



# COVENANT & CONVERSATION

THOUGHTS ON THE WEEKLY PARSHA  
FROM RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

בס"ד



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וארא תשע"ט  
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## COVENANT & CONVERSATION: FAMILY EDITION

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## The God Who Acts in History

The Israelites were at their lowest ebb. They had been enslaved. A decree had been issued that every male child was to be killed. Moses had been sent to liberate them, but the first effect of his intervention was to make matters worse, not better. Their quota of brick-making remained unchanged, but now they also had to provide their own straw. Initially they had believed Moses when he performed the signs God had given him and told them that God was about to rescue them. Now they turned against Moses and Aaron, accusing them:

*"May the Lord look upon you and judge you! You have made us a stench to Pharaoh and his officials and have put a sword in their hand to kill us."* (Exodus 5:20–21)

At this point Moses – who had been so reluctant to take on the mission – turned to God in protest and anguish: *"O Lord, why have You brought trouble upon this people? Is this why You sent me? Ever since I went to Pharaoh to speak in Your name, he has brought trouble upon this people, and You have not rescued Your people at all."* (Exodus 5:22)

None of this, however, was accidental. The Torah is preparing the ground for one of its most monumental propositions: In the darkest night, Israel was about to have its greatest encounter with God. Hope was to be born at the very edge of the abyss of despair. There was nothing natural about this, nothing inevitable. No logic can give rise to hope; no law of history charts a path from slavery to redemption. The entire sequence of events was a prelude to the single most formative moment in the history of Israel: the intervention of God in history – the supreme Power intervening on behalf of the supremely powerless, not (as in every other culture) to endorse the status quo, but to overturn it.

God tells Moses: *"I am Hashem, and I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. I will free you from being slaves to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment. I will take you as My own people, and I will be your God"* (Ex.6:6-7). The entire speech is full of interest, but what will concern us – as it has successive generations of interpreters – is what God tells Moses at the outset: *"I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob as God Almighty [E-l Shaddai], but by*

*My name Hashem I was not known to them*” (Ex. 6:3). A fundamental distinction is being made between the experience the patriarchs had of God, and the experience the Israelites were about to have. Something new, unprecedented, was about to happen. What is it?

**“The entire sequence of events was a prelude to the single most formative moment... the intervention of God in history”**

Clearly it had to do with the names by which God is known. The verse distinguishes between E-l Shaddai (“God Almighty”) and the four-letter name of God which, because of its sanctity, Jewish tradition refers to simply as Hashem – “the name” par excellence.

As the classic Jewish commentators point out, the verse must be read with great care. It does not say that the patriarchs “did not know” this name; nor does it say that God did not “make this name known” to them. The name Hashem appears no less than 165 times in the book of Genesis. God Himself uses the phrase “I am Hashem” to both Abraham (Genesis 15:7) and Jacob (28:13). What, then, is new about the revelation of God that was about to happen in the days of Moses that had never happened before?

The Sages give various explanations. A Midrash says that God is known as *Elokim* when He judges human beings, *E-l Shaddai* when He suspends judgment and *Hashem* when He shows mercy.<sup>1</sup> Judah Halevi in *The Kuzari*, and Ramban in his *Commentary*, say that *Hashem* refers to God when He performs miracles that suspend the laws of nature.<sup>2</sup> However, Rashi’s explanation is the simplest and most elegant:

*It is not written here, “[My name, Hashem] I did not make known to them” but rather “[By the name, Hashem] I was not known to them” – meaning, I was not recognised by them in My attribute of “keeping faith,” by reason of which My name is “Hashem,” namely that I am faithful to fulfil My word, for I made promises to them but I did not fulfil them [during their lifetime].*<sup>3</sup>

The patriarchs had received promises from God. They would multiply and become a nation. They would inherit a land. Neither of these promises were realised in their lifetime. To the contrary, as Genesis reaches its close, the family of the patriarchs numbered a mere seventy souls. They had not yet acquired a land. They were in exile in Egypt. But now the fulfilment was about to begin.

Already, in the first chapter of Exodus, we hear, for the first time, the phrase *Am Bnei Yisrael*, “the people of the children of Israel” (Ex. 1:9). Israel was no longer a family, but a people. Moses at the burning bush was told by God that He was about to bring the people to “a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey” (Ex. 3:8). Hashem therefore means the God who acts in history to fulfil His promises.

This was something radically new – not just to Israel but to humanity as a whole. Until then, God (or the gods) was known through nature. God was in the sun, the stars, the rain, the storm, the fertility of the fields and the sequence of the seasons. When there was drought and famine, the gods were being angry. When there was produce in plenty, the gods were showing favour. The gods were nature personified. Never before had God intervened in history, to rescue a people from slavery and set them on the path to freedom. This was a revolution, at once political and intellectual.

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<sup>1</sup> Shemot Rabbah 3:6

<sup>2</sup> Judah Halevi, *Kuzari* 2:2. Ramban, commentary to Exodus 6:2.

<sup>3</sup> Rashi commentary to Exodus 6:3.

To most humans at most times, there seems to be no meaning in history. We live, we die, and it is as if we had never been. The universe gives no sign of any interest in our existence. If that was so in ancient times, when people believed in the existence of gods, how much more so is it true today for the neo-Darwinians who see life as no more than the operation of “chance and necessity” ( Jacques Monod) or “the blind watchmaker” (Richard Dawkins).<sup>4</sup> Time seems to obliterate all meaning. Nothing lasts. Nothing endures.<sup>5</sup>

In ancient Israel, by contrast, “for the first time, the prophets placed a value on history...For the first time, we find affirmed and increasingly accepted the idea that historical events have a value in themselves, insofar as they are determined by the will of God...Historical facts thus become situations of man in respect to God, and as such they acquire a religious value that nothing had previously been able to confer on them. It may, then, be said with truth that the Hebrews were the first to discover the meaning of history as the epiphany of God.”<sup>6</sup> Judaism is humanity’s first glimpse of history as more than a mere succession of happenings – as nothing less than a drama of redemption in which the fate of a nation reflects its loyalty or otherwise to a covenant with God.

It is hard to recapture this turning point in the human imagination, just as it is hard for us to imagine what it was like for people first to encounter Copernicus’ discovery that the earth went round the sun. It must have been a terrifying threat to all who believed that the earth did not move; that it was the one stable point in a shifting universe. So it was with time. The ancients believed that nothing really changed. Time was, in Plato’s phrase, no more than the “moving image of eternity.” That was the certainty that gave people solace. The times may be out of joint, but eventually things will return to the way they were.

**“Judaism is humanity’s first glimpse of history as... the drama of redemption in which the fate of a nation reflects its loyalty to a covenant with God.”**

To think of history as an arena of change is terrifying likewise. It means that what happened once may never happen again; that we are embarked on a journey with no assurance that we will ever return to where we began. It is what Milan Kundera meant in his phrase, “the unbearable lightness of being.”<sup>7</sup> Only profound faith – a new kind of faith, breaking with the entire world of ancient mythology – could give people the courage to set out on a journey to the unknown.

That is the meaning of Hashem: the God who intervenes in history. As Judah Halevi points out, the Ten Commandments begin not with the words “I am the Lord your God who created heaven and earth,” but “I am the Lord your God who brought you out from Egypt, from the house of slavery.” *Elokim* is God as we encounter Him in nature and creation, but *Hashem* is God as revealed in history, in the liberation of the Israelites from slavery and Egypt.

I find it moving that this is precisely what many non-Jewish observers have concluded. This, for example, is the verdict of the Russian thinker Nikolai Berdyaev:

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<sup>4</sup> Jacques Monod, *Chance and Necessity* (New York: Vintage, 1972); Richard Dawkins, *The Blind Watchmaker* (New York: Norton, 1996)

<sup>5</sup> We even find this sentiment in one place in Tanakh, in Kohelet (Ecclesiastes): “Man’s fate is like that of the animals; the same fate awaits them both; as one dies so does the other.... Everything is meaningless” (Ecclesiastes 3:19).

<sup>6</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Cosmos and History*, New York, Harper & Row, 1959, 104.

<sup>7</sup> Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (London: Faber, 1984)

*I remember how the materialist interpretation of history, when I attempted in my youth to verify it by applying it to the destinies of peoples, broke down in the case of the Jews, where destiny seemed absolutely inexplicable from the materialistic standpoint...Its survival is a mysterious and wonderful phenomenon demonstrating that the life of this people is governed by a special predetermination, transcending the processes of adaptation expounded by the materialistic interpretation of history. The survival of the Jews, their resistance to destruction, their endurance under absolutely peculiar conditions and the fateful role played by them in history: all these point to the particular and mysterious foundations of their destiny.<sup>8</sup>*

That is what God tells Moses is about to be revealed: Hashem, meaning God as He intervenes in the arena of time, “so that My name may be declared throughout the world” (Ex. 9:16). The script of history would bear the mark of a hand not human, but divine. And it began with these words: “Therefore say to the Israelites: I am Hashem, and I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians.”

Shabbat shalom

**“Hashem is God as revealed in history, in the liberation of the Israelites from slavery and Egypt.”**

Jonathan Sacks

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<sup>8</sup> Nicolai Berdyaev, *The Meaning of History* (1936), 86–87