



COVENANT & CONVERSATION

Family Edition

FINDING FAITH IN THE PARSHA WITH RABBI SACKS

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בס"ד

שופטים תש"ף
Shoftim 5780

**A Sage is
Greater
than a
Prophet**

** KEY IDEA OF THE WEEK **

Our Prophets' visions survived when translated from utopian ideals into practical policies.



PARSHAT SHOFTIM IN A NUTSHELL

In parshat Shoftim, Moses finishes explaining how to worship God in the Promised Land. Next he discusses the different kinds of Jewish leaders and how they will govern society. He begins with the structure of the justice system: there must be courts, judges, and officers in every city. All people must be able to approach the justice system and judges must be fair and unbiased. Special procedures must be followed when someone is accused of idolatry, and there is to be a supreme court to deal with difficult cases. There will be three main types of leader: Kings, Priests and Levites, and Prophets.

Moses then warns the people to avoid magic, witchcraft, and false prophets. Lying witnesses who testify falsely are to be punished. The laws of going to war are set out. The parsha ends with the laws of responding to an unsolved murder case (a process called the *Egla Arufa*).

QUESTION TO PONDER:

Which types of biblical leaders do we still have today? Do we have any other kinds of religious leaders not included here?



THE CORE IDEA

In Shoftim, Moses speaks about the great institutions of Judaism: Courts, judges, officers, Kings, Priests, Levites and Prophets. In the case of the Prophet, Moses says in the name of God: "I will raise up a Prophet for them from among their own people, like yourself: I will put My words in his mouth, and he will speak to them all that I command him." (Devarim 18:18)

This cannot be meant literally. In the quality and clarity of his communications with God, Moses was unique. He was matchless in the miracles he performed. Most importantly, only he was authorised to proclaim Torah: he was Israel's sole legislator. The King and Sanhedrin both had powers to make temporary laws for the sake of social order. Prophets were given the authority to command specific, time-bound acts. But no one could add to or subtract from the 613 commandments given by God through Moses.

Rambam explains the role of future Prophets like this: "He [the Prophet] will come not to establish a religion, but to command them to keep the words of the Torah, warning the

people not to transgress them, as the last among them said: 'Remember the Torah of Moses My servant'" (Malachi 3:22).

In other words, the Prophets who followed Moses, from Elijah to Malachi, were not revolutionaries. They did not intend to create something new. Rather, they restored something old. Their task was to bring the people back to the mission Moses had taught them: to stay faithful to God, and to create a just and compassionate society.

Eventually, during or after the Second Temple period, most of these institutions of leadership came to an end. There were no more Kings because Israel had no sovereignty. There were no Priests because there was no Temple. But there were also no Prophets. How important were the Prophets and what happened to prophecy?

One opinion stated in the Talmud (Baba Batra 12a) is that the Sages became the successors to the Prophets: "From the day that the Temple was destroyed, prophecy was taken from the Prophets and given to the Sages ... And a Sage is greater than a Prophet, as it is stated: 'A Prophet has a heart

of wisdom" (Tehillim 90:12). Who is compared to whom? You must say that the lesser is compared to the greater. (Since a Prophet must have a heart of wisdom, the Sage, who is wisdom personified, must be greater still).



IT ONCE HAPPENED...

Theodore Herzl is known as the 'Chozeh HaMedina' (Visionary of the State). He was born into an assimilated Jewish family in Budapest, Hungary, and apart from his Bar Mitzvah, Judaism did not play a significant part in his life during his early years. But then he moved to Paris to work as a journalist, and everything changed. He covered the Dreyfuss Affair in 1894 and witnessed the deeply ingrained antisemitism in French society. It was then that he realised the Jewish people needed to have their own state. So Herzl embarked on a campaign to convince both the Jewish world and the powerful and influential heads of state to support his idea to create a Jewish State. Ten years later he died at the age of 44, with little to show for his efforts. While he had created the Zionist Congress which brought together Zionists from across the Jewish world, there was little agreement within this group, and despite numerous meetings with heads of state, none had formally agreed to support his ideas. He spent his entire fortune and sacrificed his health to the cause of Zionism, yet did not live to see the result of his hard work.

David Grun was born in Poland in 1886. In 1906, two years after Herzl's death, he immigrated to Palestine, later changing his name to David Ben-Gurion. He soon took on leadership roles in the Yishuv (the Jewish community in pre-state Palestine), and ultimately became the *de facto* leader of the Jewish community in Palestine. He was instrumental in creating the organisations that would later become the institutions of state such as the Histadrut, Hagana, and the political party

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. What was the main role of the Prophets?
2. How did the Sages continue this role and how was their leadership different?

Poali Zion (which later became the Labour Party). He ultimately became the first Prime Minister of the State of Israel, a position he held for 14 years.

Herzl's vision was to create a state from the top-down, using political means and diplomacy to achieve international support for the creation of a Jewish state. He famously said, "If you will it, it is no dream." David Ben-Gurion represented practical Zionism, a movement that differed from Herzl's political strategy, by instead working to create a Jewish State through moving to Palestine and starting with establishing the foundations. This was a bottom-up approach. There is much debate over which strategy ultimately led to the establishment of the State of Israel. Most historians agree that neither approach would have succeeded without the other.

Forty-four years after Herzl's death, David Ben-Gurion declared Israel's independence on 14th May 1948, whilst sitting in the Tel Aviv Museum with a portrait of Theodore Herzl proudly displayed on the wall behind him.

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. What do you think is more important, having a vision or taking practical steps towards a goal?
2. Which approach best represents the Prophets and which is more similar to the approach of the Sages?



THINKING MORE DEEPLY

The notion that the Sages are the successors to the Prophets is seriously interesting. The early Judges in Israel were Kohanim. When Moses blessed the people at the end of his life, he said of the tribe of Levi, "They shall teach Your laws to Jacob and Your instructions to Israel" (Devarim 33:10). When Ezra taught Torah to the Israelites, he positioned Levites among the people to explain what was being said. All this suggests that when the Sages – teachers and masters of Jewish law – traced their intellectual-spiritual lineage, they should have done so by seeing themselves as heirs of the Kohanim and Levites. But they did not do so. We see this from the famous Mishnah that opens Pirkei Avot: "Moses received the Torah at Sinai and handed it onto Joshua, Joshua to the elders, and the elders to the Prophets, and the Prophets to the Men of the Great Assembly."

The Sages saw themselves as heirs to the Prophets. But in what sense? And how did they come to see themselves not just as

heirs to, but as *greater than* the Prophets. What is more, the proof-text they cite means nothing of the kind. The verse in Tehillim 90 says, "Teach us to number our days, that *we may gain* a heart of wisdom." The Talmud is playing on the fact that two quite different words sound alike: נָבִיא (we may gain) and נְבִיא (a Prophet). In other words, only by suspending our critical faculties is the proof-text a proof.

Something very strange is happening here. The Sages, who valued humility, who knew that prophecy had come to an end in the days of Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi (5 centuries before the destruction of the Second Temple), who believed that the most one could hear from heaven was a *Bat Kol*, a distant echo, are here saying that not only are they like the Prophets, but that they are superior to the Prophets.

The message here is that the Sages took the ideals of the Prophets and turned them into practical programmes. That is how they increased the wisdom of the Prophets. For example, Prophets often had to reprimand the people, administering rebuke. This was Ezekiel's experience of the task:

God said: "Son of man, I am sending you to the Israelites, to a rebellious nation that has rebelled against Me... Say to them, 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says.' And whether they listen or fail to listen—for they are a rebellious people—they will know that a Prophet has been among them. (Ezekiel 2:3-5)

Ezekiel was told to take a public stand. Once he had done that, he had fulfilled his duty. The people were warned, and then it was their decision whether or not to change their behaviour.

The Sages had a completely different approach. First, they understood the task of remonstrating as belonging to everyone, not just Prophets. That is how they understood the verse, "You shall surely rebuke your neighbour so you will not share in their guilt" (Vayikra 19:17). Second, they held that it should be done not once but up to a hundred times if necessary. In fact, they said that a person should keep reprimanding a wrongdoer until they were hit or cursed or scolded. All of this, though, applies only if there is a reasonable chance of making the situation better. If not, then we apply the rule: "Just as it is a mitzvah to say something that will be heeded, so it is a mitzvah *not* to say something that will not be heeded."

Note the difference between the two approaches. The Prophet takes a heroic stand but does not take responsibility for whether the people listen or not. The Rabbis do not take a heroic stand. In fact, they democratise the responsibility for rebuke so that it applies to everyone. But they are also hypersensitive to when it is the right approach. If there is a chance of changing someone for the better, then you must try a hundred times, but if there is no chance at all, it is better to be silent. This is not only a wise approach; it is a highly effective one.

Now consider peace. No finer visions of a world at peace have ever been given than by Israel's Prophets. This is just one:

"The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little

child will lead them... They will neither harm nor destroy on all My holy mountain, for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea." (Isaiah 11:6-9)

And the Sages taught: "For the sake of peace, the poor of the heathens should not be prevented from gathering gleanings, forgotten sheaves, and corners of the field... they should be supported as we support the poor of Israel, the sick of the heathens should be visited as we visit the sick of Israel, and the dead of the heathens should be buried as we bury the dead of Israel."

Once again, the difference is glaring. The Prophets had a dazzling vision of a distant future, but the Sages took this idea and actually set out a practical programme of good community relations, a way of sustaining peaceful coexistence between the Jewish community and its Gentile neighbours. Their teachings were imaginative, gracious and workable.

There are many other examples. The Sages achieved something extraordinary. Throughout the biblical era, the Israelites were constantly tempted by idolatry and foreign ways. The Prophets were often driven close to despair. During the rabbinic era, Jews became a people defined by religion, commandments, learning and prayer, sustained voluntarily and maintained tenaciously against all pressures to convert to the majority faith. How was this achieved? Because the Rabbis did not focus on distant visions. They devised practical programmes. These may have lacked drama, but they worked.

The Sages, perhaps to their own surprise, realised that where the Prophets failed, they were succeeding. **I believe that institutions like prophecy survive when they are translated from utopian ideals into practical policies. The greatness of the Sages, still not fully appreciated by the world, is that guided by the visions of the Prophets, they gave us the instructions for how to get from here to there.**

QUESTION TO PONDER:

Why is it so important to translate ideas and ideals into practical steps, implementing them into a society?



FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

Judaism's genius was to take high ideals and translate them into life's simple daily deeds: the way of mitzvot, acting in accordance with God's will. We do not just contemplate truth: we live it.

Ten Paths to God, Mitzvot, p.3



AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. How did the later Prophets differ from Moses?
2. Why did the age of prophecy come to an end?
3. What aspects of the different types of biblical leadership mentioned in the parsha can be found in the later religious leadership of the Sages?



QUESTION TIME

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EDUCATIONAL COMPANION TO THE QUESTIONS

IN A NUTSHELL

1. The parsha mentions judges, officers, Kings, Priests, Levites and Prophets. Although we still have Levites and Priests (Kohanim) they only have a ceremonial leadership role. All the other leadership positions mentioned were discontinued when sovereignty and the Temple worship were lost. Today we have religious leadership from rabbinic leaders and teachers.

THE CORE IDEA

1. The Prophets communicated the word of God and through their speeches they encouraged the people to create a society based on Torah values and ideals. When the people strayed from these ideals it was the role of the Prophet to highlight this and guide them back to the path of God.
2. While the Sages did not receive direct instructions from God to deliver messages to the people, they developed a system of mitzvot and Jewish law in order to ensure the people had the best possible chance of living the Torah values that the Prophets had been communicating to them. If Jewish law and Torah values were followed faithfully then Jewish society would be based on these ideals, which was the aim of the Prophets.

IT ONCE HAPPENED...

1. This interesting question is relevant in many different contexts, including business, social entrepreneurship, and religious communal life. Without a vision, ideals and dreams cannot be fulfilled. But without a practical plan and leadership that can deliver this in a real and tangible way, visions and ideals are at risk of being trapped in mere words and in the dreams of the visionaries. Very often we find leaders who excel in one or the other of these areas, but rarely both. Neither can succeed without the other.
2. Herzl was the visionary who did not manage to bring his vision to practical fulfilment in his lifetime, and Ben-Gurion excelled at delivering Herzl's Zionist dream through a practical programme of state-building. The Prophets, like Herzl, were the dreamers who spoke in beautiful, poetic language about a society based on the ideals and values of the Torah. The Sages, like Ben-Gurion, built a programme of laws and mitzvot that established a society based on those ideals and values.

THINKING MORE DEEPLY

1. Ideals can remain abstract and theoretical if they are not translated into practical steps for fulfilment. Only very few people can find a way to live by ideals without clear practical instructions showing them how to do this. Most of us need guidance and concrete instruction. This is the basis of all legal systems, which translate national values into practical society and civilisation.

AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

These questions are all open, to encourage thought and debate. There are no wrong answers. However, here are some thoughts to consider:

1. Moses was Israel's sole legislator, and only he could proclaim Torah (in the name of God). The later Prophets were given the authority to command specific, time-bound acts, but could not add to or subtract from the 613 commandments given by God through Moses. The Prophets who followed Moses were not revolutionaries, because they did not create something new but rather restored something old. Their task was to recall people to the mission Moses taught them: to stay faithful to God, and to create a just and compassionate society.
2. Prophecy was lost to the people once they were exiled from the Holy Land and distanced from their previous intimacy with God there (including the loss of the Temple as a means to worship God).
3. The Sages (and their successors, today's modern Rabbis) are our only surviving religious leadership. We no longer have Temple worship, so the majority of the functions of the Priests and Levites are lost to us. The educational aspects of the Levites' role have been transferred to professional teachers and Rabbis. But the aspiration of the Prophets and Sages, to ensure the ideals and values of the Torah are at the heart of Jewish society, has been taken on by the Rabbis, who continue to develop and legislate Jewish law, ensuring those ideals are embodied by those who are faithful to halachah and mitzvot.