



COVENANT & CONVERSATION

THOUGHTS ON THE WEEKLY PARSHA
FROM RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

בס"ד



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COVENANT & CONVERSATION: FAMILY EDITION

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End Without an Ending

What an extraordinary way to end a book: not just any book but the Book of books – with Moses seeing the Promised Land from Mount Nebo, tantalisingly near, yet so far away that he knows he will never reach it in his lifetime. This is an ending to defy all narrative expectations. A story about a journey should end at journey's end, with arrival at the destination. But the Torah terminates before the terminus. It concludes in *medias res*. It ends in the middle. It is constructed as an unfinished symphony.

We, the readers and listeners, feel Moses' personal sense of incompleteness. He had dedicated a lifetime to leading the people out of Egypt to the Promised Land. Yet he was not granted his request to complete the task and reach the place to which he had spent his life as a leader leading the people. When he prayed, "Let me...cross over and see the good land on the other side of the Jordan," God replied, "Enough! Never speak to Me of this matter again" (Deut. 3:25–26).

Moses – the man who stood before Pharaoh demanding his people's freedom, who was unafraid even to challenge God Himself, who when he came down the mountain and saw the people dancing around the Golden Calf smashed the Divinely-hewn tablets, the holiest object ever to be held by human hands – pleaded for the one small mercy that would give completion to his life's work, but it was not to be. When he prayed for others, he succeeded. When he prayed for himself, he failed. That in itself is strange.

Yet the sense of incompleteness is not merely personal, not just a detail in the life of Moses. It applies to the entire narrative as it has unfolded from the beginning of the book of Exodus. The Israelites are in exile. God charges Moses with the task of leading the people out of Egypt and bringing them to the land flowing with milk and honey, the country He had promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. It seems simple enough. Already in Exodus 13, the people have left, sent on their way by a Pharaoh and an Egypt ravaged by plagues. Within days, they hit an obstacle. Ahead of them is the Red Sea. Behind them are the rapidly approaching chariots of Pharaoh's army. A miracle happens. The sea divides. They pass over on dry land. Pharaoh's troops, their chariot wheels caught in the mud, drown.

Now all that stands between them and their destination is the wilderness. Every problem they face – a lack of food, water, direction, protection – is solved by divine intervention mediated by Moses. What is left to tell, if not their arrival?

Yet *it does not happen*. Spies are sent to determine the best way of entering and conquering the land, a relatively straightforward task. They come back, unexpectedly, with a demoralising report. The people lose heart and say they want to go back to Egypt. The result is that God decrees that they will have to wait a full generation, forty years, before entering the land. It is not only Moses who does not cross the Jordan. The entire people have not done so by the time the Torah ends. That must await the book of Joshua, not itself part of the Torah but rather of the *Nevi'im*, the later prophetic and historical texts.

This, from a literary point of view, is odd. But it is not accidental. In the Torah, style mirrors substance. The text is telling us something profound. The Jewish story ends without an ending. It closes without closure. There is in Judaism no equivalent of “and they all lived happily ever after” (the closest the Bible comes to this is the book of Esther). Biblical narrative lacks what Frank Kermode called “the sense of an ending.” Jewish time is open time – open to a denouement not yet realised, a destination not yet reached.

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This is not simply because the Torah records history, and history has no end. The Torah is telling us something quite different from history in the way the Greeks, Herodotus and Thucydides, wrote it. Secular history has no meaning. It simply tells us what happened. Biblical history, by contrast, is saturated with meaning. Nothing merely happens *bemikreh*, by chance.

This becomes clearer and clearer as we look, for example, at Genesis. God summons Abraham to leave his land, his birthplace, and his father’s house and go “to the land I will show you” (Gen. 12:1). Abraham does so, and by verse 5, he has arrived. This sounds like the end of the story, but it turns out to be hardly the beginning. Almost immediately, there is a famine in the land and he has to leave. The same thing happens to Isaac, and eventually to Jacob and his children. The story that began with a journey to the land ends with the main characters outside the land, with both Jacob (49:29) and Joseph (50:25) asking their descendants to bring them back to the land to be buried.

Seven times, God promises Abraham the land – “Look around from where you are, to the north and south, to the east and west. All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever” (Gen. 13:14–15). Yet when Sarah dies, he has not a single plot of land in which to bury her, and has to buy one at an inflated price. Something similar happens to Isaac and Jacob. Genesis ends as Deuteronomy ends – with the promise but not yet the fulfilment, the hope but not yet the realisation.

So does Tanach as a whole. The second book of Chronicles ends with the Israelites in exile. In its closing verse, the last line of Tanach, Cyrus king of Persia gives permission for the exiles to return to their land: “Anyone of His people among you – may the Lord his God be with him, and let him go up” (II Chr. 36:23). Again, anticipation but not yet reality.

There is something significant here – though it lies so deep it is hard to explain. The Bible is a battle against myth. In myth, time is as it is in nature. It is cyclical. It goes through phases – spring, summer, autumn, winter; birth, growth, decline, death – but it always returns to where it began. The standard plot of myth is that order is threatened by the forces of chaos. In ancient times these were depicted by Greek gods of destruction. In more recent times we have seen the dark forces battled dramatically in *Star Wars* and *Lord of the Rings*. The hero challenges them. He slips, falls, almost dies, but ultimately succeeds. Order is restored. The world is once again as it was. Hence the “happily ever after.” The future is the restoration of the past. There is a return to order, to the way things were before the threat, but there is no history, no progress, no development, no unanticipated outcome.

Judaism is a radical break with this way of seeing things. Instead, time becomes the arena of human growth. The future is not like the past. Nor can it be predicted, foreseen, the way the end of any myth can be foreseen. Jacob, at the end of his life, told his children, “Gather round, and I will tell you what will happen to you at the end of days” (Gen. 49:1). Rashi, quoting the Talmud, says: “Jacob sought to reveal the end, *but the Divine Presence departed from him.*” We cannot foretell the future, because *it depends on us* – how we act, how we choose, how we respond. The future cannot be predicted, because we have free will. Even we ourselves do not know how we will respond to crisis until it happens. Only in retrospect do we discover ourselves. *We face an open future.* Only God, who is beyond time, can transcend time. Biblical narrative has no sense of an ending because it constantly seeks to tell us that we have not yet completed the task. That remains to be achieved in a future we believe in but will not live to see. We glimpse it from afar, the way Moses saw the holy land from the far side of the Jordan, but like him, we know we have not yet arrived. Judaism is the supreme expression of *faith as the future tense*.

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The nineteenth-century Jewish philosopher Hermann Cohen put it this way:

What Greek intellectualism could not create, prophetic monotheism succeeded in creating.... For the Greek, history is oriented solely toward the past. The prophet, however, is a seer, not a scholar.... The prophets are the idealists of history. Their seerdom created the concept of history as *the being of the future*. (Emphasis added.)

Harold Fisch, the literary scholar, summarised this in a hauntingly beautiful phrase: “the unappeased memory of a future still to be fulfilled.”

Judaism is the only civilisation to have set its golden age not in the past but in the future. We hear this at the beginning of the Moses story, although not until the end do we realise its significance. Moses asks God: What is Your name? God replies: *Ehyeh asher Ehyeh*, literally, “I will be what I will be” (Ex. 3:14). We assume this means something like “I am what I am – unlimited, indescribable, beyond the reach of a name.” That may be part of the meaning. But the fundamental point is: My name is the future. “I am what will be.” God is in the call from the future to the present, from the destination to us who are still on the journey. What distinguishes Judaism from Christianity is that in answer to the question “Has the Messiah come?” the Jewish answer is always: Not yet. Moses’ death, his unfinished life, his glimpse of the land of the future, is the supreme symbol of the not-yet.

“It is not for you to complete the task, but neither are you free to desist from it” (Mishnah Avot 2:16). The challenges we face as human beings are never resolved simply, quickly, completely. The task takes many lifetimes. It is beyond the reach of a single individual, even the greatest; it is beyond the scope of a single generation, even the most epic. Deuteronomy ends by telling us: “Never again has there arisen in Israel a prophet like Moses” (Deut. 34:10). But even his life was, necessarily, incomplete.

As we see him, on Mount Nebo, looking across the Jordan to Israel in the distance, we sense the vast, challenging truth that confronts us all. Each person has a promised land he or she will not reach, a horizon beyond the limits of his or her vision. What makes this bearable is our intense existential bond between the generations – between parent and child, teacher and disciple, leader and follower. The task is bigger than us, but it will live on after us, as something of us will live on in those we have influenced.

The greatest mistake we can make is to do nothing because we cannot do everything. Even Moses discovered that it was not for him to complete the task. That would only be achieved by Joshua, and even then the story of the Israelites was only just beginning. Moses’ death tells us something fundamental about mortality. Life is not robbed of meaning because one day it will end. For in truth – even in this world, before we turn our thoughts to eternal life in the World to Come – we become part of eternity when we write our chapter in the book of the story of our people and hand it on to those who will come after us. The task – building a society of justice and compassion, an oasis in a desert of violence and corruption – is greater than any one lifetime. The Jewish people have returned to the land, but the vision is not yet complete. This is still a violent, aggressive world. Peace still eludes us, as does much else. We have not yet reached the destination, though we see it in the distance, as did Moses. The Torah ends without an ending to tell us that we too are part of the story; we too are still on the journey. And as we reach the Torah’s closing lines we know, as did Robert Frost in his famous poem, that

**“The Torah ends
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I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep.

Chag Sameach,

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