

COVENANT & Conversation

A STUDY OF THE PARSHA WITH RABBI SACKS

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— RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS



THE MAURICE WOHL
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Moses the Man

Ha'azinu 2017 / 5778

That very day the Lord spoke to Moses, "Go up this mountain of the Abarim, Mount Nebo, which is in the land of Moab, opposite Jericho, and view the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the people of Israel for a possession. And die on the mountain which you go up, and be gathered to your people ...For you will see the land only from a distance; you will not enter the land I am giving to the people of Israel."

With these words there draws to a close the life of the greatest hero the Jewish people has ever known: Moses, the leader, the liberator, the lawgiver, the man who brought a group of slaves to freedom, turned a fractious collection of individuals into a nation, and so transformed them that they became the people of eternity.

It was Moses who mediated with God, performed signs and wonders, gave the people its laws, fought with them when they sinned, fought for them when praying for Divine forgiveness, gave his life to them and had his heart broken by them when they repeatedly failed to live up to his great expectations.

Each age has had its own image of Moses. For the more mystically inclined sages Moses was the man who ascended to Heaven at the time of the giving of the Torah, where he had to contend with the Angels who opposed the idea that this precious gift be given to mere mortals. God told Moses to answer them, which he did decisively. *"Do angels work that they need a day of rest? Do they have parents that they need to be commanded to honour them? Do they have an evil inclination that they need to be told, 'Do not commit adultery?'"* (Shabbat 88a). Moses the Man out-argues the Angels.

Other Sages were more radical still. For them Moses was Rabbenu, "our Rabbi" – not a king, a political or military leader, but a scholar and master of the law, a role which they invested with astonishing authority. They went so far as to say that when Moses prayed for God to forgive the people for the Golden Calf, God replied, *"I*

cannot, for I have already vowed, “One who sacrifices to any God shall be destroyed” (Ex. 22:19), and I cannot revoke My vow.” Moses replied, “Master of the Universe, have You not taught me the laws of annulling vows? One may not annul his own vow, but a Sage may do so.” Moses thereupon annulled God’s vow (Shemot Rabbah 43:4).

For Philo, the 1st century Jewish philosopher from Alexandria, Moses was a philosopher-king of the type depicted in Plato’s *Republic*. He governs the nation, organises its laws, institutes its rites and conducts himself with dignity and honour; he is wise, stoical and self-controlled. This is, as it were, a Greek Moses, looking not unlike Michelangelo’s famous sculpture.

For Maimonides, Moses was radically different from all other prophets in four ways. First, others received their prophecies in dreams or visions, while Moses received his when awake. Second, to the others God spoke in parables obliquely, but to Moses He spoke directly and lucidly. Third, the other prophets were terrified when God appeared to them but of Moses it says, “Thus the Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend” (Ex. 33:11). Fourth, other prophets needed to undergo lengthy preparations to hear the Divine word; Moses spoke to God whenever he wanted or needed to. He was “always prepared, like one of the ministering angels” (Laws of the Foundations of Torah 7:6).

Yet what is so moving about the portrayal of Moses in the Torah is that he appears before us as quintessentially human. No religion has more deeply and systemically insisted on the absolute otherness of God and Man, Heaven and Earth, the infinite and the finite. Other cultures have blurred the boundary, making some human beings seem godlike, perfect, infallible. There is such a tendency – marginal to be sure, but never entirely absent – within Jewish life itself: to see sages as saints, great scholars as angels, to gloss over their doubts and shortcomings and turn them into superhuman emblems of perfection. Tanakh, however, is greater than that. It tells us that God, who is never less than God, never asks us to be more than simply human.

“God, who is never less than God, never asks us to be more than simply human”

Moses is a human being. We see him despair and want to die. We see him lose his temper. We see him on the brink of losing his faith in the people he has been called on to lead. We see him beg to be allowed to cross the Jordan and enter the land he has spent his life as a leader travelling toward. Moses is the hero of those who wrestle with the world as it is and with people as they are, knowing that “It is not for you to complete the task, but neither are you free to stand aside from it.”

The Torah insists that “to this day no one knows where his grave is” (Deut. 34:6), to avoid his grave being made a place of pilgrimage or worship. It is all too easy to turn human beings, after their death, into saints and demigods. That is precisely what the Torah opposes. “Every human being” writes Maimonides in his Laws of Repentance (5:2), “can be as righteous as Moses or as wicked as Jeroboam.”

Moses does not exist in Judaism as an object of worship but as a role model for each of us to aspire to. He is the eternal symbol of a human being made great by what he strove for, not by what he actually achieved. The titles conferred by him in the Torah, “the man Moses,” “God’s servant,” “a man of God,” are all the more impressive for their modesty. Moses continues to inspire.

On 3 April 1968, Martin Luther King delivered a sermon in a church in Memphis, Tennessee. At the end of his address, he turned to the last day of Moses' life, when the man who had led his people to freedom was taken by God to a mountain-top from which he could see in the distance the land he was not destined to enter. That, said King, was how he felt that night:

I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight that we, as a people, will get to the promised land.

That night was the last of his life. The next day he was assassinated. At the end, the still young Christian preacher – he was not yet forty – who had led the civil rights movement in the United States, identified not with a Christian figure but with Moses.

In the end the power of Moses' story is precisely that it affirms our mortality. There are many explanations of why Moses was not allowed to enter the Promised Land. I have argued that it was simply because “each generation has its leaders” (Avodah Zarah 5a) and the person who has the ability to lead a people out of slavery is not necessarily the one who has the requisite skills to lead the next generation into its own and very different challenges. There is no one ideal form of leadership that is right for all times and situations.

Franz Kafka gave voice to a different and no less compelling truth:

He is on the track of Canaan all his life; it is incredible that he should see the land only when on the verge of death. This dying vision of it can only be intended to illustrate how incomplete a moment is human life; incomplete because a life like this could last forever and still be nothing but a moment. Moses fails to enter Canaan not because his life was too short but because it is a human life.¹

What then does the story of Moses tell us? That it is right to fight for justice even against regimes that seem indestructible. That God is with us when we take our stand against oppression. That we must have faith in those we lead, and when we cease to have faith in them we can no longer lead them. That change, though slow, is real, and that people are transformed by high ideals even though it may take centuries.

“Change, though slow, is real, and people are transformed by high ideals”

In one of its most powerful statements about Moses, the Torah states that he was “*one hundred and twenty years old when he died, yet his eyes were undimmed and his strength unabated*” (34:8). I used to think that these were merely two sequential phrases, until I realised that the first was the explanation for the second. Why was Moses' strength unabated? Because his eyes were undimmed – because he never lost the ideals of his youth. Though he sometimes lost faith in himself and his ability to lead, he never lost faith in the cause: in God, service, freedom, the right, the good and the holy. His words at the end of his life were as impassioned as they had been at the beginning.

¹ Franz Kafka, Diaries 1914 – 1923, ed. Max Brod, trans. Martin Greenberg and Hannah Arendt, New York, Schocken, 1965, 195-96.

That is Moses, the man who refused to “*go gently into that dark night*”, the eternal symbol of how a human being, without ever ceasing to be human, can become a giant of the moral life. That is the greatness and the humility of aspiring to be “a servant of God.”

“A human being, without ever ceasing to be human, can become a giant of the moral life”

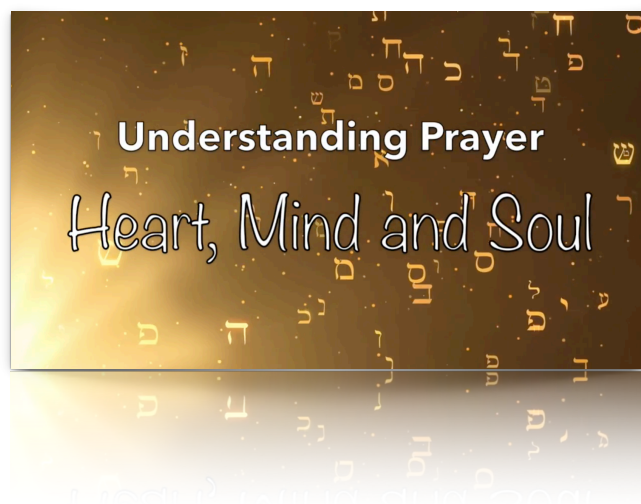
Shabbat Shalom.



On behalf of Rabbi Sacks, Elaine and all of us at The Office of Rabbi Sacks,
we wish you a Shana tova u'metukah.

May this year be one of peace, health, happiness and success for you,
for your family and for all of Am Yisrael.

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