



COVENANT & CONVERSATION

Family Edition

FINDING FAITH IN THE PARSHA WITH RABBI SACKS

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בס"ד

ואתחנן תש"ף
Va'etchanan
5780

**The Infinite
Game**

** KEY IDEA OF THE WEEK **

We need to internalise the rules of how to treat each other, to develop a moral instinct.



PARSHAT VA'ETCHANAN IN A NUTSHELL

Va'etchanan contains some of the most important sections of the whole Torah. First Moses tells the people how special their laws and history are. Their mitzvot, their laws, were given by God Himself, and their history was written by God. There is no other nation which can say the same.

Moses then begins his second great speech in preparation for the Israelites to enter the Land of Israel. He reminds the people of the Ten Commandments and he retells of how they were given to Israel by God at Mount Sinai. He then commands them to remember to make God the centre of their lives – the words he uses are will become the first

paragraph of the *Shema*, the greatest expression of our love for God. This love is more than an emotion. It is an ideal that we surround ourselves with. We constantly speak about it with our children, men wear it on their arms and heads in the form of *tefillin*, and we place it as *mezuzot* "on the doorposts" of all the rooms in our homes (Devarim 6:9).

QUESTION TO PONDER:

Isn't it enough to do the mitzvot? Why must we love God also?



THE CORE IDEA

It says in this week's parsha: "Be sure to keep the commandments, decrees, and laws that the Lord your God has commanded you. Do what is right and good in the eyes of the Lord..." (Devarim 6:17-18)

The second verse seems strange. Doesn't the first verse cover all 613 of the Torah's mitzvot? Why then does the Torah add, "Do what is right and good in the sight of the Lord"? Surely doing what is right and good means keeping God's commands, decrees and laws! Are these not two ways of saying the same thing?

The Talmud (Bava Metzia 108a) explains: "And you shall do that which is right and good in the eyes of the Lord" means that one should ensure that every action is right and good, even beyond what we are legally allowed to do. For example of this in the Torah, let's look at *dina debar metzra*, "the law of the bordering property." When a landowner comes to sell a piece of land, the owner of the neighbouring

land has the right to buy it. If it is instead sold to someone else, the neighbour can force the buyer to give them the land, and then reimburse them for the price they paid for it.

This law is not about land ownership as such. In general, a landowner has the right to sell to whomever they choose. It is about doing "the right and the good" – what people sometimes call *being a mensch*. To the neighbour, the purchase of the land is an immense good. They can expand their estate without having to spread their landholdings in different locations. To the outsider, losing this purchase is not a significant loss because they can acquire other fields elsewhere. The law of *bar metzra* goes beyond the usual principles of law in order to achieve a moral end: helping one's neighbour.

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. What is the difference between law and morality?
2. Why do we keep to laws? Why should we try to be moral?



IT ONCE HAPPENED...

It was two weeks until Aryeh's Bar Mitzvah. He had been practising his parsha, Va'etchanan, for many months, and although he was nervous, deep down he knew he was prepared. But he still needed to find a Dvar Torah for his speech, and this was easier said than done. With so many different topics in Va'etchanan, which idea should he choose to speak about?

Then he noticed something strange in Devarim 6:17-18. After reminding us of the Ten Commandments and the Shema, Hashem tells us not only to keep all the commandments, but to also 'do what is right and good in the eyes of God'.

"Surely the right thing is to keep all the mitzvot!" he said to his father. "What else is Hashem telling us?"

So they sat down together to take a closer look. "Do you think it is possible to keep the mitzvot according to all the laws, and still not be doing 'what is right and good?'" asked his father. Aryeh thought about this and became frustrated. "How can there be more than keeping the mitzvot? What else can God expect from us?" he demanded.

"I think we might find the answer in the FA Cup," his father replied with a mischievous grin. Aryeh looked totally confused. They had just watched their beloved Arsenal football team reach the FA Cup finals at the expense of the superior Manchester City (a miracle of almost biblical proportions) but what on earth could that have to do with Va'etchanan?!

"Let me explain," said his father. "Before you were born, in 1999, Arsenal faced Sheffield United in the fifth round of the FA Cup. With 15 minutes remaining, the score was level at 1:1 but then a Sheffield player got injured. A teammate kicked the ball out to allow him to receive treatment, and when the game restarted, Arsenal threw the ball back towards the Sheffield side so they could start the game again in possession. But Arsenal's

striker Kanu misunderstood what had happened. He ran on to the loose ball and crossed to Marc Overmars, who calmly slotted the ball away for the winning goal!"

"Wow the Sheffield players must have been furious!" Aryeh exclaimed, understanding the injustice of the moment.

"They were! They demanded that the referee disallow the goal, but there was nothing the ref could do. Arsenal had not broken any official rules, only an unwritten rule of decency and fair play that could not be enforced. The Sheffield team didn't want to forfeit the match, so they played on, and a few minutes later the final whistle blew and they were out of the Cup."

"I get it!" exclaimed Aryeh. "This is an example of when playing by the rules just isn't enough. Arsenal didn't do the right thing, despite not breaking the rules!"

"Exactly," said his father with a smile. "This is just what Hashem is asking of us. Not only to keep the rules, which are the mitzvot, but also to always do 'the right thing', which sometimes requires more. In the end Arsenal did do the right thing. The team and their manager Arsène Wenger were upset by the misunderstanding, and wanted to play the game under fairer conditions, so they offered a rematch. This had never happened in the history of the FA Cup. And Arsenal won the rematch and progressed to the next round, although sadly they lost in the semi-final, so this year's team has already gone one better. Let's hope they win it for you on your Bar Mitzvah!"

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. How are the laws of the game and the spirit of the game different?
2. How are the football rules similar to Devarim 6:17-18?



THINKING MORE DEEPLY

The popular author and TED lecturer Simon Sinek recently published a book entitled *The Infinite Game* about the difference between two types of enterprise. One, a *finite game*, has a starting and ending point. It obeys rules, recognises boundaries, and has winners and losers. Most sports are like this. Often, politics is too: there are campaigns, elections, rules and regulations, winning and losing amongst the candidates. Businesses can be run this way as well, when they focus on quarterly profits, share price, market share and the like.

But there are also *infinite games*. These have no starting point or finishing line, no clear winners and losers, no agreed rules or boundaries. Art is like this. So are music and literature. Beethoven didn't win. Bach didn't lose. Great artists change the rules. That is what Beethoven, Schoenberg and Stravinsky did; so too did Van Gogh, Cézanne and Picasso. Politics can be like

this when it rises above opinion polls and sets its vision on larger issues of justice, equality and the moral health of society. Education is a finite game when it focuses on exam results and qualifications, or it can be an infinite game when it is about breadth and depth of understanding and character development.

Finite games are played to win. Infinite games are played for their own sake. Finite games are usually performed in front of an audience of some kind. Infinite games are participative. We engage in them because we are changed by them. Infinite games are not a means to an end: winning the championship, beating the market, victory in an election. Instead they are what psychologists call autotelic, that is, they contain their purpose within themselves. We do them because the activity is inherently creative, demanding, uplifting and ennobling.

These are not simply two types of game. They are two different ways of playing a game. If, in any country at any time, politics is treated as a finite game where the focus is on popularity, ratings, and election results, then it quickly becomes superficial, trivial, uninspiring. The quality of leadership declines. The public becomes cynical and disillusioned. Trust is eroded and the social bond becomes frayed. When politics is lifted by a sense of history and destiny on the part its leaders, when it becomes not the pursuit of power but a form of service-to-others and social responsibility, when it is driven by high ideals and ethical aspiration, then leadership becomes statesmanship and politics itself a noble calling.

This is not to denigrate finite games. We need them, because in many spheres of life we need rules, boundaries and time limits. But we must also have space for infinite games because they are among the highest expressions of the human spirit.

These reflections are prompted by the two verses quoted above (Devarim 6:17-18). Rashi says that doing what is right and good in the eyes of the Lord means "compromise, acting beyond the strict demands of the law." Ramban agrees with this but goes on to make a fascinating and fundamental point:

"First we are told to keep the commandments, testimonies, and laws as God has commanded them. And then we are taught: even regarding what God did *not* command, pay attention to do what is good and right in God's eyes, because God loves goodness and righteousness. This is important because it is impossible to mention in the Torah all the details of people's behaviour with neighbours and friends, or business conduct or local ordinances. The Torah mentions many such laws... [and then] states generally that one should do what is good and right regarding everything, including compromise and acting beyond the strict demands of the law."

Ramban seems to be concurring with Rashi, but actually he is making a somewhat different point. Rashi is saying: keep the law and go beyond it. Ramban is saying that there are some things that *cannot be specified by law*: "because it is impossible to mention in the Torah all the details of people's behaviour." The

Torah gives us specific examples: don't gossip, don't take revenge and so on. But the rest depends on the situation, the circumstances, and the person or people you are dealing with.

Not all the Torah is a finite game. Much of it is. There are rules, commands, decrees and laws. There is the *halachah*. There are boundaries: milk, meat, public domain, private domain. There are beginnings and endings: the earliest time to say the morning Shema and the latest time. There are successes and defeats: either one does or doesn't complete the counting of the Omer. All of this is finite even though it is dedicated to the One-who-is-Infinite.

Ramban's point however is that there are significant areas of the moral life that cannot be reduced to rules. That is because rules deal in generalities, and human lives are particular. We are all different. So is every situation in which we find ourselves. Good people know when to speak, when to be silent, when to praise, when to challenge. They hear the unspoken word, sense the concealed pain, focus on the other person rather than on themselves, and are guided by a deeply internalised moral sense that leads them instinctively away from anything less than the right and the good. The "right and the good in the sight of the Lord" is about leading a moral life during the infinite game of life.

I believe that we make a fundamental error when we think that all we need to know and to keep are the rules governing interactions *bein adam le-chavero*, between us and our fellows. The rules are essential but also incomplete. We need to develop a conscience that does not permit us to wrong, harm or hurt someone even if the rules permit us to do so. The moral life is an infinite game which cannot be reduced to rules. We need to learn and internalise a sense of "the right and the good."

QUESTION TO PONDER:

Can you think of practical examples of when this message needs to be heeded?



FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

Morality matters because we cherish relationships and believe that love, friendship, work and even the casual encounter of strangers are less fragile and abrasive when conducted against a shared code of civility and mutuality. It matters because we care for liberty and have come to understand that human dignity is better served by the restraints we impose on ourselves than those forced upon us by external laws and punishment and police.

Morality, p. 319



AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. Which parts of the Torah are a "finite game" and which are an "infinite game"?
2. What motivates us to keep the mitzvot and what motivates us to "do what is right"? Are they separate motivations?
3. Why does the Torah need to add the extra command to "do what is right"?



QUESTION TIME

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EDUCATIONAL COMPANION TO THE QUESTIONS

IN A NUTSHELL

1. This question reflects an age-old debate – do we need to have the right focus and intention when we perform mitzvot? Which is primary in Judaism, belief or practice? The context of the Shema in our parsha, included right after the Ten Commandments, seems to suggest that loving (and obviously believing in) God is important, when practising mitzvot. This connects to the message of the *Covenant & Conversation*. The morality that is expected beyond practice – going beyond the letter of the law – is more likely to come from the motivation of love of God than commitment to following the laws of Judaism for their own sake.

THE CORE IDEA

1. Laws are a system that enforce the values of a society. These should be moral, and their goal is to enforce people to live a moral life. But they are not the sum total of morality. A law system cannot be comprehensive and apply to every situation. It is possible to obey the laws and still find ways to not be moral. Morality, doing "what is right" is the way we keep the laws, and the way we live in society. The Torah needs to command both, to ensure that we follow the laws and also concern ourselves with doing "what is right" in the way we live our lives.
2. We keep the laws because they are enforced by the state or the rabbinic law courts, or some other authority. We are moral because we believe it is the right way to live.

IT ONCE HAPPENED...

1. The laws of the game try to enforce the spirit of the game, but in football, like in any other legal system, laws can be observed and enforced without the spirit of the game being enforced. In this case, while Arsenal were keeping the laws of the game, and the referee was enforcing these laws, the spirit of the game was missing, because the Arsenal team did not give the ball back to Sheffield United when they deserved it (having kicked the ball out of play so their player could receive treatment). The referee could not enforce the spirit of the game, but ultimately the Arsenal manager, Arsène Wenger, showed a commitment to the true spirit of the game by offering a rematch.
2. In our parsha, the Torah commands us to keep the mitzvot, and to do "what is right". The mitzvot (the laws) are not enough to achieve "what is right", just as the laws of football are not always enough to ensure the spirit of the game. The "spirit of the game" in the Torah, is morality – "what is right".

THINKING MORE DEEPLY

1. The Ramban developed the idea of *naval bi-reshut ha-Torah* (see His commentary to Vayikra. 19:2). He describes someone who keeps all the mitzvot and halachot, but who despite this is not moral, someone who doesn't treat people respectfully, and finds other loopholes in the law – ultimately this kind of person keeps to the written rules but is an immoral person. Unfortunately, we can find examples (in all religions) of religiously observant people who are careful to keep the laws but not careful to be good, moral people who treat others kindly. These people are the ones being addressed in these two verses.

AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. There are rules in the Torah, commands, decrees and laws. There is the halachah. Examples given here include boundaries: milk, meat, public domain, private domain. There are beginnings and endings: the earliest time to say the morning Shema and the latest time. There are successes and defeats: either one does or doesn't complete the counting of the Omer. The "right and the good in the sight of the Lord" is about the part of the moral life that is an infinite game. These are the areas of the moral life that cannot be reduced to rules, but describe ongoing behaviour, especially towards other people.
2. We keep the laws because they are enforced by rewards and punishments. These may be man-made consequences (rabbinic in this case) or from God (spiritual reward and punishment). We "do what is right" because it is right. This is morality, and in Va'etchanan God urges us to identify it and protect it.
3. It is possible to keep the laws in full and still not "do what is right". Ramban calls this a *naval bi-reshut ha-Torah* (someone who is immoral despite keeping the laws of the Torah). Rules deal in generalities, and human lives are particular. We are all different. So is every situation in which we find ourselves. "Do what is right" is our guiding principle here – to follow the spirit of the Torah even when the law of the Torah does not specify an action or behaviour.