



COVENANT & CONVERSATION

THOUGHTS ON THE WEEKLY PARSHA
FROM RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

בס"ד

ויצא תשע"ט

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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

COVENANT & CONVERSATION: FAMILY EDITION

Covenant & Conversation: Family Edition is a new and exciting initiative. Written as an accompaniment to Rabbi Sacks' weekly *Covenant & Conversation* essay, the *Family Edition* is aimed at connecting older children and teenagers with his ideas and thoughts on the *parsha*. To download the accompanying Family Edition to this *Covenant & Conversation* essay, please visit www.RabbiSacks.org/CCFamilyEdition or make sure you are subscribed to Rabbi Sacks' free mailing list via www.RabbiSacks.org/Subscribe and you will receive the link each week in your inbox.

When the 'I' is Silent

This week's *parsha* relates a powerful, primal vision of prayer: Jacob, alone and far from home, lies down for the night, with only stones for a pillow, and dreams of a ladder, with angels ascending and descending. This is the initial encounter with the "house of God" that would one day become the synagogue, the first dream of a "gate of heaven" that would allow access to a God that stands above, letting us know finally that "God is truly in this place."

There is, though, one nuance in the text that is lost in translation, and it took the Hassidic masters to remind us of it. Hebrew verbs carry with them, in their declensions, an indication of their subject. Thus the word *yadati* means "I knew," and *lo yadati*, "I did not know." When Jacob wakes from his sleep, however, he says, "Surely the Lord is in this place *ve'anokhi lo yadati*." *Anokhi* means "I," which in this sentence is superfluous. To translate it literally we would have to say, "And I, I knew it not." Why the double "I"?

To this, Rabbi Pinchas Horowitz (Panim Yafot) gave a magnificent answer. How, he asks, do we come to know that

"Only when we stop thinking about ourselves do we become truly open to the world and the Creator."

"God is in this place"? "By *ve'anokhi lo yadati* – not knowing the I." We know God when we forget the self. We sense the "Thou" of the Divine Presence when we move beyond the "I" of egocentricity.

Only when we stop thinking about ourselves do we become truly open to the world and the Creator. In this insight lies an answer to some of the great questions about prayer: What difference does it make? Does it really change God? Surely God does not change. Besides which, does not prayer contradict the most fundamental principle of faith, which is that we are called on to do God's will rather than ask God to do ours? What really happens when we pray?

Prayer has two dimensions, one mysterious, the other not. There are simply too many cases of prayers being answered for us to deny that it makes a difference to our fate. It does. I once heard the following story. A man in a Nazi concentration camp lost the will to live – and in the death camps, if you lost the will to live, you died. That night he poured out his heart in prayer. The next morning, he was transferred to work in the camp kitchen. There he was able, when the guards were not looking, to steal some potato peelings. It was these peelings that kept him alive. I heard this story from his son.

Perhaps each of us has some such story. In times of crisis we cry out from the depths of our soul, and something happens. Sometimes we only realise it later, looking back. Prayer makes a difference to the world – but how it does so is mysterious.

There is, however, a second dimension which is non-mysterious. Less than prayer changes the world, it changes us. The Hebrew verb *lehitpallel*, meaning “to pray,” is reflexive, implying an action done to one- self. Literally, it means “to judge oneself.” It means, to escape from the prison of the self and see the world, including ourselves, from the outside. Prayer is where the relentless first person singular, the “I,” falls silent for a moment and we become aware that we are not the centre of the universe. There is a reality outside. That is a moment of transformation.

If we could only stop asking the question, “How does this affect me?” we would see that we are surrounded by miracles. There is the almost infinite complexity and beauty of the natural world. There is the Divine Word, our greatest legacy as Jews, the library of books we call the Bible. And there is the unparalleled drama, spreading over forty centuries, of the tragedies and triumphs that have befallen the Jewish people. Respectively, these represent the three dimensions of our knowledge of God: creation (God in nature), revelation (God in holy words) and redemption (God in history).

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Sometimes it takes a great crisis to make us realise how self-centred we have been. The only question strong enough to endow existence with meaning is not, “What do I need from life?” but “What does life need from me?” That is the question we hear when we truly pray. More than an act of speaking, prayer is an act of listening – to what God wants from us, here, now. What we discover – if we are able to create that silence in the soul – is that we are not alone. We are here because someone, the One, wanted us to be, and He has set us a task only we can do. We emerge strengthened, transformed.

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More than prayer changes God, it changes us. It lets us see, feel, know that “God is in this place.” How do we reach that awareness? By moving beyond the first person singular, so that for a moment, like Jacob, we can say, “I know not the I.” In the silence of the “I,” we meet the “Thou” of God.

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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The theme this week is prayer. Here is an extract from
Unit 2 of Ten Paths to God: “Prayer: Speaking to God”

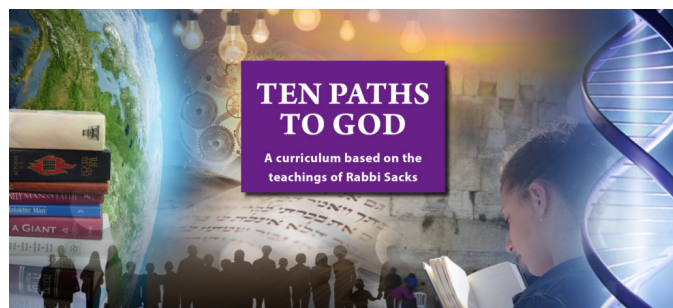
“Prayer is our intimate dialogue with Infinity, the profoundest expression of our faith that at the heart of reality is a Presence that cares, a God who listens, a creative Force that brought us into being in love. It is this belief more than any other that redeems life from solitude and fate from tragedy. The universe has a purpose. We have a purpose. However infinitesimal we are, however brief our stay on earth, we matter. The universe is more than particles of matter endlessly revolving in indifferent space. The human person is more than an accidental concatenation of genes blindly replicating themselves. Human life is more than ‘A tale, told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.’ Prayer gives meaning to existence.

It is possible to believe otherwise. There can be a life without faith or prayer, just as there can be a life without love, or laughter, or happiness, or hope. But it is a diminished thing, lacking dimensions of depth and aspiration. Descartes said, ‘I think, therefore I am.’ Judaism says, ‘I pray, therefore I am not alone.’

It takes courage to believe. Jews need no proof of the apparent injustice of events. It is written on the pages of our history. Jews had no power or earthly glory. For the better part of forty centuries our ancestors lived dispersed throughout the world, without a home, without rights, all too often experiencing persecution and pain. All they had was an invisible God and the line connecting us to Him: the siddur, the words of prayer. All they had was faith. In Judaism, we do not analyse our faith, we pray it. We do not philosophise about truth: we sing it, we daven it. For Judaism, faith becomes real when it becomes prayer.

In prayer we speak to a presence vaster than the unfathomable universe yet closer to us than we are to ourselves: the God beyond who is also the Voice within. Though language must fail when we try to describe a Being beyond all parameters of speech, yet language is all we have, and it is enough. For God who made the world with creative words, and who revealed His will in holy words, listens to our prayerful words. Language is the bridge that joins us to Infinity.

In prayer God becomes not a theory but a Presence, not a fact but a mode of relationship. Prayer is where God meets us, in the human heart, in our offering of words, in our acknowledged vulnerability.”



Ten Paths is a 10-unit curriculum on Judaism and Jewish identity based on traditional sources and the teachings of Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks. This curriculum is a resource that can be adapted and used by anyone involved in formal or informal Jewish education – in middle or high schools, for youth movements, on campuses, or as part of outreach organisations, synagogues and community centres. Parents and children can use it to learn together, or you can use it to learn individually or in pairs or groups.

Download it for free, and watch the video, when you visit: www.rabbisacks.org/tenpaths/