



# Covenant & Conversation

Jonathan Sacks  
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

VAERA • וארא

FROM THE TEACHINGS AND WRITINGS OF **RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS** זצ"ל

With thanks to the Schimmel Family for their generous sponsorship of Covenant & Conversation, dedicated in loving memory of Harry (Chaim) Schimmel. "I have loved the Torah of R' Chaim Schimmel ever since I first encountered it. It strives to be not just about truth on the surface but also its connection to a deeper truth beneath. Together with Anna, his remarkable wife of 60 years, they built a life dedicated to love of family, community, and Torah. An extraordinary couple who have moved me beyond measure by the example of their lives." — Rabbi Sacks

## The Birth of History

The parsha of Vaera begins with some fateful words. It would not be too much to say that they changed the course of history, because they changed the way people thought about history. In fact, they gave birth to the very idea of history. Listen to the words:

God said to Moses, "I am Hashem. I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob as E-l Shaddai, but by My name 'Hashem' I did not make Myself fully known to them.

Ex. 6:2-3

What exactly does this mean? As Rashi points out, it does not mean that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah did not know God by the name Hashem. To the contrary, God's first words to Abraham, "Leave your land, your birthplace and your father's house," were said using the name Hashem.

It even says, just a few verses later (Gen. 12:7), *Vayera Hashem el Avram*: "Hashem appeared to Abram and said, "To your descendants I will give this land." So God had appeared to Avram as Hashem. And in the very next verse it says that Avram built an altar and "He called on the name of Hashem" (Gen. 12:8). So Avram himself knew the name and had used it.

Yet it is clear from what God says to Moses that something new is about to happen, a Divine revelation of a kind that had never happened before, something that no one, not even the people closest to God, has yet seen. What was it?

The answer is that through Bereishit, God is the God of Creation, the God of nature, the aspect of God we call, with different nuances but the same overall

sense, *Elokim*, or *E-l Shaddai*, or even *Koneh shamayim va'aretz*, Creator of heaven and earth.

Now, in a sense, that aspect of God was known to everyone in the ancient world. It's just that they did not see nature as the work of one God but of many: the god of the sun, the god of the rain, the goddesses of the sea and the earth, the vast pantheon of forces responsible for harvests, fertility, storms, droughts, and so on.

There were profound differences between the gods of polytheism and myth and the one God of Abraham, but they operated, as it were, in the same territory, the same ballpark.

The aspect of God that appears in the days of Moses and the Israelites is radically different, and it's only because we are so used to the story that we find it hard to see how radical it was.

For the first time in history God was about to get involved in history, not through natural disasters like the Flood, but by direct interaction with the people who shape history. God was about to appear as the force that shapes the destiny of nations. He was about to do something no one had ever heard of before: bring an entire nation from slavery and servitude, persuade them to follow Him into the desert, and eventually to the Promised Land, and there build a new kind of society, based not on power but on justice, welfare, respect for the dignity of the human person and on collective responsibility for the rule of law.

God was about to initiate a new kind of drama and a new concept of time. According to many of the world's greatest historians, Arnaldo Momigliano, Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, J. H. Plumb, Eric Voegelin, and the

anthropologist Mircea Eliade, this was the moment when history was born.

Until then, the basic human drama was struggling to maintain order against the ever-present threats of chaos, whether through natural disasters, foreign conquest, or internal power struggles. Success meant maintaining the status quo. In fact, religion in the ancient world was intensely conservative. It was about teaching people the inevitability of the status quo. Time was an arena in which nothing fundamentally changed.

And now God appears to Moses and tells him that something utterly new is about to occur, something the patriarchs knew about in theory but had never lived to see in practise. A new nation. A new kind of faith. A new kind of political order. A new type of society. God was about to enter history and set the West on a trajectory that no human beings had ever contemplated before.

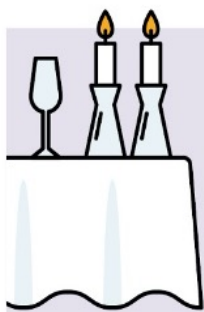
Time was no longer going simply to be what Plato beautifully described as *the moving image of eternity*. It was going to become the stage on which God and humanity would journey together toward the day when all human beings – regardless of class, colour, creed, or culture – would achieve their full dignity as the image and likeness of God. Religion was about to become not a conservative force but an evolutionary and even revolutionary one.

Think about this: Long before the West, the Chinese had invented ink, paper, printing, porcelain manufacture, the compass, gunpowder, and many other technologies.

But they failed to develop a scientific revolution, an industrial revolution, a market economy, and a free society. Why did they get so far and then stop? The historian Christopher Dawson argued that it was the religion of the West that made the difference. Alone among the civilisations of the world, Europe “has been continually shaken and transformed by an energy of spiritual unrest.” He attributed this to the fact that “its religious ideal has not been the worship of timeless and changeless perfection but a spirit that strives to incorporate itself in humanity and to change the world.”<sup>1</sup>

To change the world. That is the key phrase. The idea that – together with God – we can change the world, that we can *make* history, not just be made by it, this idea was born when God told Moses that he and his contemporaries were about to see an aspect of God no one had ever seen before.

I still find it a spine-tingling moment when, each year, we read Vaera and recall the moment history was born, the moment God entered history and taught us for all time that slavery, oppression, injustice, are not written into the fabric of the cosmos, engraved into the human condition. Things can be different because we can be different, because God has shown us how.



## Around the Shabbat Table

1. What do you think this transition from God teaches us about the relationship between the Divine and humanity?
2. How do you see God in your everyday life?
3. When else in the Tanach, or Jewish history, has God's involvement mirrored the Exodus from Egypt?

● These questions come from this week's **Family Edition** to Rabbi Sacks' Covenant & Conversation. For an interactive, multi-generational study, check out the full edition at [www.RabbiSacks.org/covenant-conversation-family-edition/shemot/jewish-leadership/](http://www.RabbiSacks.org/covenant-conversation-family-edition/shemot/jewish-leadership/)



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<sup>1</sup> Christopher Dawson, *Religion and the Rise of Western Culture*, New York: Doubleday, 1991, p. 15.