on being sensitive to its deliberate and delicate ambiguity. Just as *ruach*, a physical wind, can part waters and expose land beneath, so *ruach*, the human spirit, can expose, beneath the surface of a story, a deeper meaning beneath.

**“Just as *ruach*, a physical wind, can part waters and expose land beneath, so *ruach*, the human spirit, can expose, beneath the surface of a story, a deeper meaning beneath.”**

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Jonathan Sachs". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

# **“BEING AN INSPIRING PARENT”**

## ***A new online video series from Rabbi Sacks***

Rabbi Sacks has recorded a series of 13 short videos on the subject of ‘Being an Inspiring Parent’.

Over the next few weeks, these will be uploaded onto Rabbi Sacks’ Facebook page ([www.facebook.com/rabbisacks](http://www.facebook.com/rabbisacks)) as well as on his website ([www.rabbisacks.org/being-an-inspiring-parent/](http://www.rabbisacks.org/being-an-inspiring-parent/)).



The first video in this series looks at how making space for our children to inspire us is one of the greatest gifts we can give them.

The second video looks at how important it is to serve God in joy if you want your children to love Judaism.



For more material from Rabbi Sacks, or to join his mailing list, please visit [www.rabbisacks.org](http://www.rabbisacks.org)

The Office of Rabbi Sacks, PO Box 72007, London, NW6 6RW  
+44 (0)20 7286 6391 • [info@rabbisacks.org](mailto:info@rabbisacks.org) • [www.rabbisacks.org](http://www.rabbisacks.org)

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