



COVENANT & CONVERSATION

Family Edition

בחקתי תשע"ט
Bechukotai 5779

The Birth of Hope

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 BECHUKOTAI IN A NUTSHELL

Parshat Bechukotai is dominated by the passage in which God speaks of the blessings that will be experienced by the Israelites if they are faithful to the covenant, and the curses they will encounter if they are not. This belief in Divine involvement in history forms the basis for the Jewish principle of hope. The choice between blessing and curse

lies at the heart of Judaism as an ethic of responsibility – the opposite of a victim culture. The remarkable statement at the end of the curses - that whatever happens, God will not reject His people, explicitly refutes the Christian argument against Judaism, that God had rejected the "old" covenant in favour of a new one.



THE CORE IDEA

This week we read the *Tochecha*, the terrifying curses warning of what would happen to Israel if it betrayed its Divine mission. We read a prophecy of history gone wrong. If Israel loses its way spiritually, say the curses, it will lose physically, economically, and politically also. The nation will experience defeat and disaster. It will forfeit its freedom and its land. The people will go into exile and suffer persecution. Customarily we read this passage in the synagogue *sotto voce*, in an undertone, so fearful is it.

Yet the passage does not end there. In an abrupt change of key, we then hear one of the great consolations in the Bible:

Yet in spite of this, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not cast them away, neither will I abhor them, to destroy them utterly and to break My covenant with them: for I am the Lord their God. But I will for their sakes remember the covenant of their ancestors, whom I brought forth out of Egypt in the

sight of the heathen, that I might be their God: I am the Lord. (Vayikra 26:44–45)

This is a turning point in the history of the human spirit. It is *the birth of hope*: not hope as a dream, a wish, a desire, but hope as the very shape of history itself, "the arc of the moral universe," as Martin Luther King Jr. put it. God is just. He may punish. He may hide His face. But He will not break His word. He will fulfil His promise. He will redeem His children. He will bring them home.

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. How does the promise that God will never cast us away or break the covenant give us hope?
2. What is the difference between "hope as a dream" and hope as the "shape of history"?
3. What are your hopes for your life and for the world?



IT ONCE HAPPENED...

Gena Turgel survived Plaszow, Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen. She saw her sister and brother-in-law shot and lost much of her family. Only an iron determination to save her mother kept her alive. When Belsen was liberated by the British in 1945, one of the officers was a Jewish man, Norman Turgel. Mere days after they met, they became engaged. Rev. Leslie Hardman, the Jewish chaplain who was with the troops as they entered Belsen, officiated at their wedding. Gena's wedding dress, made from a British army parachute, is now exhibited in London's Imperial War Museum. Gena and Norman moved to London, and she lived there until the age of 95, leaving children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

In 1987 she wrote her autobiography, *I Light a Candle*, and she spent much of her later years speaking to young people at schools and universities, recounting her experiences during the Holocaust. Most of the people to whom she spoke were not Jewish, and what she had to tell them often

came as a profound shock. Despite everything, most children do not know the details of those years. Yet what she conveyed is not dark. Gena had no bitterness or hate or rage, only serenity and graciousness.

What she taught, over and above the need for tolerance and the willingness to fight on behalf of those who are victims, is a love of life itself. Every day was, for her, an unexpected gift. She knew that there were hundreds of moments at which she might have died. That, too, is something that, after her experiences at the hands of the Nazis, she felt a need to convey to future generations: a sense that time is precious and must be used to create good.

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. How did the strength of Gena Turgel's hope affect her throughout her life?
2. How can Gena's story help you have hope?



THINKING MORE DEEPLY

Hope is one of the very greatest Jewish contributions to Western civilisation. Judaism is the "voice of hope in the conversation of humankind." In the ancient world, there were 'tragic cultures' in which people believed that the gods were, at best, indifferent to our existence, at worst actively malevolent. The best humans could do was avoid attracting their attention or appease their wrath with sacrifices. In the end, though, it was considered all in vain. The great stories of unavoidable tragedy were Greek. Biblical Hebrew did not even contain a word that meant "tragedy" in the Greek sense. Modern Hebrew had to borrow the word: hence, *tragedia*.

Then there are secular cultures like that of the contemporary West in which the very existence of the universe, of human life and consciousness, is seen as the result of a series of meaningless accidents intended by no one and with no redeeming purpose. All we know for certain is that we are born, we live, we will die, and it will be as if we had never been. Hope is not unknown in such cultures, but it is what Aristotle defined as "a waking dream," a private wish that things might be otherwise. As seen through the eyes of ancient Greece or contemporary science, there is nothing in the texture of reality or the direction of history to justify belief that the human condition could be other and better than it is.

For the most part, the Hebrew Bible expresses a quite different view: that there can be change in the affairs of humankind. We are summoned to the long journey at whose end is redemption

and the Messianic Age. *Judaism is the principled rejection of tragedy in the name of hope.*

Judaism insists that the reality that underlies the universe is not deaf to our prayers, blind to our aspirations, indifferent to our existence. We are not wrong to strive to perfect the world, refusing to accept the inevitability of suffering and injustice. We hear this note at key points in the Torah. It occurs twice at the end of Bereishit when first Jacob then Joseph assure the other members of the covenantal family that their stay in Egypt will not be endless. God will honour His promise and bring them back to the Promised Land. We hear it again, magnificently, as Moses tells the people that even after the worst suffering that can befall a nation, Israel will not be lost or rejected (Devarim 30:3–4).

But the key text is here at the end of the curses of the *Tochecha*. This is where God promises that even if Israel sins, it may suffer, but it will never die. It may experience exile, but eventually it will return. It may undergo the most terrible suffering, but it will never have reason to despair. Israel may betray the covenant but God never will. This is one of the most fateful of all biblical assertions. It tells us that no fate is so bleak as to murder hope itself. No defeat is final, no exile endless, no tragedy the story's last word.

Subsequent to Moses, all the prophets delivered this message, each in their own way. Hosea told the people that though they

may act like a faithless wife, God remains a loving husband. Amos assured them that God would rebuild even the most devastated ruins. Jeremiah bought a field in Anatot to assure the people that they would return from Babylon. Isaiah became the poet laureate of hope in visions of a world at peace that have never been surpassed.

Of all the prophecies of hope inspired by Vayikra 26, none is as haunting as the vision in which Ezekiel saw the people of the covenant as a valley of dry bones. Gradually they came together, took on flesh, and lived again: "Then He said to me: Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up and our hope is lost [*avda tikvatenu*]; we are cut off.' Therefore prophesy and say to them, 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: 'O My people, I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them; I will bring you back to the land of Israel.'" (Ezekiel 37:11–14)

No text in all of literature is so evocative of the fate of the Jewish people after the Holocaust, before the rebirth in 1948 of the State of Israel. Almost prophetically, Naftali Herz Imber alluded to this text in his words for the song that eventually became Israel's national anthem. He wrote: *od lo avda*

tikvatenu, "our hope is not yet lost." Not by accident is Israel's anthem called HaTikva, "The Hope."

Hope emerged as part of the spiritual landscape of Western civilisation through a quite specific set of beliefs: that God exists, that He cares about us, that He has made a covenant with humanity and a further covenant with the people He chose to be a living example of faith. That covenant transforms our understanding of history. God has given His word, and He will never break it, however much we may break our side of the promise. Without these beliefs, we would have no reason to hope at all.

History as conceived in this parsha is not utopian. Faith does not blind us to the apparent randomness of circumstance, the cruelty of fortune, or the seeming injustices of fate. No one reading Vayikra 26 can be an optimist. Yet no one sensitive to its message can abandon hope. Without this, Jews and Judaism would not have survived. Without belief in the covenant and its insistence, "Yet in spite of this," there might have been no Jewish people after the destruction of one or other of the Temples, or the Holocaust itself. It is not too much to say that Jews kept hope alive, and hope kept the Jewish people alive.



FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

This was perhaps the greatest contribution of Judaism – via the Judaic roots of Christianity – to the West. The idea that time is an arena of change, and that freedom and creativity are God's gift to humanity, resulted in astonishing advances in science and our understanding of the world, technology and our ability to control the human environment, economics and our ability to lift people out of poverty and starvation, medicine and our ability to cure disease. It led to the abolition of slavery, the growth of a more egalitarian society, the enhanced position of women, and the emergence of democracy and liberalism ...

To be a Jew is to be an agent of hope. Every ritual, every command, every syllable of the Jewish story is a protest against escapism, resignation and the blind acceptance of fate. Judaism, the religion of the free God, is a religion of freedom. Jewish faith is written in the future tense. It is belief

in a future that is not yet but could be, if we heed God's call, obey His will and act together as a covenantal community. The name of the Jewish future is hope ...

Jews were and are still called on to be the voice of hope in the conversation of humankind.

Future Tense, p. 249-252

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. How did Judaism contribute to the world the idea that "time was an arena of change"? How did this lead to all the achievements listed?
2. What is the alternative to hope? How does Judaism combat this?



AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. Where in this week's parsha do we learn that hope is central to what it means to be a Jew?
2. How is Judaism's value and culture of hope different from other cultures and societies?
3. Where else in Judaism can you see this value expressed?
4. Can you also see hope expressed in Jewish history and the way Jews have acted throughout time?
5. What are your hopes for your life and for the world?



QUESTION TIME

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EDUCATIONAL COMPANION TO THE QUESTIONS

THE CORE IDEA

1. Whatever challenges we face in our history, we refuse not to see a light at the end of the tunnel, and have faith that the future will be better, because God has promised us that He will never abandon us. Even if there is reason to believe the challenges we face can be explained through our own mistakes, God always leaves the door open for return and redemption. The opportunity for *teshuva* – repentance – always exists. The covenant will never be totally broken and unrepairable. There will always be hope of a brighter future.
2. Hope as a dream is a superficial hope that our dreams will be realised. But hope as the shape of history suggests that history has a destiny. The hope found in the Torah is that the destiny of history is redemption for the Jewish people and the world.
3. Hopes can be individual, national, or universal, and the lesson of hope from parshat *Bechukotai* can be applied to all of these.

IT ONCE HAPPENED...

1. Gena displayed deep hope in a brighter future by rebuilding her life immediately after her experiences in the Holocaust. She married and built a family that would contribute to the rebirth and continuity of the Jewish people in the post-Holocaust generation. Through this and her efforts to share her love of life, she demonstrated her belief in hope as "the shape of history" – that there would be a happy ending to her story, the story of the Jewish people, and the story of the humanity.
2. On any given day, when life itself seems out to get you, when all you want to do is go back to bed and give up, remember Gena's story. How she picked up her life and went forward, and appreciated each day as a gift.

FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

1. Many ancient societies believed that everything in history is pre-destined, or that history is doomed to repeat itself in a never-ending cycle. Judaism introduced to the world the revolutionary idea that tomorrow can be better than today. That humans have agency to change their world for the better. That history has a destiny. That the world can and will be redeemed. This was a new belief in a linear history that marches towards a different destiny, and that humans are God's partners in achieving this. This outlook has encouraged Jews to be at the forefront of achievements and initiatives to improve the world and bring it closer to its destined state of redemption.
2. The alternative to hope is despair caused by the belief that history is destined to repeat itself *ad infinitum*. Judaism, in both its ritual and its philosophy, refuses to accept these positions. It encourages humanity to change the world for the better, inspiring the belief that tomorrow can be better than today.

AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. After listing the terrible curses that will be visited upon the Jewish people if they stray from the path of God and break their end of the covenant, the Torah states that "In spite of this, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not cast them away, neither will I abhor them, to destroy them utterly and to break My covenant with them." However difficult Jewish history becomes, this gives us hope that there will always be light at the end of the tunnel, because God has promised us that He will never abandon us.
2. See *From the Thought of Rabbi Sacks*, answer 2.
3. This concept is inherent in the belief that one day Mashiach will come, heralding the redemption of the world, an age of universal peace and an end to suffering in the world. This belief is also found in every ethical command that requires us to make society a better place, for example every *mitzvah* that commands us to protect the poor in society. This implies a belief that society can be improved. Hope in a brighter future is at the core of these ideas.
4. Persecution and suffering are recurring themes in Jewish history. But so, too, are the Jewish responses to adversity – the Jewish drive for rebuilding and continuity. Jews time after time would respond to an expulsion by finding another land to build and thrive in, until the next tragic chapter of Jewish history refused to leave them to live there in peace. Generation after generation of Jews showed perseverance and determination not just to survive but to thrive as a nation. No better example of this is the establishment of the State of Israel just three years following the darkest period Jewish history has known – the Holocaust.
5. See *The Core Idea*, answer 3.