

# COVENANT & CONVERSATION

LIFE-CHANGING IDEAS IN 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

## Miles to Go Before I Sleep

Matot-Masei 2018 / 5778

Etre ailleurs, “To be elsewhere – the great vice of this race, its great and secret virtue, the great vocation of this people.” So wrote the French poet and essayist Charles Peguy (1873-1914), a philosemite in an age of Anti-Semitism. He continued: “Any crossing for them means the crossing of the desert. The most comfortable houses, the best built from stones as big as the temple pillars, the most real of real estate, the most overwhelming of apartment houses will never mean more to them than a tent in the desert.”<sup>1</sup>

What he meant was that history and destiny had combined to make Jews aware of the temporariness of any dwelling outside the Holy Land. To be a Jew is to be on a journey. That is how the Jewish story began when Abraham first heard the words “Lech Lecha”, with their call to leave where he was and travel “to the land I will show you.” That is how it began again in the days of Moses, when the family had become a people. And that is the point almost endlessly repeated in parshat Masei: “They set out from X and camped at Y. They set out from Y and camped at Z” – 42 stages in a journey of forty years. We are the people who travel. We are the people who do not stand still. We are the people for whom time itself is a journey through the wilderness in search of the Promised Land.

In one sense this is a theme familiar from the world of myth. In many cultures, stories are told about the journey of the hero. Otto Rank, one of Freud’s most brilliant colleagues, wrote about it. So did Joseph

<sup>1</sup> Charles Peguy, Basic Verities, New York, Pantheon, 1943, 141.

Campbell, a Jungian, in his book, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Nonetheless, the Jewish story is different in significant ways:

[1] The journey – set out in the books of Shemot and Bamidbar – is undertaken by everyone, the entire people: men, women and children. It is as if, in Judaism, we are all heroes, or at least all summoned to an heroic challenge.

[2] It takes longer than a single generation. Perhaps, had the spies not demoralised the nation with their report, it might have taken only a short while. But there is a deeper and more universal truth here. The move from slavery to the responsibilities of freedom takes time. People do not change overnight. Therefore evolution succeeds; revolution fails. The Jewish journey began before we were born and it is our responsibility to hand it on to those who will continue it after us.

[3] In myth, the hero usually encounters a major trial: an adversary, a dragon, a dark force. He (it is usually a he) may even die and be resurrected. As Campbell puts it: “A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.”<sup>2</sup> The Jewish story is different. The adversary the Israelites encounter is themselves: their fears, their weaknesses, their constant urge to return and regress.

It seems to me, here as so often elsewhere, that the Torah is not myth but anti-myth, a deliberate insistence on removing the magical elements from the story and focussing relentlessly on the human drama of courage versus fear, hope versus despair, and the call, not to some larger-than-life hero but to all-of-us-together, given strength by our ties to our people's past and the bonds between us in the present. The Torah is not some fabled escape from reality but reality itself, seen as a journey we must all undertake, each with our own strengths and contributions to our people and to humanity.

**“The Torah is reality, seen as a journey we must all undertake, each with our own strengths and contributions to our people and to humanity.”**

We are all on a journey. And we must all rest from time to time. That dialectic between setting out and encamping, walking and standing still, is part of the rhythm of Jewish life. There is a time for Nitzavim, standing, and a time for Vayelekh, moving on. Rav Kook spoke of the two symbols in Bilaam's blessing, “How goodly are

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<sup>2</sup> Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, New World Library, 2008, 23.

your tents, Jacob, and your dwelling places, Israel.” Tents are for people on a journey. Dwelling places are for people who have found home.

Psalm 1 uses two symbols of the righteous individual. On the one hand he or she is on the way, while the wicked begin by walking, then transition to standing and sitting. On the other hand, the righteous is compared to a tree, planted by streams of water, that gives fruit in due season and whose leaves do not wither. We walk, but we also stand still. We are on a journey but we are also rooted like a tree.

In life, there are journeys and encampments. Without the encampments, we suffer burnout. Without the journey, we do not grow. And life is growth. There is no way to avoid challenge and change. The late Rav Aharon Lichtenstein zt”l once gave a beautiful shiur<sup>3</sup> on Robert Frost’s poem, ‘Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening,’ with its closing verse:

*The woods are lovely dark and deep,  
But I have promises to keep,  
And miles to go before I sleep,  
And miles to go before I sleep.*

He analyses the poem in terms of Kierkegaard’s distinction between the aesthetic and ethical dimensions of life. The poet is enchanted by the aesthetic beauty of the scene, the soft silence of the falling snow, the dark dignity of the tall trees. He would love to stay here in this timeless moment, this eternity-in-an-hour. But he knows that life has an ethical dimension also, and this demands action, not just contemplation. He has promises to keep; he has duties toward the world. So he must walk on despite his tiredness. He has miles to go before he sleeps: he has work to do while the breath of life is within him.

The poet has stopped briefly to enjoy the dark wood and falling snow. He has encamped. But now, like the Israelites in Masei, he must set out again. For us as Jews, as for Kierkegaard the theologian and Robert Frost the poet, ethics takes priority over aesthetics. Yes, there are moments when we should, indeed must, pause to see the beauty of the world, but then we must move on, for we have promises to keep, including the promises to ourselves and to God.

**“There are moments when we should, indeed must, pause to see the beauty of the world, but then we must move on.”**

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<sup>3</sup> <http://etzion.org.il/en/woods-are-lovely-dark-and-deep-reading-poem-robert-frost>

Hence the life-changing idea: life is a journey, not a destination. We should never stand still. Instead we should constantly set ourselves new challenges that take us out of our comfort zone. Life is growth.

Shabbat shalom.



### LIFE-CHANGING IDEA #38

Life is a journey, not a destination. We should constantly set ourselves new challenges that take us out of our comfort zone. Life is growth.

## LIFE-CHANGING IDEAS IN SEFER BAMIDBAR

- **BAMIDBAR:** Remember your destination. This will help you to distinguish between an opportunity to be seized and a temptation to be resisted.
- **NASO:** You are as important as you make other people feel.
- **BEHA'ALOTECHA:** We tend to become what our friends are. So choose friends who are what you aspire to be.
- **SHELACH LECHA:** Never let negative emotions distort your perceptions. To see the world as it is, not as you are afraid it might be, let faith banish fear.
- **KORACH:** If you seek to learn, grow, pursue truth and find freedom, seek places that welcome argument and respect dissenting views.
- **CHUKAT:** Life lives in the tension between our physical smallness and our spiritual greatness. Life is short, but when we lift our eyes to heaven, we walk tall.
- **BALAK:** By being what only we are, we contribute to humanity what only we can give.
- **PINCHAS:** If we truly wish to hand on our legacy to our children, we must teach them to love it.
- **MATOT-MASEI:** Life is a journey, not a destination. We should constantly set ourselves new challenges that take us out of our comfort zone. Life is growth.



The Office of Rabbi Sacks

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