



# COVENANT & CONVERSATION

## Family Edition

וזאת הברכה  
Vezot Habracha

**End  
Without an  
Ending**

### WELCOME TO COVENANT & CONVERSATION 5779: FAMILY EDITION

Written as an accompaniment to the weekly *Covenant & Conversation* essay, the Family Edition is aimed at connecting students, teenagers and families with Rabbi Sacks zt”l’s ideas and thoughts on the parsha.



### PARSHAT VEZOT HABRACHA IN A NUTSHELL

Vezot Habracha is Moshe’s blessing, delivered at the end of his life to the Israelites, tribe by tribe. It concludes emotionally with the story of the death and burial of Moshe. Moshe dies in the land of Moab, in an unknown location, so that “to this day no one knows his burial place” (Devarim 34:6). Hashem did not want his grave to be a place of pilgrimage and worship.

The very last verses of the Torah are a tribute to the greatest leader and Prophet the Israelites ever had. The ultimate tribute the Torah gives Moshe is both simple and

powerful. He was “the man Moshe” (Bamidbar 12:3), “the servant of the Lord” (Devarim 34:5). Vezot Habracha is not read as an ordinary Shabbat portion, but instead we read it during Simchat Torah. It is a powerful statement about mortality and what it means to a human. The Moshe we encounter in the Torah is simply a human being made great by the task he was set and by his humility. He became the ultimate channel through whom the word and power of God flowed.



### THE CORE IDEA

What an extraordinary way to end a book: not just *a* book but *the* Book of Books – with Moshe seeing the Promised Land from Mount Nevo, tantalisingly near yet so far away that he knows he will never reach it in his lifetime. This is an ending that goes against all the expectations of a classic story. A story about a journey should end at journey’s end, once we arrive at the destination. But the Torah terminates before the terminal. It ends in the middle. It is constructed as an unfinished symphony.

We, the readers and listeners, feel Moshe’s personal sense of incompleteness. He has dedicated a lifetime to leading the people out of Egypt to the Promised Land. Yet he was not granted his request to complete the task and reach the place to which he had spent his life as a leader leading the people. When he prayed, “Let me ... cross over and see the good land on the other side of the Jordan,” God replied, “Enough! Never speak to Me of this matter again” (Devarim 3:25–26).

The sense of incompleteness is not merely personal, not just a detail in the life of Moshe. It applies to the entire narrative as it has unfolded from the beginning of the book

of Shemot. The Israelites are in exile. God charges Moshe with the task of leading the people out of Egypt and bringing them to the land flowing with milk and honey, the country He had promised to Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov. It seems simple enough. Already in Shemot 13, the people have departed Egypt and begun their journey. Within days, they hit an obstacle. Ahead of them is the Red Sea. Behind them are the rapidly approaching chariots of Pharaoh’s army. A miracle happens. The sea divides. They pass over on dry land. Pharaoh’s troops, their chariot wheels caught in the mud, drown. Now all that stands between them and their destination is the wilderness. Every problem they face – a lack of food, water, direction, protection – is solved by Divine intervention mediated by Moshe. What is left to tell, if not their arrival?

Yet it *does not happen*. Spies are sent to determine the best way of entering and conquering the land, a relatively straightforward task. They come back, unexpectedly, with a demoralising report. The people lose heart and say they want to go back to Egypt. The result is that God decrees that they will have to wait a full generation, forty years,

before entering the land. So it is not only Moshe who does not cross the Jordan. The entire people have not done so by the time the Torah ends. That must await a new book, Yehoshua, not itself part of the Torah but rather of the *Nevi'im*, the later prophetic and historical texts.

This, from a literary point of view, is odd. But it is not accidental. In the Torah, style mirrors substance. The text is telling us something profound. The Jewish story ends without an ending. It closes without closure. There is in Judaism no equivalent of “and they all lived happily ever after”. Jewish time is open time – open to a finale not yet

realised, a destination not yet reached. The future can and will be better. The best is yet to come.

### QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. Have you ever read a story without an ending? Why do stories almost always have endings?
2. What is the possible message behind the story in the Torah not having an ending?
3. Has the Jewish story ended yet? What will be its ending?



### IT ONCE HAPPENED...

For this last edition of the *Covenant & Conversation Family Edition* of this cycle, for the “*It Once Happened...*” section, it is your turn to write the story. The story of you.

When and where were you born? What were your early years like? Where did you live? Who were your friends? What school did you go to? Do you have siblings? What are your memories from this period in your life?

Now write about the chapter you are currently in. What is your life like today? What are your likes and dislikes? Hobbies and pastimes? What do you like about school? What don't you like about school? What adventures have you had in the last few years that you think will be fond memories in the future?

Now come the interesting questions that need to be asked for this story to develop ...

What's the next for you? What does your future hold?

Where will you go? What will you do?

What are your hopes and dreams?

Will you achieve them?

How will you achieve them?

How does would you like your story to end?

### QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. What is the message behind this story-telling task?
2. How can we find out our true potential? What do you think your potential is?



### THINKING MORE DEEPLY

The biblical story has no ending, not simply because the Torah records history, and history has no end. The Torah is telling us something quite different from history in the way the Greeks, Herodotus and Thucydides, wrote it. Secular history has no meaning. It simply tells us what happened. Biblical history, by contrast, is saturated with meaning. Nothing merely happens *bemikreh*, by chance.

The Bible is a battle against myth. In myth, time is as it is in nature. It is cyclical. It goes through phases – spring, summer, autumn, winter; birth, growth, decline, death – but it always returns to where it began. The standard plot of myth is that order is threatened by the forces of chaos. In ancient times these were the gods of destruction. In more recent times they are the dark forces found in *Star Wars* and *Lord of the Rings*. The heroes battle against them. They may slip, fall, almost die, but ultimately they will succeed. Order is then restored. The world is once again as it was. Hence “they all lived happily ever after.” The future is the restoration of the past. There is a return

to order, to the way things were before the threat, but there is often no history, no progress, no development, no unanticipated outcome.

Judaism is a radical break with this way of seeing things. Instead, time becomes the arena of human growth. The future is not like the past. Nor can it be predicted, foreseen, the way the end of any myth can be foreseen. We cannot foretell the future, because *it depends on us* – how we act, how we choose, how we respond. The future cannot be predicted, because we have freewill. Even we ourselves do not know how we will respond to crisis until it happens. Only in retrospect do we discover ourselves. *We face an open future*. Only God, who is beyond time, can transcend time. Biblical narrative has no sense of an ending because it constantly seeks to tell us that we have not yet completed the task. That remains to be achieved in a future we believe in but will not live to see. We glimpse it from afar, the way Moshe saw the holy land from the far side of the

Jordan, but like him, we know we have not yet arrived. Judaism is the supreme expression of *faith as the future tense*.

Judaism is the only civilisation to have set its golden age not in the past but in the future. We hear this at the beginning of the Moshe story, although not until the end do we realise its significance. Moshe asks God: What is Your name? God replies: *Ehyeh asher Ehyeh*, literally, “I will be what I will be” (Shemot 3:14). We assume this means something like “I am what I am – unlimited, indescribable, beyond the reach of a name.” That may be part of the meaning. But the fundamental point is: *My name is the future*. “I am what will be.” God is in the call from the future to the present, from the destination to us who are still on the journey. What distinguishes Judaism from Christianity is that in answer to the question “Has the Messiah come?” the Jewish answer is always: Not yet. Moshe’s death, his unfinished life, his glimpse of the land of the future, is the supreme symbol of the not-yet.

As we see him on Mount Nevo, looking across the Jordan to Israel in the distance, we sense the vast, challenging truth that confronts us all. Each person has a promised land they will not reach, a horizon beyond the limits of their vision. What makes this bearable is our intense existential bond between the generations – between parent and child, teacher and disciple, leader and follower. The task is bigger than us, but it will live on after us, as something of us will live on in those we have influenced.

*The greatest mistake we can make is to do nothing because we cannot do everything.* Even Moshe discovered that it was not for him to complete the task. That would only be achieved by Yehoshua, and even then the story of the Israelites was only just beginning.

Moshe’s death tells us something fundamental about mortality. Life is not robbed of meaning because one day it will end. For in truth – even in this world, before we turn our thoughts to eternal life in the World to Come – we become part of eternity when we write our chapter in the book of the story of our people and hand it on to those who will come after us.

The task – building a society of justice and compassion, an oasis in a desert of violence and corruption – is greater than any one lifetime. The Jewish people have returned to the land, but the vision is not yet complete. This is still a violent, aggressive world. Peace still eludes us, as does much else. We have not yet reached the destination, though we see it in the distance, as did Moshe.

The Torah ends without an ending to tell us that we too are part of the story; we too are still on the journey. And as we reach the Torah’s closing lines we know, as did Robert Frost in his famous poem, that “I have promises to keep, and miles to go before I sleep.”



## FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

Neither Bereishit, nor the Torah as a whole, concludes with an ending. They are God’s unfinished symphony. We are left *in medias res*, in liminal space midway between departure and arrival, tantalisingly close yet unmistakably distant. We have travelled through several centuries and generations on a journey with a destination that no one has yet reached... after 39 books and more than a thousand years of history—back almost where the story began, in Babel, not far from Ur of the Chaldees from where Avraham’s family first set out.

There is no other story quite like this. It breaks all the rules of narrative form. It leads us to expectations that are never met in the way we anticipated them. The Hebrew Bible is *a story without an ending*... The Bible is one of the meta-narratives of Western civilisation, the Book of Books, the story of stories, yet Bereishit and Devarim and the Hebrew Bible all close with us, the readers, still awaiting the promised, predestined end. It is always just over the horizon, receding like a mirage in the distance. The Torah leaves us, in Harold Fisch’s fine phrase, with ‘the unappeased memory of a future yet to be fulfilled’. So we arrive at a third proposition: *in Judaism we are always in the middle of a story whose ending lies in the future*.

We are free because we face an open future: open because it depends on us. We know the beginning of our story, but we do not yet know how it will end.

That is the human condition, and it is why the Jewish story has a beginning but not an end. That is why Jewish time is not cyclical time in which the future is a mere repetition of the past. That is why in Judaism the golden age, the messianic destination, has not yet been. *The language of freedom is the future tense*. Judaism, the religion of freedom, is the religion of the future tense.

***Future Tense, pp. 239-243***

### QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. How does the missing end to the Tanach as a narrative demonstrate the importance of freedom to Jewish thought?
2. How does understanding this make Judaism the ‘voice of hope in the conversation of humankind’?



## AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. How is the Greek approach to history different to the Jewish approach?
2. Who determines the end of a people's story? What will be our ending?
3. What does 'Judaism is an expression of *faith as the future tense*' mean?



## EDUCATIONAL COMPANION TO THE QUESTIONS

### THE CORE IDEA

1. Stories without endings can be frustrating. The reader always wants to know how things wrap up, and most people like to see all the loose ends tied neatly together. Stories that do not have endings leave us in a state of tension and require imagination from the reader who must decide for themselves how things end. It is natural to want the author to write a satisfying ending.
2. The Torah does not end with a natural conclusion, or a 'happy ending' to teach us that Jewish time is open to a finale not yet realised, a destination not yet reached. The future can and will be better. The best is yet to come. This also places emphasis on the current players in this story (us!) to achieve the fitting end.
3. The Jewish story is still being written, and the Jewish people, together with God, are the writers. We hope and have faith that the ending will be a world redeemed.

### IT ONCE HAPPENED...

1. Our futures have yet to be decided and this can sometimes prove frustrating as we are curious to know our future, but it can also be exciting to know our future chapters are yet to be written. It also gives us hope that things can always improve and we can always put in more effort to achieve our hopes and dreams. Our destiny is not set, and is in our hands.
2. Although our lives are impacted by so many factors beyond our control, the only person who ultimately decides how we respond to these is ourselves. We write the future chapters of our story, and while we believe that God influences our story and guides us, we also believe every person has freewill and is the ultimate decision-maker in their life.

### FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

1. Judaism is a religion of freewill and freedom. The ultimate book of the Jewish journey has no ending, because the ending has yet to be written. We are still writing the story, and this is what gives us freedom and agency. Rabbi Sacks describes Jewish faith as 'written in the future tense' because we believe in a future that is not yet written.
2. If we have freedom and agency, and the end to our stories have not yet been written, then the future can be better than the present. We have faith that it will be, and we believe that Jews are called on to be 'the voice of hope in the conversation of humankind.' This is one explanation as to why Jews are often at the forefront of technological and social initiatives that improve the world.

### AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. The classic Greek view of history is that it has is devoid of meaning and is not a movement towards redemption. In Greek myth, time is cyclical. It goes through phases such as the seasons, or birth, growth, decline, death – but it always returns to where it began. The future is the restoration of the past after a battle against chaos. There is a return to order, to the way things were before the threat, but there is no progress. Judaism sees history as a progression towards a better time, brought about by humanity as an agent of freewill.
2. The Jewish people will decide its ending in partnership with God. This will be a partnership between humankind's freewill and God's Divine Providence of the universe. See also *The Core Idea*, answer 3.
3. This is the belief that the future will be better than the present. That the world will be redeemed. The faith in humankind's ability to achieve this and that God will play a role to help humankind arrive at this time.