



COVENANT & CONVERSATION

THOUGHTS ON THE WEEKLY PARSHA
FROM RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

בס"ד

בלק תשע"ט
Balak 5779



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 or subscribe to Rabbi Sacks' free mailing list via www.RabbiSacks.org/Subscribe.

Not Reckoned Among the Nations

The year is 1933. Two Jews are sitting in a Viennese coffee house, reading the news. One is reading the local Jewish paper, the other the notoriously antisemitic publication *Der Stürmer*. "How can you possibly read that revolting rubbish?" says the first. The second smiles. "What does your paper say? Let me tell you: 'The Jews are assimilating.' 'The Jews are arguing.' 'The Jews are disappearing.' Now let me tell you what my paper says: 'The Jews control the banks.' 'The Jews control the media.' 'The Jews control Austria.' 'The Jews control the world.' My friend, if you want good news about the Jews, always read the antisemites."

An old and bitter joke. Yet it has a point and a history and it begins with this week's parsha. Some of the most beautiful things ever said about the Jewish people were said by Bilaam: "Who can count the dust of Jacob ... May my final end be like theirs! ... How beautiful are your tents, Jacob, your dwelling places, Israel! ... A star will come out of Jacob; a sceptre will rise out of Israel."

Bilaam was no friend of the Jews. Having failed to curse them, he eventually devised a plan that worked. He suggested that Moabite women seduce Israelite men and then invite them to take part in their idolatrous worship. 24,000 people died in the subsequent plague that struck the people (Num. 25, 31:16). Bilaam is numbered by the rabbis as one of only four non-royals mentioned in the Tanach who are denied a share in the World to Come (Sanhedrin 90a).

Why then did God choose that Israel be blessed by Bilaam? Surely this contradicts the principle *Megalgelim zechut al yedei zakai*, which means that "Good things come about through good people" (Tosefta Yoma 4:12). Why did this good thing come about through a bad man? The answer lies in the principle stated in Proverbs (27:2): "Let someone else praise you, and not your own mouth; an outsider, and not your own lips." Tanach is perhaps the least self-congratulatory national literature in history. Jews chose to record for history their faults, not their virtues. Hence it was important that their

praise come from an outsider, and one not known to like them.
Moses rebuked the people. Bilaam, the outsider, praised them.

**“Jews chose to record
for history their faults,
not their virtues.”**

That said, however, what is the meaning of one of the most famous descriptions ever given of the people Israel: “It is a nation dwelling alone, not reckoned among the nations.” (Num. 23:9)? I have argued (in my book, *Future Tense*) against the interpretation that has become popular in modern times, namely that it is Israel’s destiny to be isolated, friendless, hated, abandoned and alone, as if antisemitism were somehow written into the script of history. It isn’t. None of the prophets said so. To the contrary, they believed that the nations of the world would eventually recognise Israel’s God and come to worship Him in the Temple in Jerusalem. Zechariah (8:23) foresees a day when “ten people from all languages and nations will take firm hold of one Jew by the hem of his robe and say, ‘Let us go with you, because we have heard that God is with you.’” There is nothing fated, predestined, about antisemitism.

What then do Bilaam’s words mean? “It is a nation dwelling alone, not reckoned among the nations.” Ibn Ezra says they mean that unlike all other nations, Jews, even when a minority in a non-Jewish culture, will not assimilate. Ramban says that their culture and creed will remain pure, not a cosmopolitan mix of multiple traditions and nationalities. The Netziv gives the sharp interpretation, clearly directed against the Jews of his time, that “If Jews live distinctive and apart from others they will dwell safely, but if they seek to emulate ‘the nations’ they ‘will not be reckoned’ as anything special at all.”

There is, however, another possibility, hinted at by another noted antisemite, G. K. Chesterton¹, who we have already mentioned in Beha’alotecha. Chesterton famously wrote of America that it was “a nation with the soul of a church” and “the only nation in the world founded on a creed.” That is, in fact, precisely what made Israel different – and America’s political culture, as historian Perry Miller and sociologist Robert Bellah pointed out, is deeply rooted in the idea of biblical Israel and the concept of covenant. Ancient Israel was indeed founded on a creed, and was, as a result, a nation with the soul of a religion.

We discussed in Beha’alotecha how Rabbi Soloveitchik broke down the two ways in which people become a group, be it a camp or a congregation. Camps face a common enemy, and so a group of people bands together. If you look at all other nations, ancient and modern, you will see they arose out of historical contingencies. A group of people live in a land, develop a shared culture, form a society, and thus become a nation.

Jews, certainly from the Babylonian exile onward, had none of the conventional attributes of a nation. They did not live in the same land. Some lived in Israel, others in Babylon, yet others in Egypt. Later they would be scattered throughout the world. They did not share a language of everyday speech.

¹ That Chesterton was an antisemite is not my judgment but that of the poet W. H. Auden). Chesterton wrote: “I said that a particular kind of Jew tended to be a tyrant and another particular kind of Jew tended to be a traitor. I say it again. Patent facts of this kind are permitted in the criticism of any other nation on the planet: it is not counted illiberal to say that a certain kind of Frenchman tends to be sensual.... I cannot see why the tyrants should not be called tyrants and the traitors traitors merely because they happen to be members of a race persecuted for other reasons and on other occasions.” (G.K. Chesterton, *The Uses of Diversity*, London, Methuen & Co., 1920, p. 239). On this Auden wrote, “The disingenuousness of this argument is revealed by the quiet shift from the term nation to the term race.”

There were many Jewish vernaculars, versions of Yiddish, Ladino and other regional Jewish dialects. They did not live under the same political dispensation. They did not share the same cultural environment. Nor did they experience the same fate. Despite all their many differences though, they always saw themselves and were seen by others as one nation: the world's first, and for long the world's only, global people.

What then made them a nation? This was the question R. Saadia Gaon asked in the tenth century, to which he gave the famous answer: "Our nation is only a nation in virtue of its laws (*torot*).” They were the people defined by the Torah, a nation under the sovereignty of God. Having received, uniquely, their laws before they even entered their land, they remained bound by those selfsame laws even when they lost the land. Of no other nation has this ever been true.

“ Having received their laws before they even entered their land, they remained bound by those laws even when they lost the land.”

Uniquely then, in Judaism religion and nationhood coincide. There are nations with many religions: multicultural Britain is one among many. There are religions governing many nations: Christianity and Islam are obvious examples. Only in the case of Judaism is there a one-to-one correlation between religion and nationhood. Without Judaism there would be nothing (except antisemitism) to connect Jews across the world. And without the Jewish nation Judaism would cease to be what it has always been, the faith of a people bound by a bond of collective responsibility to one another and to God. Bilaam was right. The Jewish people really are unique.

Nothing therefore could be more mistaken than to define Jewishness as a mere ethnicity. If ethnicity is a form of culture, then Jews are not one ethnicity but many. In Israel, Jews are a walking lexicon of almost every ethnicity under the sun. If ethnicity is another word for race, then conversion to Judaism would be impossible (you cannot convert to become Caucasian; you cannot change your race at will).

What makes Jews “a nation dwelling alone, not reckoned among the nations,” is that their nationhood is not a matter of geography, politics or ethnicity. It is a matter of religious vocation as God's covenant partners, summoned to be a living example of a nation among the nations made distinctive by its faith and way of life. Lose that and we lose the one thing that was and remains the source of our singular contribution to the heritage of humankind. When we forget this, sadly, God arranges for people like Bilaam and Chesterton to remind us otherwise. We should not need such reminding.

Shabbat Shalom

“Jews are summoned to be a living example of a nation made distinctive by its faith and way of life.”

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jonathan Marks". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

**** OUT NOW - “DEUTERONOMY: RENEWAL OF THE SINAI COVENANT” ****

Maggid Books, the division of contemporary Jewish thought of Koren Publishers Jerusalem, is proud to announce the completion of Covenant & Conversation: A Weekly Reading of the Jewish Bible by Rabbi Sacks.

In “**Deuteronomy: Renewal of the Sinai Covenant**”, the 5th and final installation of the series, Rabbi Sacks writes: “With the book of Deuteronomy, the entire biblical project becomes lucid and reaches its culmination. Deuteronomy is the last act of the Jewish people’s drama before becoming a nation in its own land, and it forms the context of all that follows... [it] is, in essence, a programme for the creation of a moral society in which righteousness is the responsibility of all. The good society was to be, within the limits of the world as it was thirty-three centuries ago, an inclusive if not an entirely egalitarian one. Time and again we are told that social joy must embrace the widow, the orphan, the stranger, and the Levite, people without independent status or means. It is to be one nation under God.”



Matthew Miller, Publisher of Maggid Books, says, “We are thrilled that this series is now complete. Since the release of Genesis, we have heard from people around the globe how Rabbi Sacks’ writings have deepened their appreciation of the Jewish Bible and of Judaism as a whole. Now every Shabbat can be inspired by Rabbi Sacks’ brilliant insights.”

Rabbi Sacks says, “I am delighted to have finished this work on the Covenant & Conversation series. I called this series Covenant & Conversation because this, for me, is the essence of what Torah learning is – throughout the ages, and for us, now. The text of Torah is our covenant with God, our written constitution as a nation under His sovereignty. The interpretation of this text has been the subject of an ongoing conversation that began at Sinai thirty-three centuries ago and has not ceased since. Every age has added its commentaries, and so must ours. I hope by reading this series, people are inspired to participate in that conversation because that is a major part of what it is to be a Jew.”

Jonathan Sacks
The Office of Rabbi Sacks

www.rabbisacks.org     @rabbisacks

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

© Rabbi Sacks • All rights reserved
The Office of Rabbi Sacks is supported by The Covenant & Conversation Trust

LOOK OUT FOR
COVENANT & CONVERSATION
Family Edition