

COVENANT & Conversation

A STUDY OF THE PARSHA WITH RABBI SACKS

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— RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS



THE MAURICE WOHL
CHARITABLE FOUNDATION

The Light We Make

Shemini 2017 / 5777

The great moment has come. For seven days – beginning on the 23rd Adar – Moses had consecrated Aaron and the priests. Now, on Rosh Chodesh Nissan, the time has arrived for Aaron to begin his service, ministering to the people on behalf of God:

It came to pass *on the eighth day*, that Moses called to Aaron and his sons, and the elders of Israel, and he said to Aaron, take a young bull for a sin offering, and a ram for a burnt offering, without blemish, and offer them before the Lord.

What is the significance of the “eighth day,” the phrase that gives our sedra its name? To understand the profound symbolism of the number eight, we have to go back to creation itself.

In the beginning, when all was “waste and void,” God created the universe. Day by day, the world unfolded. First, there were the domains: light and dark, the upper and lower waters, sea and dry land. Then there were the objects that filled the domains: the sun, moon and stars, then the fish and birds, and finally the land animals, culminating in mankind. Then came Shabbat, the seventh day, the day of limits and of holiness, on which first God, then His covenantal people, rested in order to show that there are boundaries to creation. There is an integrity to nature. Everything has its proper place, its ecological niche, its function and dignity in the totality of being. *Holiness consists in respecting boundaries and honouring the natural order.*

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Thus, the seven days. But what of the eighth day – the day *after* creation? For this, we have to turn to *Torah she-be'al peh*, the oral tradition.

On the sixth day, God made His most fateful decision: to create a being who, like Himself, had the capacity to create. Admittedly, there is a fundamental distinction between human creativity (“something from something”) and Divine creativity (“something from nothing”). That is why human beings are “the *image* of God” but not – as Nietzsche argued – gods themselves.

Yet the ability to create goes hand in hand with the ability to destroy. There cannot be one without the other. Every new technology can be used to heal or harm. Every power can be turned to good or evil.

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The danger immediately becomes clear. God tells the first man not to eat of the fruit of one tree. What kind of tree it was is irrelevant; what mattered was its symbolic function. It represents the fact that *creation has boundaries* – the most important being the boundary between the permitted and forbidden. That is why there had to be, even in paradise, something that was forbidden. When the first two human beings ate of the forbidden fruit, the essential harmony between man and nature was broken. Humanity lost its innocence. For the first time, *nature* (the world we find) and *culture* (the world we make) came into conflict. The result was paradise lost.

According to the sages, this entire drama took place on the sixth day. On that day, they were made, they were commanded about the tree, they transgressed the command and were sentenced to exile.

But in compassion, God allowed them a stay of sentence. They were given an extra day in Eden – namely Shabbat. For the whole of that day, the sun did not set. As it too came to a close, *God showed the first human beings how to make light*:

With the going out of the Sabbath, the celestial light began to fade. Adam was afraid that the serpent would attack him in the dark. Therefore God illuminated his understanding, and he learned to rub two stones against each other and produce light for his needs.

This, according to the sages, is the reason we light a *havdalah* candle at the end of Shabbat to inaugurate the new week.

There is, in other words, a fundamental difference between the light of the first day (“And God said, Let there be light . . .”) and that of the eighth day. The light of the first day was created by God. The light of the eighth day is what God taught us to create. It symbolizes our “partnership with God in the work of creation.” There is no more beautiful image than this of how God empowers us to join Him in bringing light to the world. On Shabbat we remember God’s creation. On the eighth day (*motsei Shabbat*) we celebrate *our* creativity as the image and partner of God.

To understand the full significance of this story, we have to go back to one of the great myths of the ancient world: the myth of Prometheus. To the Greeks, the gods were essentially hostile to mankind. Zeus wanted to keep the art of making fire secret, but Prometheus stole a spark and taught men how to make it. Once the theft was discovered, Zeus punished him by having him chained to a rock, with an eagle pecking at his liver.

Against this background can we see the revolutionary character of Jewish faith. We believe that God *wants* human beings to exercise power: responsibly, creatively, and within limits set by the integrity of nature. The rabbinic account of how God taught Adam and Eve the secret of making fire is the precise opposite of the story of Prometheus. God seeks to confer dignity on the beings He made in His image as an act of love. He does not hide the secrets of the universe from us. He does not seek to keep mankind in a state of ignorance or dependence. The creative God empowers us to be creative and begins by teaching us how. He wants us to be guardians of the world He has entrusted to our care. That is the significance of the eighth day. It is *the human counterpart of the first day of creation*.

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We now understand the symbolic significance of the eighth day in relation to the Tabernacle. As we have noted elsewhere, the linguistic parallels in the Torah show that the construction of the *mishkan* in the wilderness mirrors the Divine creation of the world. The Tabernacle was intended to be a miniature universe, a symbolic microcosmos, constructed by human beings. Just as God made the earth as a home for mankind, so the Israelites in the wilderness built the Tabernacle as a symbolic home for God. It was their act of creation.

So it had to begin on the eighth day, just as Adam and Eve began their creative endeavour on the eighth day. Just as God showed them how to make light so, many centuries later, He taught the Israelites how to make a space for the Divine presence so that they too would be accompanied by light – God’s light, in the form of the fire that consumed the sacrifices, and the light of the menorah. If the first day represents Divine creation, the eighth day signifies human creation under the tutelage and sovereignty of God.

We now see the extraordinary and intimate connection between four themes: (1) the creation of the universe; (2) the building of the sanctuary; (3) the Havdalah ceremony at the end of Shabbat; and (4) the number eight.

The story of creation tells us that nature is not a blind struggle between contending forces, in which the strongest wins and power is the most important gift. To the contrary: the universe is fundamentally good. It is a place of ordered harmony, the intelligible design of a single creator.

That harmony is constantly threatened by humankind. In the covenant with Noah, God establishes a minimum threshold for human civilisation. In the covenant with Israel, he establishes a higher code of holiness. Just as the universe is the home God makes for us, so the holy is the home we make for God, symbolized first by the *mishkan*, the Tabernacle, then the Temple, and now the synagogue.

And it begins by the creation of light. Just as God began by making light on the first day, so in the ceremony of *havdalah* we make light on the eighth day, the start of human creativity, and in so doing we become God’s partners in the work of creation. Like Him, we begin by *creating light* and proceed to *make distinctions* (“Blessed are you . . . who makes a distinction between sacred and profane, light and darkness . . .”). The eighth day thus becomes the great moment at which God entrusts His creative work to the people He has taken as His covenantal partners. So it was with the Tabernacle, and so it is with us.

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This is a vision of great beauty. It sees the world as a place of order in which everything has its place and dignity within the richly differentiated tapestry of creation. To be holy is to be a guardian of that order, a task delegated to us by God. That is both an intellectual and ethical challenge: intellectually to recognise the boundaries and limits of nature, ethically to have the humility to preserve and conserve the world for the sake of generations yet to come.

In the midst of what can sometimes seem to be the dark and chaos of the human world, our task is to create order and light.

Jonathan Sacks

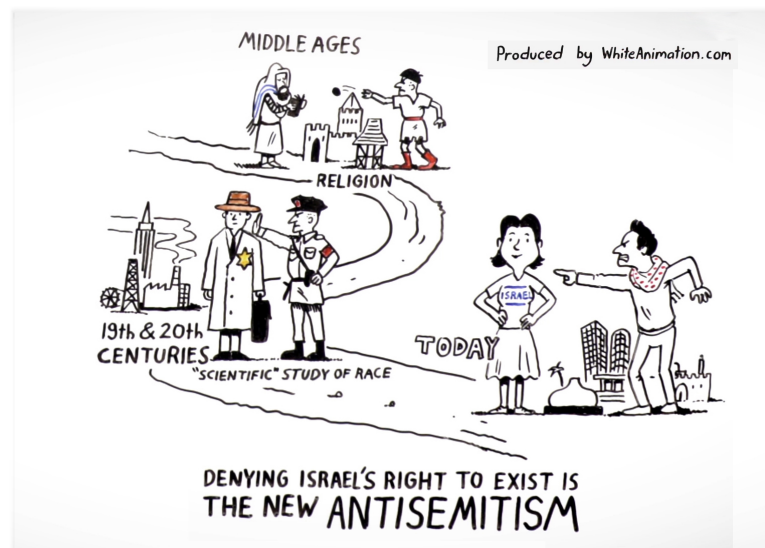
WATCH RABBI SACKS' NEW WHITEBOARD ANIMATION VIDEO ON THE MUTATION OF ANTISEMITISM

Yom HaShoah - the day in the Jewish calendar set aside for Holocaust remembrance - takes place on 27th Nisan which this year corresponds to the evening of Sunday 23rd and Monday 24th April 2017.

But how has antisemitism mutated over time? And why does its return today present a danger not just for Jews, but for all who care about our common humanity?

Please watch and share my new whiteboard animation and this important message.

www.rabbisacks.org/the-mutation-of-antisemitism/



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