




WOHL LEGACY

COVENANT & CONVERSATION

FINDING FAITH IN THE PARSHA WITH RABBI SACKS

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The Arc of the Moral Universe

In majestic language, Moses breaks into song, investing his final testament to the Israelites with all the power and passion at his command. He begins dramatically but gently, calling heaven and earth to witness what he is about to say, words which are almost echoed in Portia's speech in *The Merchant of Venice*, "The quality of mercy is not strained".

*Listen, you heavens, and I will speak;
Hear, you earth, the words of my mouth.
Let my teaching fall like rain
And my words descend like dew,
Like showers on new grass,
Like abundant rain on tender plants. (Deut. 32:1-2)*

But this is a mere prelude to the core message Moses wants to convey. It is the idea known as *tzidduk ha-din*, vindicating God's justice. The way Moses puts it is this:

*He is the Rock, His works are perfect,
And all His ways are just.
A faithful God who does no wrong,
Upright and just is He. (Deut. 32:4)*

This is a doctrine fundamental to Judaism and its understanding of evil and suffering in the world – a difficult but necessary doctrine. God is just. Why, then, do bad things happen?

*Is He corrupt? No – the defect is in His children,
A crooked and perverse generation. (Deut. 32:5)*

God requites good with good, evil with evil. When bad things happen to us, it is because we have been guilty of doing bad things ourselves. The fault lies not in our stars but within ourselves.

Moving into the prophetic mode, Moses foresees what he has already predicted, even before they have crossed the Jordan and entered the land. Throughout the book of Devarim he has been warning of

the danger that in their land, once the hardships of the desert and the struggles of battle have been forgotten, the people will become comfortable and complacent. They will attribute their achievements to themselves and they will drift from their faith. When this happens, they will bring disaster on themselves:

*Yeshurun grew fat and kicked –
You became fat, thick, gross –
They abandoned the God who made them
And scorned the Rock their Saviour ...
You deserted the Rock, who fathered you;
And you forgot the God who gave you life. (Deut. 32:15-18)*

This, the first use of the word Yeshurun in the Torah – from the root *Yashar*, upright – is deliberately ironic. Israel once knew what it was to be upright, but it will be led astray by a combination of affluence, security and assimilation to the ways of its neighbours. It will betray the terms of the covenant, and when that happens it will find that God is no longer with it. It will discover that history is a ravening wolf. Separated from the source of its strength, it will be overpowered by its enemies. All that the nation once enjoyed will be lost. This is a stark and terrifying message.

**“God, Creator of the
universe, made a world that
is fundamentally good.”**

Yet Moses is bringing the Torah to a close with a theme that has been present from the beginning. God, Creator of the universe, made a world that is fundamentally good: the word that echoes seven times in the first chapter of Bereishit. It is humans, granted freewill as God’s image and likeness, who introduce evil into the world, and then suffer its consequences. Hence Moses’ insistence that when trouble and tragedy appear, we should search for the cause within ourselves, and not blame God. God is upright and just. The shortcomings are ours, His children’s, shortcomings.

This is perhaps the most difficult idea in the whole of Judaism. It is open to the simplest of objections, one that has sounded in almost every generation: If God is just, why do bad things happen to good people?

This is the question asked not by sceptics, doubters, but by the very heroes of faith. We hear it in Abraham’s plea, “Shall the Judge of all the earth not do justice?” We hear it in Moses’ challenge, “Why have You done evil to this people?” It sounds again in Jeremiah: “Lord, You are always right when I dispute with You. Yet I must plead my case before You: Why are the wicked so prosperous? Why are evil people so happy?” (Jer. 12:1).

It is an argument that never ceased. It continued through the rabbinic literature. It was heard again in the *kinot*, the laments, prompted by the persecution of Jews in the Middle Ages. It sounds in the literature produced in the wake of the Spanish expulsion, and its echoes continue to reverberate in memories of the Holocaust.

The Talmud says that of all the questions Moses asked God, this was the only one to which God did not give an answer.¹ The simplest, deepest interpretation is given in Psalm 92, “The song of the Sabbath day.” Though “the wicked spring up like grass”, they will eventually be destroyed. The righteous, by contrast, “flourish like a palm tree and grow tall like a cedar in Lebanon.” Evil wins in the short term but never in the long. The wicked are like grass, whereas the righteous are more like trees. Grass grows overnight but it takes years for a tree to reach its full height. In the long run, tyrannies are defeated. Empires decline and fall. Goodness and rightness win the final battle. As Martin Luther King said in the spirit of the Psalm: “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”

It is a difficult belief, this commitment to seeing justice in history under the sovereignty of God. Yet consider the alternatives. There are three: The first is to say that there is no meaning in history whatsoever. *Homo hominis lupus est*, “Man is wolf to man”. As Thucydides said in the name of the Athenians: “The strong do as they want, the weak suffer what they must.” History is a Darwinian struggle to survive, and justice is no more than the name given to the will of the stronger party.

The second, about which I write in *Not In God's Name*, is dualism, the idea that evil comes not from God but from an independent force: Satan, the Devil, the Antichrist, Lucifer, the Prince of Darkness, and the many other names given to the force that is not God but is opposed to Him and those who worship Him. This idea, which has surfaced in sectarian forms in each of the

“It is here, in this world, that we must work for justice, fairness, compassion, decency, the alleviation of poverty, and the perfection... of society and our individual lives.”

Abrahamic monotheisms, as well as in modern, secular totalitarianisms, is one of the most dangerous in all of history. It divides humanity into the unshakeably good and the irredeemably evil, giving rise to a long history of bloodshed and barbarism of the kind we see being enacted today in many parts of the world in the name of holy war against the greater and lesser Satan. This is dualism, not monotheism, and the Sages, who called it *shtei reshuyot*, “two powers or domains”,² were right to reject it utterly.

The third alternative, debated extensively in the rabbinic literature, is to say that justice ultimately exists in the World to Come, in life after death. Although this is an essential element of Judaism, it is striking how relatively little Judaism had recourse to it, recognising that the central thrust of Tanach is on this world, and life before death. For it is *here*, in this world, that we must work for justice, fairness, compassion, decency, the alleviation of poverty, and the perfection, as far as lies within our power, of society and our individual lives. Tanach almost never takes this third option. God does not say to Jeremiah or Job that the answer to their question exists in heaven and they will see it as soon as they end their stay on earth. The passion for justice, so characteristic of Judaism, would dissipate entirely were this the only answer.

Difficult though Jewish faith is, it has had the effect through history of leading us to say: if bad things have happened, let us blame no one but ourselves, and let us labour to make them better. I believe it was this that led Jews, time and again, to emerge from tragedy, shaken, scarred, limping like

¹ Brachot 7a.

² Brachot 33b.

Jacob after his encounter with the angel, yet resolved to begin again, to rededicate ourselves to our mission and faith, to ascribe our achievements to God and our defeats to ourselves.

I believe that out of such humility, a momentous strength is born.

Shabbat Shalom

Jonathan Sacks

AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

**COVENANT AND
CONVERSATION**
Family Edition

The Family Edition of Covenant & Conversation is an accompanying resource available to download each week from www.RabbiSacks.org/CCFamilyEdition (or via the main Covenant & Conversation email). It helps parents and educators take Rabbi Sacks' ideas from this essay and make them more accessible to teenagers. Each week, we will include three key questions from the Family Edition to inspire discussion around your Shabbat table. For more educational content as well as discussion pointers when answering these questions, please see the Family Edition!

1. **What extra dimension does poetry give this week's parsha?**
2. **What right do the heroes of our faith, such as Moses, Jeremiah, and Job, have to ask God why there is injustice in the world? Did they receive answers?**
3. **Does this approach to suffering blame the victim? Or are we asking for something else from the victims (and from us all)?**

Stuck at home this Yom Kippur?



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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

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