



# COVENANT & CONVERSATION

THOUGHTS ON THE WEEKLY PARSHA  
FROM RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

בס"ד

בהר 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 accompaniment to Rabbi Sacks' weekly *Covenant & Conversation* essay, 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](http://www.RabbiSacks.org/CCFamilyEdition) or subscribe to Rabbi Sacks' free mailing list via [www.RabbiSacks.org/Subscribe](http://www.RabbiSacks.org/Subscribe).

## Evolution or Revolution?

There are, it is sometimes said, no controlled experiments in history. Every society, every age, and every set of circumstances is unique. If so, there is no science of history. There are no universal rules to guide the destiny of nations. Yet this is not quite true. The history of the past four centuries does offer us something close to a controlled experiment, and the conclusion to be drawn is surprising.

The modern world was shaped by four revolutions: the English (1642–1651), the American (1776), the French (1789), and the Russian (1917). Their outcomes were radically different. In England and America, revolution brought war, but led to a gradual growth of civil liberties, human rights, representative government, and eventually, democracy. On the other hand, the French revolution gave rise to the “Reign of Terror” between 5 September 1793, and 28 July 1794, in which more than forty thousand enemies of the revolution were summarily executed by the guillotine. The Russian revolution led to one of the most repressive totalitarianism regimes in history. As many as twenty million people are estimated to have died unnatural deaths under Stalin between 1924 and 1953. In revolutionary France and the Soviet Union, the dream of utopia ended in a nightmare of hell.

What was the salient difference between them? There are multiple explanations. History is complex and it is wrong to simplify, but one detail in particular stands out. The English and American revolutions were inspired by the Hebrew Bible as read and interpreted by the Puritans. This happened because of the convergence of a number of factors in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: the Reformation, the invention of printing, the rise of literacy and the spread of books, and the availability of the Hebrew Bible in vernacular translations. For the first time, people could read the Bible for themselves, and what they discovered when they read the prophets and stories of civil disobedience like that of Shifrah and Puah, the Hebrew midwives, was that it is permitted, even sometimes necessary, to resist tyrants in the name of God. The political philosophy of the English revolutionaries and the Puritans who set sail for America in the 1620s and 1630s was dominated by the work of the Christian Hebraists who based their thought on the history of ancient Israel.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See Eric Nelson, *The Hebrew Republic: Jewish Sources and the Transformation of European Political Thought* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2010).

The French and Russian revolutions, by contrast, were hostile to religion and were inspired instead by philosophy: that of Jean-Jacques Rousseau in the case of France, and of Karl Marx in the case of Russia. There are obvious differences between Torah and philosophy. The most well-known is that one is based on revelation, the other on reason. Yet I suspect it was not this that made the difference to the course of revolutionary politics. Rather, it lay in their respective understandings of time.

Parshat Behar sets out a revolutionary template for a society of justice, freedom, and human dignity. At its core is the idea of the Jubilee, whose words (“Proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof”) are engraved on one of the great symbols of freedom, the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia. One of its provisions is the release of slaves:

**“Behar sets out a revolutionary template for a society of justice, freedom, and human dignity.”**

If your brother becomes impoverished and is sold to you, do not work him like a slave. He shall be with you like an employee or a resident. He shall serve you only until the Jubilee year and then he and his children shall be free to leave you and return to their family and to the hereditary land of their ancestors. For they are My servants whom I brought out of the land of Egypt; they shall not be sold as slaves... For the Children of Israel are servants to Me: they are My servants whom I brought out of the land of Egypt – I am the Lord, your God. (Lev. 25:39–42)

The terms of the passage are clear. Slavery is wrong. It is an assault on the human condition. To be “in the image of God” means to be summoned to a life of freedom. The very idea of the sovereignty of God means that He alone has claim to the service of humankind. Those who are God’s servants may not be slaves to anyone else. As Judah Halevi put it, “The servants of time are servants of servants. Only God’s servant alone is free.”<sup>2</sup>

At this distance of time it is hard to recapture the radicalism of this idea, overturning as it did the very foundations of religion in ancient times. The early civilisations – Mesopotamia, Egypt – were based on hierarchies of power which were seen to inhere in the very nature of the cosmos. Just as there were (so it was believed) ranks and gradations among the heavenly bodies, so there were on earth. The great religious rituals and monuments were designed to mirror and endorse these hierarchies. In this respect, Karl Marx was right. Religion in antiquity was the opium of the people. It was the robe of sanctity concealing the naked brutality of power. It canonised the status quo.

At the heart of Israel was an idea almost unthinkable to the ancient mind: that God intervenes in history to liberate slaves – that the supreme Power is on the side of the powerless. It is no accident that Israel was born as a nation under conditions of slavery. It has carried throughout history the memory of those years – the bread of affliction and the bitter herbs of servitude – because the people of Israel serves as an eternal reminder to itself and the world of the moral necessity of liberty and the vigilance needed to protect it. The free God desires the free worship of free human beings.

*Yet the Torah does not abolish slavery.* That is the paradox at the heart of Parshat Behar. To be sure, it was limited and humanised. Every seventh day, slaves were granted rest and a taste of freedom. In the seventh year, Israelite slaves were set free. If they chose otherwise they were released in the Jubilee year. During their years of service they were to be treated like employees. They were not to be subjected to back-breaking or spirit-crushing labour. Everything dehumanising about slavery was forbidden. Yet slavery itself was not banned.

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<sup>2</sup> *Ninety-Two Poems and Hymns of Judah Halevi*, trans. Thomas Kovach, Eva Jospe, and Gilya Gerda Schmidt (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2000), 124.

Why not? If it was wrong, it should have been annulled. Why did the Torah allow a fundamentally flawed institution to continue?

It is Moses Maimonides in *The Guide for the Perplexed* who explains the need for time in social transformation. All processes in nature, he argues, are gradual. The foetus develops slowly in the womb. Stage by stage, a child becomes mature. And what applies to individuals applies to nations and civilisations:

It is impossible to go suddenly from one extreme to the other. It is therefore, according to the nature of man, impossible for him suddenly to discontinue everything to which he has been accustomed.<sup>3</sup>

So God did not ask of the Israelites that they suddenly abandon everything they had become used to in Egypt. “God refrained from prescribing what the people by their natural disposition would be incapable of obeying.”

In miracles, God changes physical nature but never *human* nature. Were He to do so, the entire project of the Torah – the free worship of free human beings – would have been rendered null and void. There is no greatness in programming a million computers to obey instructions. God’s greatness lay in taking the risk of creating a being, Homo sapiens, capable of choice and responsibility and thus of freely obeying God.

God wanted humankind to abolish slavery, but by their own choice, in their own time. Slavery as such was not abolished in Britain and America until the nineteenth century, and in America, not without a civil war. The challenge to which Torah legislation was an answer is: how can one create a social structure in which, of their own accord, people will eventually come to see slavery as wrong and freely choose to abandon it?

The answer lay in a single deft stroke: to change slavery from an *ontological condition* to a *temporary circumstance*: from what I am to a situation in which I find myself, now but not forever. No Israelite was allowed to be treated or to see him or herself as a slave. They might be reduced to slavery for a period of time, but this was a passing plight, not an identity. Compare the account given by Aristotle:

[There are people who are] slaves by nature, and it is better for them to be subject to this kind of control. For a man who is able to belong to another person is by nature a slave.<sup>4</sup>

For Aristotle, slavery is an ontological condition, a fact of birth. Some are born to rule, others to be ruled. This is precisely the worldview to which the Torah is opposed. The entire complex of biblical legislation is designed to ensure that neither the slave nor their owner should ever see slavery as a permanent condition. A slave should be treated “like an employee or a resident,” in other words, with the same respect as is due a free human being. In this way the Torah ensured that, although slavery could not be abolished overnight, it would eventually be. And so it happened.

There are profound differences between philosophy and Judaism, and one lies in their respective understandings of time. For Plato and his heirs, philosophy is about the truth that is *timeless*. For Hegel and Marx, it is about “historical inevitability,” the change that comes, regardless of the conscious decisions of human beings. Judaism is about ideals like human freedom that are realised *in and through time, by the free decisions of free persons*.

**“The Torah ensured that, although slavery could not be abolished overnight, it would eventually be. And so it happened.”**

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<sup>3</sup> Maimonides, *The Guide for the Perplexed*, III:32.

<sup>4</sup> Aristotle, *Politics* I:5.

That is why we are commanded to hand on the story of the Exodus to our children every Passover, so that they too taste the unleavened bread of affliction and the bitter herbs of slavery. It is why we are instructed to ensure that every seventh day, all those who work for us are able to rest and breathe the expansive air of freedom. It is why, even when there were Israelite slaves, they had to be released in the seventh year, or failing that, in the Jubilee year. This is the way of evolution, not revolution, gradually educating every member of Israelite society that it is wrong to enslave others so that eventually the entire institution will be abolished, not by divine fiat but by human consent. The end result is a freedom that is secure, as opposed to the freedom of the philosophers that is all too often another form of tyranny. Chillingly, Rousseau once wrote that if citizens did not agree with the “general will,” they would have to be “forced to be free.” That is not liberty but slavery.

The Torah is based, as its narratives make clear, on history, a realistic view of human character, and a respect for freedom and choice. Philosophy is often detached from history and a concrete sense of humanity. Philosophy sees truth as system. The Torah tells truth as story, and a story is a sequence of events extended through time. Revolutions based on philosophical systems fail because change in human affairs takes time, and philosophy has rarely given an adequate account of the human dimension of time.

Revolutions based on Tanach succeed, because they go with the grain of human nature, recognising that it takes time for people to change. The Torah did not abolish slavery, but it set in motion a process that would lead people to come of their own accord to the conclusion that it was wrong. That it did so, albeit slowly, is one of the wonders of history.

**“Philosophy sees truth as system. The Torah tells truth as story”**

Shabbat shalom

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