



# COVENANT & CONVERSATION

## Family Edition

בהעלתך תשע"ט  
Beha'alotecha 5779

### The Duality of Camp and Congregation

#### 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](http://www.RabbiSacks.org/Subscribe).



#### PARSHAT BEHA'ALOTECHA IN A NUTSHELL

Beha'alotecha begins with the final preparations for the Israelites' journey from the Sinai desert to the Promised Land. There are instructions for Aaron, the High Priest, to tend to the light of the Menorah, and for consecrating the Levites into their special role as guardians of the sacred. Before setting out, the Israelites celebrate Pesach, one year after the Exodus itself, and *Pesach Sheini* is given as a way for those unable to celebrate Pesach at its proper time to have their chance a month later. Details are given about the Cloud that signals when to encamp and when to move on. Moses is commanded to make two silver trumpets to summon the people.

Then the story changes tone. The Israelites set out after their long stay in the Sinai desert, but almost immediately there are problems, protests, and complaints. Moses suffers his deepest emotional crisis. He prays to God to die. God tells him to gather seventy elders who will help him with the burdens of leadership. In the last scene of the parsha, Moses' own sister and brother speak against him. Miriam is punished with *tzara'at*. Moses, here described as the humblest of men, prays on her behalf. After a week's wait, Miriam is healed and the people move forward on their journey.



#### THE CORE IDEA

Our parsha speaks about the silver trumpets Moses was commanded to make: "The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, 'Make two trumpets of silver; make them of hammered work. They shall serve you to summon the congregation [*edah*] and cause the camps [*machanot*] to journey.'" (Bamidbar 10:1–2).

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik explored the difference between these two terms used here to describe the people in his famous essay *Kol Dodi Dofek*. There are, says Rabbi Soloveitchik, two ways in which people become a group – a community, society, or nation.

The first is when they face a common enemy. They band together for mutual protection, knowing that only by so doing can they survive. Humans are not the only creatures to do this. Animals too come together in herds or flocks to defend themselves against predators. Such a group is a *machaneh* – a camp, a defensive formation.

An *edah*, congregation, is altogether different. Here people can come together because they share a vision, a goal, a set of ideals. *Edah* is related to the word *ed*, witness. *Edot* (as opposed to *chukim* and *mishpatim*) are the commands that testify to Jewish belief – as Shabbat testifies to Creation, Pesach to the Divine involvement in history, and so on. An *edah* is not a defensive formation but a creative one. People join to do together what none of them could achieve alone. A society built around a shared project, a vision of the common good, is not a *machaneh* but an *edah* – not a camp but a congregation.

These are two different ways of existing and relating to the world. A camp is brought into being by what happens to it from the outside. A congregation comes into existence by internal decision. The first is reactive, the second proactive. The first is a response to what has happened to the group in the past. The second represents what the group seeks to achieve in the future. Whereas camps exist even in the

animal kingdom, congregations are uniquely human. They flow from the human ability to think, speak, communicate, envision a society different from any that has existed in the past, and to collaborate to bring it about.



## IT ONCE HAPPENED...

Rabbi Josef B. Soloveitchik was born in 1903 in Pruzhan, (Belarus), into a famous rabbinic family. Even as a young child, he was a remarkable scholar of Talmud, Jewish law and philosophy. After intensive Torah studies under his father's instruction, he attended the University of Berlin where he was awarded a PhD in Philosophy.

In 1932, as the winds of war grew stronger in Europe, it became apparent that his Jewish life in Germany was no longer secure and Rabbi Soloveitchik was forced to flee to America. Describing his emotions during that period, he relates that he prayed to Hashem to allow him to stay in Europe with his family and friends. This was not to be, and when he later heard news of the Shoah he realised a profound lesson - that while it may not always feel this way, Hashem always listens to our personal prayers. He knows what is best for us, better than we do ourselves. This means that sometimes He helps us in a way that appears contrary to our prayers. But He always listens.

Rabbi Soloveitchik settled in the city of Boston, Massachusetts, and became the Rabbi of the community there. Together with his wife Tonya (an academic in her

### QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. Do you think the Jewish people are a *machaneh* or an *edah*?
2. Can you give examples from Jewish history when the Jewish people have behaved like a *machaneh*?
3. Can you give examples from Jewish history when the Jewish people have behaved like an *edah*?

own right) he founded the Maimonides High School in Boston. In 1941 he succeeded his father as Rosh Yeshiva of the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary at Yeshiva University in New York, a position he held until his passing in 1993. Hugely influential as a spiritual leader of the Orthodox community in America and around the world, he ordained more rabbis than anyone else, (approx. 2,000), inspired tens of thousands of people and wrote many important works of Jewish scholarship and philosophy that remain relevant and essential reading to this day. His teachings on the application and relevance of Judaism to the modern world remain critically important, inspiring generations.

### QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. Where in Rabbi Soloveitchik's own life can you see his experience of the dual nature of the Jewish people as both *machaneh* and *edah*?
2. How do you feel about Rabbi Soloveitchik's approach to how God answers our prayers?



## THINKING MORE DEEPLY

A camp and a congregation. Jews are a people in both of these two quite different ways. Our ancestors became a *machaneh* in Egypt, forged together in the crucible of slavery and suffering. They were different. They were not Egyptians. They were Hebrews – a word which probably means “on the other side” or “an outsider.” Ever since, Jews have known that we are thrown together by circumstance. We share a history all too often written in tears. Rabbi Soloveitchik calls this the *covenant of fate* (*brit goral*).

This is not a purely negative phenomenon. It gives rise to a powerful sense that we are part of a single story – that what we have in common is stronger than the things that separate us. It leads also to a sense of *shared suffering*. When we pray for the recovery of a sick person, we do so “among all the sick of Israel.” When we comfort a mourner, we do so “among all the other

mourners of Zion and Jerusalem.” We weep together. We celebrate together. This in turn leads to *shared responsibility*: “All Israel are responsible for one another.” And this leads to collective action in the field of welfare, charity, and deeds of loving kindness.

All these are dimensions of a congregation of fate, born in the experience of slavery in Egypt. But there is an additional element of Jewish identity. Rabbi Soloveitchik calls this the covenant of destiny (*brit ye'ud*) – entered into at Mount Sinai. This defines the people Israel not as the object of persecution but the subject of a unique vocation, to become “a kingdom of Priests and a holy nation” (Shemot 19:6).

Under this covenant, the Jewish people was defined not by what others do to them but by the task they have undertaken,

the role they have chosen to play in history. The Israelites did not choose to become slaves in Egypt. That was a fate thrust upon them by someone else. They did, however, choose to become God's people at Sinai when they said, "We will do and obey" (Shemot 24:7). Destiny, call, vocation, purpose, task: these create not a *machaneh* but an *edah*, not a *camp* but a *congregation*.

Our task as a people of destiny is to bear witness to the presence of God – through the way we lead our lives (Torah) and the path we chart as a people across the centuries (history).

It is the concept of covenant that gives Jewish identity this strange dual character. Nations are usually forged through long historical experience, through what happens to them – rather than what they consciously set themselves to do. They fall into the category of *machaneh*. Religions, on the other hand, are defined in terms of beliefs and a sense of mission. Each is constituted as an *edah*. What is unique about Judaism is the way it brings together these separate and quite distinct ideas. *There are nations that contain many religions and there are religions that are spread over many nations, but only in the case of Judaism do religion and nation coincide.*

This has had remarkable consequences. For almost two thousand years Jews were scattered throughout the world, yet they saw themselves and were seen by others as a nation – the world's first global nation. It was a nation held together not by geographical proximity or any other of the normal

accompaniments of nationhood. Jews did not speak the same vernacular. Rashi spoke French, Maimonides spoke Arabic. Rashi lived in a Christian culture, Maimonides in a Muslim one. Nor was their fate the same. While the Jews of Spain were enjoying their Golden Age, the Jews of northern Europe were being massacred in the Crusades. In the fifteenth century, when the Jews of Spain were being persecuted and expelled, those of Poland were enjoying a rare spring of tolerance. What held Jews together during these centuries was shared faith.

In the trauma that accompanied European Emancipation and the subsequent rise of racial antisemitism, many Jews lost that faith. Yet the events of the past century – persecution, pogroms, and the Holocaust, followed by the birth of the State of Israel and the constant fight it has had to survive against war and terror – tended to bind Jews together in a covenant of fate in the face of the hostility of the world. So when Jews were divided by fate they were united by faith, and when they were divided by faith they were united again by fate. Such is the irony, or the providential nature, of Jewish history.

This duality was given its first expression this week in Beha'alotcha. Sometimes the clarion call speaks to our sense of faith. At other times the silver trumpet that sounds and summons us is the call of fate. Whichever sound the instruments make, they call on that duality that makes Jews and Judaism inseparable. However deep the divisions between us, we remain one family in fate and faith. When the trumpet sounds, it sounds for us.



## FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

This is the destination of the Jewish journey – the Promised Land, the holy city, a society of justice, generosity and peace.

And in the transition from **Exodus** to **Sinai**, from *am* to *edah*, Jewish identity itself is transformed from **passive** to **active**, from **fate** to **faith**, from a people defined by what happens to it to a people defined by the social order they are called on to create.

*Radical Then, Radical Now, p. 116*

### QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. What links the **Exodus**, an *am*, a **passive** approach to history, and a community of **fate**?
2. What links **Sinai**, an *edah*, an **active** approach to history, and a community of **faith**?



## AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. Do you think the Jewish people are a *machaneh* or an *edah*?
2. Can you give examples from Jewish history when the Jewish people have behaved more like a *machaneh* and like an *edah*?
3. Is the country where you live more like a *machaneh* or an *edah*?
4. Do you think the Jewish people have been faithful to the *covenant of fate* (*brit goral*) and to the *covenant of faith* (*brit ye'ud*)?
5. In our generation do you hear the "clarion call of the trumpets" beckoning us to the covenant of *fate* or more to the *covenant of faith*?



## QUESTION TIME

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## EDUCATIONAL COMPANION TO THE QUESTIONS

### THE CORE IDEA

1. In the thought of Rabbi Soloveitchik, a *machaneh* is a community, society or nation that exists when a group of people come together for mutual protection in the face of a common enemy. An *edah* on the other hand come together because they share a vision, an aspiration, a set of ideals. Jews are a people in both of these two different ways, so different people may have varied answers to this question speaking an interesting debate, but our duality exists.
2. Jewish history began with the Jews as a *machaneh* in slavery in Egypt, and one could argue that as a group they have never ceased to experience external threats from then until now.
3. The Jewish people entered a covenant of destiny (*brit ye'ud*) at Mount Sinai when they received the Torah that called on them to fulfill a unique vocation, to become "a kingdom of Priests and a Holy Nation" (Shemot 19:6). They are told that this covenant will ultimately be fulfilled when they create their own society based on the values of the Torah, and then the world.

### IT ONCE HAPPENED...

1. Rabbi Soloveitchik lived through the lowest period in Jewish history, fleeing from Europe on the eve of the Holocaust. At this time, the Jewish people functioned as a *machaneh*, and had to fall back on the covenant of fate and unite like never before. However, he also witnessed the establishment of the State of Israel just a few years later and saw religious meaning in this event in history. This was the first opportunity since the destruction of the Second Temple to truly be an *edah* on a national scale, and fulfill the covenant of faith.
2. Rabbi Soloveitchik's faith is an inspiration, and underlies his belief in Divine Providence and finding meaning in his personal history and our national history. His approach to *tefillah* however may not resonate for everyone.

### FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

1. When the Israelites left Egypt as liberated slaves, they became a nation (an *am* – a term Rabbi Sacks uses here instead of *machaneh*) and a community of fate, and entered into the covenant of fate. Nations that function only as a community of fate are passive in history, acted upon, and wait for their fate to be determined by others.
2. When the Israelites entered the covenant of Sinai they became an *edah* and a community of faith, entering the covenant of faith. Nations that function as a community of faith are active in history, choosing to fulfill their destiny based on a vision and a call to a vocation.

### AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. See *The Core Idea*, answer 1.
2. See *The Core Idea*, answer 2. The Jewish people entered a covenant of destiny (*brit ye'ud*) at Mount Sinai when they received the Torah that called on them to fulfill a unique vocation, to become "a kingdom of Priests and a Holy Nation" (Shemot 19:6). At any time when Jews have tried to influence the society in which they live for the good, bringing the values of the Torah to the wider world, it is an example of acting as a *community of faith*.
3. There are more than likely both aspects of *machaneh* and *edah* in all societies. But in *Covenant & Conversation* this week Rabbi Sacks suggests that America and the Jewish people are perhaps the only two examples of nations created from the outset as communities of faith.
4. Despite being a people that like to argue, and during many times in history being divided and fractured into different *edot*, and scattered throughout the world for almost two thousand years, Jews always saw themselves (and were seen by others) as a single united nation. Throughout Jewish history the Jewish people have contributed to the development of humankind in a way befitting a community of faith. The society being built in the State of Israel is clearly a work in progress, and is far from the finished product, but yet it is still a society that Jews can on the whole be proud of. But there is still much work to do both there and in the wider world!
5. After the Holocaust the world believed that humanity must learn the lessons that will ensure the end to antisemitism, prejudice, and persecution in general. Sadly this has not been the case, and antisemitism and other forms of racism and prejudice are on the rise in our generation. So as a nation the Jewish people still find themselves in a community of fate. However, the call to the covenant of faith is also as strong as it has ever been. Perhaps these two are intrinsically interconnected, and only when the community of faith fulfills its destiny will they no longer have to rely on the covenant of fate.