



COVENANT & CONVERSATION

בס"ד

THOUGHTS ON THE WEEKLY PARSHA
FROM RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

בראשית תשע"ט

Toldot 5779



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**** NEW FOR 5779 ****

COVENANT & CONVERSATION: FAMILY EDITION

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The Courage of Persistence

There is a strange passage in the life of Isaac, ominous in its foreshadowing of much of later Jewish history. Like Abraham, Isaac finds himself forced by famine to go to Gerar, in the land of the Philistines. There, like Abraham, he senses that his life may be in danger because he is married to a beautiful woman. He fears that he will be killed so that Rebecca can be taken into the harem of king Avimelekh. The couple pass themselves off as brother and sister. The deception is discovered, Avimelekh is indignant, explanations are made, and the moment passes. Genesis 26 reads almost like a replay of Genesis 20, a generation later.

In both cases Avimelekh promises the patriarchs security. To Abraham he said, "My land is before you; live wherever you like" (20:15). About Isaac, he commands, "Anyone who molests this man or his wife shall surely be put to death" (26:11). Yet in both cases, there is a troubled aftermath. In Genesis 21 we read about an argument that arose over a well that Abraham had dug: "Then Abraham complained to Avimelekh about a well of water that Avimelekh's servants had seized" (21:25). The two men make a treaty. Yet, as we now discover, this was not sufficient to prevent further difficulties in the days of Isaac:

Isaac planted crops in that land and the same year reaped a hundredfold, because the Lord blessed him. The man became rich, and his wealth continued to grow until he became very wealthy. He had so many flocks and herds and servants that the Philistines envied him. So all the wells that his father's servants had dug in the time of his father Abraham, the Philistines stopped up, filling them with earth.

Then Avimelekh said to Isaac, "Move away from us; you have become too powerful for us."

So Isaac moved away from there and encamped in the Valley of Gerar and settled there. Isaac reopened the wells that had been dug in the time of his father Abraham, which the Philistines had stopped up after Abraham died, and he gave them the same names his father had given them.

Isaac's servants dug in the valley and discovered a well of fresh water there. But the herdsmen of Gerar quarrelled with Isaac's herdsmen and said, "The water is ours!" So he named the well Esek, because they disputed with him. Then they dug another well, but they quarrelled over that one also; so he named it Sitnah. He moved on from there and dug another well, and no one quarrelled over it. He named it Rehovot, saying, "Now the Lord has given us room and we will flourish in the land." (26:12-22)

There are three aspects of this passage worthy of careful attention. The first is the intimation it gives us of what will later be the turning point of the fate of the Israelites in Egypt. Avimelekh says, “you have become *too powerful* for us.” Centuries later, Pharaoh says, at the beginning of the book of Exodus, “Behold, the people of the children of Israel are greater in number and *power* than we are. Come on, let us deal wisely with them, lest they multiply and it come to pass, when there befall any war, that they join also with our enemies and fight against us, and so get them up out of the land” (1:9–10). The same word, *atzum*, “power/ powerful,” appears in both cases. Our passage signals the birth of one of the deadliest of human phenomena, antisemitism.

Antisemitism is in some respects unique. It is, in Robert Wistrich’s phrase, the world’s longest hatred.¹ No other prejudice has lasted so long, mutated so persistently, attracted such demonic myths, or had such devastating effects. But in other respects it is not unique, and we must try to understand it as best we can.

One of the best books about antisemitism, is in fact not about antisemitism at all, but about similar phenomena in other contexts, Amy Chua’s *World on Fire*.² Her thesis is that any conspicuously successful minority will attract envy that may deepen into hate and provoke violence. All three of the following conditions are essential. The hated group must be *conspicuous*, for otherwise it would not be singled out. It must be *successful*, for otherwise it would not be envied. And it must be a *minority*, for otherwise it would not be attacked.

All three conditions were present in the case of Isaac. He was conspicuous: he was not a Philistine, he was different from the local population as an outsider, a stranger, someone with a different faith. He was successful: his crops had succeeded a hundredfold, his flocks and herds were large, and the people envied him. And he was a minority: a single family in the midst of the local population. All the ingredients were present for the distillation of hostility and hate.

“Any conspicuously successful minority will attract envy that may deepen into hate and provoke violence.”

There is more. Another profound insight into the conditions that give rise to antisemitism was given by Hannah Arendt in her book *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (the section has been published separately as *Anti-Semitism*).³ Hostility to Jews becomes dangerous, she argued, not when Jews are strong, but when they are weak.

This is deeply paradoxical because, on the face of it, the opposite is true. A single thread runs from the Philistines’ reaction to Isaac and Pharaoh’s to the Israelites, to the myth concocted in the late nineteenth century, known as *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.⁴ It says that Jews are powerful, too powerful. They control resources. They are a threat. They must be removed.

Yet, says Arendt, antisemitism did not become dangerous until they had lost the power they had once had:

When Hitler came to power, the German banks were already almost *Judenrein* (and it was here that Jews had held key positions for more than a hundred years) and German Jewry as a whole, after a long steady growth in social status and numbers, was declining so rapidly that statisticians predicted its disappearance in a few decades.⁵

The same was true in France:

¹ Robert S. Wistrich, *Anti-Semitism: The Longest Hatred* (New York: Schocken, 1991).

² Amy Chua, *World on Fire: How Exporting Free Market Democracy Breeds Ethnic Hatred and Global Instability* (New York: Anchor Books, 2004).

³ Hannah Arendt, *Anti-Semitism* (part one of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*), (Harcourt Brace and Company, 1979).

⁴ *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* was a forgery, produced by a Russian journalist at the end of the nineteenth century, claiming that there was a Jewish conspiracy to achieve world domination. The classic work on the subject is Norman Cohn, *Warrant for Genocide: The Myth of the Jewish World-Conspiracy and the Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966). See also Hadassa Ben-Itto, *The Lie That Wouldn’t Die: The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2005).

⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.

*The Dreyfus affair exploded not under the Second Empire, when French Jewry was at the height of its prosperity and influence, but under the Third Republic when Jews had all but vanished from important positions.*⁶

Antisemitism is a complex, protean phenomenon because antisemites must be able to hold together two beliefs that seem to contradict one another: Jews are so powerful that they should be feared, and at the same time so powerless that they can be attacked without fear.

It would seem that no one could be so irrational as to believe both of these things simultaneously. But emotions are not rational, despite the fact that they are often rationalised, for there is a world of difference between *rationality* and *rationalisation* (the attempt to give rational justification for irrational beliefs).

“Antisemitism is a complex, protean phenomenon because antisemites must be able to hold together two beliefs that seem to contradict one another...”

So, for example, in the twenty-first century we can find that (a) Western media are almost universally hostile to Israel, and (b) otherwise intelligent people claim that the media are controlled by Jews who support Israel: the same inner contradiction of perceived powerlessness and ascribed power.

Arendt summarises her thesis in a single, telling phrase which links her analysis to that of Amy Chua. What gives rise to antisemitism is, she says, the phenomenon of “wealth without power.” That was precisely the position of Isaac among the Philistines.

There is a second aspect of our passage that has had reverberations through the centuries: the self-destructive nature of hate. The Philistines did not ask Isaac to share his water with them. They did not ask him to teach them how he (and his father) had discovered a source of water that they – residents of the place – had not. They did not even simply ask him to move on. They “stopped up” the wells, “filling them with earth.” This act harmed them more than it harmed Isaac. It robbed them of a resource that would, in any case, have become theirs, once the famine had ended and Isaac had returned home.

More than hate destroys the hated, it destroys the hater. In this case too, Isaac and the Philistines were a portent of what would eventually happen to the Israelites in Egypt. By the time of the plague of locusts, we read:

Pharaoh’s officials said to him, “How long will this man be a snare to us? Let the people go, so that they may worship the Lord their God. *Do you not yet realise that Egypt is ruined?*” (Exodus 10:7)

In effect they said to Pharaoh: you may think you are harming the Israelites. In fact you are harming us.

Both love and hate, said Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, “upset the natural order” (*mekalkalet et hashurah*).⁷ They are irrational. They make us do things we would not do otherwise. In today’s Middle East, as so often before, those intent on destroying their enemies end by doing great harm to their own interests, their own people.

Third, Isaac’s response remains the correct one today. Defeated once, he tries again. He digs another well; this too yields opposition. So he moves on and tries again, and eventually finds peace.

How fitting it is that the town that today carries the name Isaac gave the site of this third well, is the home of the Weizmann Institute of Science, the Faculty of Agriculture of the Hebrew University, and the Kaplan hospital, allied to the Medical School of the Hebrew University. Israel Belkind, one of the founders of the settlement in 1890, called it

⁶ Ibid., 4–5.

⁷ Bereishit Rabbah 55:8.

Rehovot precisely because of the verse in our *parsha*: “He named it Rehovot, saying, Now the Lord has given us room and we will flourish in the land.”

Isaac is the least original of the three patriarchs. His life lacks the drama of Abraham or the struggles of Jacob. We see in this passage that Isaac himself did not strive to be original. The text is unusually emphatic on the point: Isaac “reopened the wells that had been dug in the time of his father Abraham, which the Philistines had stopped up after Abraham died, and he *gave them the same names* his father had given them.” Normally we strive to individuate ourselves by differentiating ourselves from our parents. We do things differently, or even if we don’t, we give them different names. Isaac was not like this. He was content to be a link in the chain of generations, faithful to what his father had started. Isaac represents the faith of persistence, the courage of continuity. He was the first Jewish child, and he represents the single greatest challenge of being a Jewish child: to continue the journey our ancestors began, rather than drifting from it, thereby bringing the journey to an end before it has reached its destination. And Isaac, because of that faith, was able to achieve the most elusive of goals, namely peace – because he never gave up. When one effort failed, he began again. So it is with all great achievements: one part originality, nine parts persistence.

I find it moving that Isaac, who underwent so many trials, from the binding when he was young, to the rivalry between his sons when he was old and blind, carries a name that means, “He will laugh.” Perhaps the name – given to him by God Himself before Isaac was born – means what the Psalm means when it says, “Those who sow in tears will reap with joy” (126:5). Faith means the courage to persist through all the setbacks, all the grief, never giving up, never accepting defeat. For at the end, despite the opposition, the envy and the hate, lie the broad spaces, Rehovot, and the laughter, Isaac: the serenity of the destination after the storms along the way.

“Faith means the courage to persist through all the setbacks, all the grief, never giving up, never accepting defeat.”

Shabbat shalom

Jonathan Sacks



www.rabbisacks.org     @rabbisacks

The Office of Rabbi Sacks, PO Box 72007, London, NW6 6RW
+44 (0)20 7286 6391 • info@rabbisacks.org

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