



COVENANT & CONVERSATION

THOUGHTS ON THE WEEKLY PARSHA
FROM RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

בס"ד

האזינו תש"ף
Ha'azinu 5780



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.

Let My Teaching Drop As Rain

In the glorious song with which Moses addresses the congregation, he invites the people to think of the Torah – their covenant with God – as if it were like the rain that waters the ground so that it brings forth its produce:

*Let my teaching drop as rain,
My words descend like dew,
Like showers on new grass,
Like abundant rain on tender plants. (Deut. 32:2)*

God's word is like rain in a dry land. It brings life. It makes things grow. There is much we can do of our own accord: we can plough the earth and plant the seeds. But in the end our success depends on something beyond our control. If no rain falls, there will be no harvest, whatever preparations we make. So it is with Israel. It must never be tempted into the hubris of saying: "My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me" (Deut. 8:17).

The Sages, however, sensed something more in the analogy. This is how Sifrei (a compendium of commentaries on Numbers and Deuteronomy dating back to the Mishnaic period) puts it:

Let my teaching drop as rain: Just as the rain is one thing, yet it falls on trees, enabling each to produce tasty fruit according to the kind of tree it is – the vine in its way, the olive tree in its way, and the date palm in its way – so the Torah is one, yet its words yield Scripture, Mishnah,

laws, and lore. Like showers on new grass: Just as showers fall upon plants and make them grow, some green, some red, some black, some white, so the words of Torah produce teachers, worthy individuals, Sages, the righteous, and the pious.¹

There is only one Torah, yet it has multiple effects. It gives rise to different kinds of teaching, different sorts of virtue. Torah is sometimes seen by its critics as overly prescriptive, as if it sought to make everyone the same. The Midrash argues otherwise. The Torah is compared to rain precisely to emphasise that its most important effect is to make each of us grow into what we could become. We are *not* all the same, nor does Torah seek uniformity. As a famous Mishnah puts it: “When a human being makes many coins from the same mint, they are all the same. God makes everyone in the same image – His image – yet none is the same as another” (Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5).

This emphasis on difference is a recurring theme in Judaism. For example, when Moses asks God to appoint his successor, he uses an unusual phrase: “May the Lord, *God of the spirits of all humankind*, appoint a man over the community” (Num. 27:16). On this, Rashi comments:

Why is this expression (“God of the spirits of all humankind”) used? [Moses] said to Him: Lord of the universe, You know each person’s character, and that no two people are alike. Therefore, appoint a leader for them who will bear with each person according to his disposition.

One of the fundamental requirements of a leader in Judaism is that he or she is able to *respect the differences* between human beings. This is a point emphasised by Maimonides in *Guide for the Perplexed*:

“One of the fundamental requirements of a leader in Judaism is that he or she is able to *respect the differences* between human beings.”

Humans are, as you know, the highest form in creation, and they therefore contain the largest number of constituent elements. This is why the human race contains so great a variety of individuals that we cannot discover two persons exactly alike in any moral quality or in external appearance.... This great variety and the necessity of social life are essential elements in human nature. But the well-being of society demands that there should be a leader able to regulate the actions of humans. The leader must complete every shortcoming, remove every excess, and prescribe for the conduct of all, so that the natural variety should be counterbalanced by the uniformity of legislation, so that social order be well established.²

¹ Sifrei, *Ha’azinu* 306.

² Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed*, II:40.

The political problem as Maimonides sees it is how to regulate the affairs of human beings in such a way as to respect their individuality while not creating chaos. A similar point emerges from a surprising rabbinic teaching: “Our Rabbis taught: If one sees a crowd of Israelites, one says: Blessed Be He who discerns secrets – because the mind of each is different from that of another, just as the face of each is different from another” (Brachot 58a).

We would have expected a blessing over a crowd to emphasise its size, its mass: human beings in their collectivity.³ A crowd is a group large enough for the individuality of the faces to be lost. Yet the blessing stresses the opposite – that each member of a crowd is still an individual with distinctive thoughts, hopes, fears, and aspirations.

“Each member of a crowd is still an individual with distinctive thoughts, hopes, fears, and aspirations.”

The same was true for the relationship between the Sages. A Mishnah states:

When R. Meir died, the composers of fables ceased. When Ben Azzai died, assiduous students ceased. When Ben Zoma died, the expositors ceased. When R. Akiva died, the glory of the Torah ceased. When R. Chanina died, men of deed ceased. When R. Yose Ketanta died, the pious men ceased. When R. Yochanan b. Zakai died, the lustre of wisdom ceased.... When Rabbi died, humility and the fear of sin ceased. (Mishnah Sotah 9:15)

There was no single template of the Sage. Each had his own distinctive merits, his unique contribution to the collective heritage. In this respect, the Sages were merely continuing the tradition of the Torah itself. There is no single role model of the religious hero or heroine in Tanach. The patriarchs and matriarchs each had their own unmistakable character. Moses, Aaron, and Miriam each emerge as different personality types. Kings, Priests, and Prophets had different roles to play in Israelite society. Even among the Prophets, “No two prophesy in the same style,” said the Sages (Sanhedrin 89a). Elijah was zealous, Elisha gentle. Hosea spoke of love, Amos spoke of justice. Isaiah’s visions were simpler and less opaque than those of Ezekiel.

The same applies to even to the revelation at Sinai itself. Each individual heard, in the same words, a different inflection:

The voice of the Lord is with power (Ps. 29:4): that is, according to the power of each individual, the young, the old, and the very small ones, each according to their power [of

³ See Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973).

understanding]. God said to Israel, “Do not believe that there are many gods in heaven because you heard many voices. Know that I alone am the Lord, your God.”⁴

According to Maharsha, there are 600,000 interpretations of Torah. Each individual is theoretically capable of a unique insight into its meaning. The French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas commented:

“There are 600,000 interpretations of Torah. Each individual is theoretically capable of a unique insight into its meaning.”

The Revelation has a particular way of producing meaning, which lies in its calling upon the unique within me. It is as if a multiplicity of persons...were the condition for the plenitude of “absolute truth,” as if each person, by virtue of his own uniqueness, were able to guarantee the revelation of one unique aspect of the truth, so that some of its facets would never have been revealed if certain people had been absent from mankind.⁵

Judaism, in short, emphasises the other side of the *maxim E pluribus unum* (“Out of the many, one”). It says: “Out of the One, many.”

The miracle of creation is that unity in heaven produces diversity on earth. Torah is the rain that feeds this diversity, allowing each of us to become what only we can be.

Shabbat Shalom



**Join Rabbi Sacks
on WhatsApp & Telegram as we
continue to share his messages
over Succot**

www.RabbiSacks.org/WhatsApp

**Over 17,000 people from
around the world have already joined!**



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**

⁴ Exodus Rabbah 29:1.

⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, “Revelation in the Jewish Tradition,” in *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Sean Hand (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2001), 190–210.