

# 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 Duality of Jewish Time

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Alongside the holiness of place and person is the holiness of time, something parshat Emor charts in its deceptively simple list of festivals and holy days (Lev. 23:1-44). Time plays an enormous part in Judaism. The first thing God declared holy was a day: Shabbat, at the conclusion of creation.

The first mitzvah given to the Jewish people as a whole, prior to the Exodus, was the command to sanctify time, by determining and applying the Jewish calendar (Ex. 12:1-2).

The prophets were the first people in history to see God in history, seeing time itself as the arena of the Divine-human encounter. Virtually every other religion and civilisation before and since has identified God, reality and truth with timelessness.

Isaiah Berlin used to quote Alexander Herzen who said about the Slavs that they had no history, only geography. The Jews, he said, had the reverse: a great deal of history but all too little geography. Much time, but little space.

So time in Judaism is an essential medium of the spiritual life. But there is one feature of the Jewish approach to time that has received less attention than it should: the duality that runs through its entire temporal structure.

Take, for instance, the calendar as a whole. Christianity uses a solar calendar, Islam a lunar one. Judaism uses both. We count time both by the monthly cycle of the moon and the seasonal cycle of the sun.

**“There is one feature of the Jewish approach to time that has received less attention than it should: the duality that runs through its entire temporal structure.”**

Then consider the day. Days normally have one identifiable beginning, whether this is at nightfall or daybreak or – as in the West – somewhere between. For

calendar purposes, the Jewish day begins at nightfall (“And it was evening and it was morning, one day”). But if we look at the structure of the prayers – the morning prayer instituted by Abraham, afternoon by Isaac, evening by Jacob – there is a sense in which the worship of the day starts in the morning, not the night before.

Years, too, usually have one fixed beginning – the “new year”. In Judaism, according to the Mishnah (Rosh Hashanah 1:1), there are no less than four new years. The first of Ellul is the new year for the tithing of animals. The fifteenth of Shevat (the first according to Bet Shammai) is the new year for trees. These are specific and subsidiary dates, but the other two are more fundamental.

According to the Torah, the first month of the year is Nissan. This was the day the earth became dry after the Flood (Gen. 8:13)<sup>1</sup>. It was the day the Israelites received their first command as a people (Ex. 12:2). One year later it was the day the Tabernacle was dedicated and the service of the priests inaugurated (Ex. 40:2). But the festival we call the New Year, Rosh Hashanah, falls six months later.

Holy time itself comes in two forms, as Emor makes clear. There is Shabbat and there are the festivals, and the two are announced separately. Shabbat was sanctified by God at the beginning of time for all time. The festivals are sanctified by the Jewish people to whom was given the authority and responsibility for fixing the calendar.

**“Shabbat was sanctified by God at the beginning of time for all time. The festivals are sanctified by the Jewish people.”**

Hence the difference in the blessings we say. On Shabbat we praise God who “sanctifies Shabbat”. On the festivals we praise God who sanctifies “Israel and the holy times” – meaning, it is God who sanctifies Israel but Israel who sanctify the holy times, determining on which days the festivals fall.

Even within the festivals there is a dual cycle. One is formed by the three pilgrimage festivals: Pesach, Shavuot and Sukkot. These are days that represent the key historic moments at the dawn of Jewish time – the Exodus, the giving of the Torah, and the forty years of desert wandering. They are festivals of history.

The other is formed by the number seven and the concept of holiness: the seventh day, Shabbat; the seventh month, Tishri, with its three festivals of Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur and Sukkot; the seventh year, Shemitah; and the Jubilee marking the completion of seven seven-year cycles.

These times (with the exception of Sukkot that belongs to both cycles) have less to do with history than with what, for want of a better word, we might call metaphysics and jurisprudence, ultimate truths about the universe, the human condition, and the laws, both natural and moral, under which we live.

Each is about creation (Shabbat, a reminder of it, Rosh Hashanah the anniversary of it), divine sovereignty, justice and judgment, together with the human condition of life, death, mortality. So on Yom Kippur we face justice and judgment. On Sukkot/Shmini Atseret we pray for rain, celebrate nature (the *arba minim*, lulav, etrog, hadassim and aravot, are the only mitzvah we do with unprocessed natural objects), and read the book of Kohelet, Tanakh’s most profound meditation on mortality.

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<sup>1</sup> Although this is the subject of an argument in Gemara Rosh HaShana 11b (quoted by Rashi Bereishit Chapter 8:13) between Rabbi Yehoshua who says this occurred in Nissan and Rabbi Eliezer who says it happened in Tishrei.

In the seventh and Jubilee years we acknowledge God's ultimate ownership of the land of Israel and the children of Israel. Hence we let slaves go free, release debts, let the land rest, and restore most property to its original owners. All of these have to do not with God's interventions into history but with his role as Creator and owner of the universe.

One way of seeing the difference between the first cycle and the second is to compare the prayers on Pesach, Shavuot and Sukkot with those of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. The Amidah of Pesach, Shavuot and Sukkot begins with the phrase "You chose us from all the peoples." The emphasis is on Jewish particularity.

By contrast, the Amidah for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur begins by speaking of "all You have made, all You have created". The emphasis is on universality: about the judgment that affects all of creation, everything that lives.

Even Sukkot has a marked universalist thrust with its seventy sacrificial bulls representing the "seventy nations". According to Zechariah 14, it is the festival that will one day be celebrated by all the nations. Why the duality? Because God is both the God of nature and of culture. He is the God of everyone in general, and of the people of the covenant in particular. He is the Author of both scientific law (cause) and religious-ethical law (command).

We encounter God in both cyclical time, which represents the movement of the planets, and linear-historical time, which represents the events and evolution of the nation of which we are a part. This very duality gives rise to two kinds of religious leader: the prophet and the priest, and the different consciousness of time each represents.

Since the ancient Greeks, people have searched for a single principle that would explain everything, or the single point Archimedes sought at which to move the world, or the unique perspective (what philosophers call "the view from nowhere") from which to see truth in all its objectivity.

Judaism tells us there is no such point. Reality is more complicated than that. There is not even a single concept of time. At the very least we need two perspectives to be able to see reality in three dimensions, and that applies to time as well as space. Jewish time has two rhythms at once.

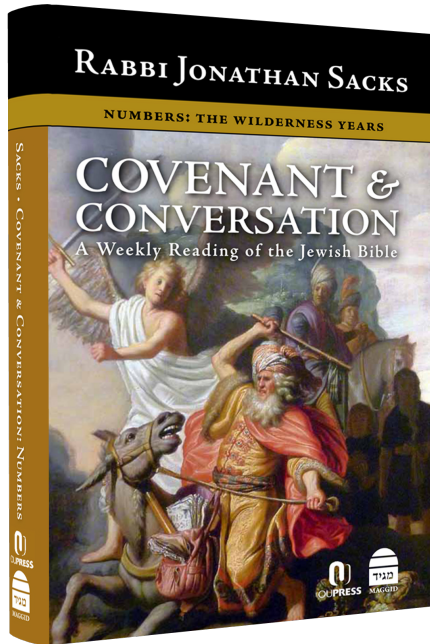
Judaism is to the spirit what Niels Bohr's complementarity theory is to quantum physics. In physics light is both a wave and a particle. In Judaism time is both historical and natural. Unexpected, counter-intuitive, certainly. But glorious in its refusal to simplify the rich complexity of time: the ticking clock, the growing plant, the ageing body and the ever-deepening mind.

**"We need two perspectives to be able to see reality in three dimensions, and that applies to time as well as space. Jewish time has two rhythms at once."**

Shabbat Shalom

A handwritten signature in blue ink, which appears to read "Jonathan Sacks". The signature is stylized, with a large loop at the beginning and a cursive script.

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