



COVENANT & CONVERSATION

Family Edition

כי-תבוא תשע"ט
Ki Tavo 5779

**A Nation of
Storytellers**

WELCOME TO COVENANT & CONVERSATION 5779 FAMILY EDITION

Covenant & Conversation: Family Edition is a new and exciting initiative from *The Office of Rabbi Sacks* for 5779. Written as an accompaniment to Rabbi Sacks' weekly *Covenant & Conversation* essay, the Family Edition is aimed at connecting teenagers and families with his ideas and thoughts on the parsha. To receive this via email please make sure you are subscribed to Rabbi Sacks' main mailing list at www.RabbiSacks.org/Subscribe.



PARSHAT KI TAVO IN A NUTSHELL

This week Moses concludes his explanation of the details of the covenant, listing commands about bringing first-fruits to the Central Sanctuary, as well as the various tithes.

He closes this section with a reminder to the people of what the covenant is: a mutual promise between the people and God. The people are to give God their full loyalty. God, in turn, will have a special relationship with the people.

The text turns to the next feature of ancient covenants: the blessings and curses that will be the result of faithfulness on the one hand, disloyalty on the other.

The parsha of Ki Tavo ends with Moses summoning the people, at the end of their forty-year journey and in sight of the Promised Land, to renew the covenant that their parents made with God at Mount Sinai.



THE CORE IDEA

Moses spends most of the book of Devarim retelling the national story to the new generation, reminding them of what God had done for their parents and also of some of the mistakes their parents had made. Moses, as well as being the great liberator, is the supreme storyteller. Yet what he does in parshat Ki Tavo extends far beyond this.

He now tells the people that when they enter, conquer and settle the Land, they must bring the first ripened fruits to the Central Sanctuary, the Temple, as a way of giving thanks to God. A *Mishnah* in *Bikkurim* describes the joyous scene as people came together in Jerusalem from across the country, bringing their first-fruits with music and celebration. Merely bringing the fruits, though, was not enough. Each person had to make a declaration. That declaration became one of the best-known passages in the Torah because, although it was originally said on Shavuot, the festival of first-fruits, in post-biblical times it became a central element of the Haggadah on Seder night:

My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down into Egypt and lived there, few in number, and there became a great nation, powerful and numerous. But the Egyptians ill-treated us and made us suffer,

subjecting us to harsh labour. Then we cried out to the Lord, the God of our ancestors, and the Lord heard our voice and saw our misery, toil and oppression. So the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror and with signs and wonders. (Devarim 26:5-8)

Here for the first time the retelling of the nation's history becomes an obligation for every citizen of the nation. In this act, known as *vidui bikkurim*, "the confession made over first-fruits," Jews were commanded to become a nation of storytellers.

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. Do you like stories? Why?
2. Why do you think Judaism teaches us that telling stories is very important?
3. How does Judaism ensure that every single Jew can and does tell the nations' story?



IT ONCE HAPPENED...

I grew up in a world very far from the world of Judaism. A world of Communism. I can't remember when Father began to hold the Passover Seder at home. Perhaps only when he was released from prison, and without Mother. The very fact that the Seder was held in Soviet Russia in the 1960s, was something special, even though there were certainly several thousand other Jews throughout the country who also kept the tradition. We didn't possess a Haggadah, so Father conducted the Seder from memory, and his memory didn't betray him.

But that wasn't, in my opinion, the most important thing. The uniqueness of my father's Seder resided in the story of the Exodus from Egypt. Father would begin with the story of Adam and Eve, and end with the history of the revival of the People of Israel in the modern era. At the Seder table we learned it all. The

Seder performed its function wonderfully, as our Sages foresaw: "And thou shall tell it to your child." This wasn't just an empty saying. Things that are said to the child, something of them will remain. I can testify about myself that I grew up as a Jew thanks to the story of our Exodus from Egypt.

At the Edge of the Heavens, Yosef Mendelevich

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. Why did Yosef's father begin the story with Adam and Eve, and end with the modern State of Israel?
2. Why does Yosef believe that his Jewish identity was thanks to the story in the Haggadah? Would you say the same about yourself?



THINKING MORE DEEPLY

The great questions – “Who are we?” “Why are we here?” “What is our task?” – are best answered by telling a story. As Barbara Hardy put it: “We dream in narrative, daydream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticise, construct, gossip, learn, hate and love by narrative.” This is fundamental to understanding why Torah is the kind of book it is: not a theological treatise or a metaphysical system but a series of interlinked stories extended over time, from Abraham and Sarah's journey from Mesopotamia to Moses' and the Israelites' wanderings in the desert. Judaism is less about truth as system than about truth as story. And we are part of that story. That is what it is to be a Jew.

The command to tell the national story when bringing the first fruits is a remarkable development. Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi tells us that, “Only in Israel and nowhere else is the injunction to remember felt as a *religious imperative to an entire people*.”

The *vidui bikkurim* gives the entire history of the nation in summary form. In a few short sentences we have here “the patriarchal origins in Mesopotamia, the emergence of the Hebrew nation in the midst of history rather than in mythic prehistory, slavery in Egypt and liberation therefrom, the climactic acquisition of the land of Israel, and throughout – the acknowledgement of God as Lord of history.”

We should note here an important nuance. Jews were the first people to find God in history. They were the first to think in historical terms – seeing time as an arena of change as opposed to cyclical time in which the seasons rotate, people are born and die, again and again, with nothing really changing. Jews were the first people to write history – many centuries before Herodotus and Thucydides, often wrongly described as the

first historians. Yet biblical Hebrew has no word that means “history” (the closest equivalent is *divrei hayamim*, “chronicles”). Instead it uses the root *zachor*, meaning “memory.”

There is a fundamental difference between history and memory. History is “his story,” an account of events that happened sometime else to someone else. Memory is “my story.” It is the past internalised and made part of my identity. That is what the Mishnah in Pesachim means when it says, “Each person must see it as if he or she personally went out of Egypt.”

Throughout Devarim Moses warns the people – no less than fourteen times – not to forget. If they forget the past they will lose their identity and sense of direction and disaster will follow. Moreover, not only are the people commanded to remember, they are also commanded to hand that memory on to their children.

This entire phenomenon represents a remarkable cluster of ideas: about identity as a matter of collective memory; about the ritual retelling of the nation's story; above all about the fact that *every one of us is a guardian of that story and memory*. It is not the leader alone, or some elite, who are trained to recall the past, but every one of us. This too is an aspect of the devolution and democratisation of leadership that we find throughout Judaism as a way of life. The great leaders tell the story of the group, but the greatest of leaders, Moses, taught the group to become a nation of storytellers.

You can still see the power of this idea today. As I mention in my book *The Home We Build Together*, if you visit the Presidential memorials in Washington, you will see that each

one carries an inscription taken from their own words: Jefferson's 'We hold these truths to be self-evident...', Roosevelt's 'The only thing we have to fear, is fear itself', Lincoln's *Gettysburg Address* and his second *Inaugural*, 'With malice toward none; with charity for all...' Each memorial tells a story.

London has no equivalent. It contains many memorials and statues, each with a brief inscription stating who it represents, but there are no speeches or quotations. There is no story. Even the memorial to Churchill, whose speeches rivalled Lincoln's in power, carries only one word: *Churchill*.

America has a national story because it is a society based on the idea of covenant. Narrative is at the heart of covenantal politics because it locates national identity in a set of historic events. The memory of those events evokes the values for which those who came before us fought and of which we are the guardians.

A covenantal narrative is always inclusive, the property of all its citizens, newcomers as well as the home-born. It says to everyone, regardless of class or creed: this is who we are. It creates a sense of common identity that transcends other identities. That is why, for example, Martin Luther King was able to use it to such effect in some of his greatest speeches. He

was telling his fellow African Americans to see themselves as an equal part of the nation. At the same time, he was telling white Americans to honour their commitment to the Declaration of Independence and its statement that 'all men are created equal'.

England does not have the same kind of national narrative because it is based not on covenant but on hierarchy and tradition. England, writes Roger Scruton, "was not a nation or a creed or a language or a state but a home. Things at home don't need an explanation. They are there because they are there." England, historically, was a class-based society in which there were ruling elites who governed on behalf of the nation as a whole. America, founded by Puritans who saw themselves as a new Israel bound by covenant, was not a society of rulers and ruled, but rather one of collective responsibility. Hence the phrase, central to American politics but never used in English politics: "We, the people."

By making the Israelites a nation of storytellers, Moses helped turn them into a people bound by collective responsibility – to one another, to the past and future, and to God. By framing a narrative that successive generations would make their own and teach to their children, Moses turned Jews into a nation of leaders.



FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

Through the Haggadah more than a hundred generations of Jews have handed on their story to their children. The word *haggadah* means "relate," "tell," "expound." But it is closely related to another Hebrew root that means "bind," "join," "connect." By reciting the Haggadah, Jews give their children a sense of connectedness to Jews throughout the world and to the Jewish people throughout time. The story connects them to a past and future, a history and destiny, and makes them characters in its drama. Every other nation known to humankind has been united because its members lived in the same place, spoke the same language, were part of the same culture. Jews alone, dispersed across continents, speaking different languages and participating in different cultures, have been bound together by a narrative, the

Pesach narrative, which they told in the same way on the same night. More than the Haggadah is the story of a people, Jews are the people of a story.

The Jonathan Sacks Haggadah, p. 2

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. What does the Haggadah give us that other nations get from shared land, language, and culture?
2. Do you think the Haggadah is all that is needed? What else might be necessary for the Jewish people?



AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. Why do you think Judaism teaches us that telling stories is very important?
2. Why do good leaders tell stories?
3. How does Judaism ensure that every single Jew can and does tell the nation's story? Why?
4. What is the difference between History and Memory? Why does biblical Hebrew only have a word for memory?
5. How is America more similar to the Jewish people than Britain?



QUESTION TIME

Do you want to win a **Koren Aviv Weekday Siddur**? Email CCFamilyEdition@rabbisacks.org with your name, age, city and your best question or observation about the *parsha* from the *Covenant & Conversation Family Edition*. **Entrants must be 18 or younger.** Thank you to Koren Publishers for kindly donating these wonderful siddurim.



EDUCATIONAL COMPANION TO THE QUESTIONS

THE CORE IDEA

1. Almost everyone likes stories, from very young children to adults. The stories we enjoy include the ones we read in books, papers and magazines, watch in movies and on shows, and even see in social media. We rely on stories to understand our own identities and the world around us.
2. Stories are an effective way to transmit meaning and identity. The Torah is not a dry, comprehensive legal code or a purely historical record, but rather a collection of stories through which the Jewish people understand their national past and create a future, an identity, and a moral and spiritual system through which to interpret the world. Stories can also be related to at every developmental stage, from the youngest child to the oldest most scholarly adult. It is the ultimate pedagogy for transmitting national identity and values.
3. These verses, the simplest way to tell the Jewish narrative, became the core story told on Seder night every year at Pesach. All Jews find themselves at a Seder table in their lives, participating in the telling of this story. This is to ensure the national narrative is passed on to every Jewish child. It ensures that every Jewish parent becomes a master educator – a storyteller *par excellence*.

IT ONCE HAPPENED...

1. He saw the Seder night as an opportunity to expand on the Exodus story, and incorporated the whole of Jewish history, ensuring his family received the entire Jewish story (not just the Exodus). For him, that was what Pesach was all about, and in Soviet Russia, when it was a dangerous and challenging thing to be a Jew, it became even more important to make sure the story of our identity was transmitted to the next generation.
2. The Haggadah is the story of the Jews, and at the core of Seder night is what it means to be a Jew. It is one of the reasons the Jewish people have maintained their sense of identity through thousands of years of exile. Yosef went on to become a *refusenik* (barred from immigrating to Israel) and spent three years in prison in Russia after he became an observant Jew and was caught celebrating Shabbat. He eventually was allowed to immigrate to Israel and he became a well-known Rabbi. A discussion of this could reveal how you and others find Seder night impactful on your own Jewish identity.

FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

1. The word Haggadah means to *tell*. But it also means, to *bind*, *join* or *connect*. Other nations achieve this through being in a common location/land, having a common language and culture. The Jewish people have experienced 2000 years of exile which has led to the loss of these things. The national narrative has replaced them as the core factor protecting Jewish unity and survival.
2. The Haggadah is the minimum, and for many Jews it has managed to keep them feeling connected even when a lot of other aspects of their lifestyle are separate to Judaism. A broader education and strength of family and community are other factors that have also achieved Jewish continuity.

AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. See *The Core Idea*, answer 1. Also see *It Once Happened*, answer 2 and *From the Thought of Rabbi Sacks*, answer 1.
2. It is the responsibility of a nation's leader to ensure the nation's narrative is passed onto future generations. The national narrative protects national identity and values. A good leader gives the people these through retelling the story of the nation.
3. See *The Core Idea*, answer 3.
4. History is the story that does not belong to us. It may be interesting and valuable to learn from, but it is not part of our own identity. Memory is our own story and our own identity. It is personal, and is the basis for who we are, and the national identity we transfer to the next generation. Judaism is concerned with this transmission, and therefore places great significance on ritual and education in order to ensure the next generation receives the national memory and with it their own identity.
5. America has a national story because it is a society based on the idea of covenant. Narrative is at the heart of covenantal politics because it locates national identity in a set of historic events. The memory of those events evokes the values for which those who came before us fought and of which we are the guardians. England does not have the same kind of national narrative because it is based not on covenant but on hierarchy and tradition.