



Covenant & Conversation

Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

KI TAVO • כי תבוא

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

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

This year's series of essays and videos were originally written and recorded by Rabbi Sacks ז"ל in 5771 (2010–2011). These timeless messages are accompanied by a new [Family Edition](#) (2023–2024), created to inspire intergenerational learning on the *parsha*.

Freedom Means Telling the Story

Here's an experiment. Walk around the great monuments of Washington D.C. There, at the far end, is the figure of Abraham Lincoln, four times life-size. Around him on the walls of the memorial are the texts of two of the greatest speeches of history, the Gettysburg Address and Lincoln's second Inaugural:

“With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right. . .”

A little way away is the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial with its quotations from each period of the President's life as leader, most famously:

“The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.”

Keep walking along the Potomac and you come to the Jefferson Memorial, modelled on the Pantheon at Rome. There too you will find, around the dome and on the interior walls, quotations from the great man, most famously from the Declaration of Independence:

“We hold these truths to be self-evident . . .”

Now visit London. You will find many memorials and statues of great people. But you will find no quotations. The base of the statue will tell you who it represents, when they lived, and the position they occupied or the work they did, but no narrative, no quotation, no memorable phrases or defining words.

Take the statue of Winston Churchill in Parliament Square. Churchill was one of the greatest orators of all time. His wartime speeches and broadcasts are part of British history. But no words of his are inscribed on the monument, and the same applies to almost everyone else publicly memorialised.

It's a striking difference. One society – the United States of America – tells a story on its monuments, a story woven out of the speeches of its greatest leaders. The other, England, does not. It builds memorials but it doesn't tell a story. This is one of the deep differences between a covenant society and a tradition-based society.

In a tradition-based society like England, things are as they are because that is how they were.

England, writes Roger Scruton, “was not a nation or a creed or a language or a state but a home. Things at home don’t need an explanation. They are there because they are there.”

Covenant societies are different. They don’t worship tradition for tradition’s sake. They do not value the past because it’s old. They remember the past because it was events in the past that led to the collective determination that moved people to create the society in the first place. The Pilgrim Fathers of America were fleeing religious persecution in search of religious freedom. Their society was born in an act of moral commitment, handed on to successive generations.

Covenant societies exist not because they have been there a long time, nor because of some act of conquest, nor for the sake of some economic or military advantage. They exist to honour a pledge, a moral bond, an ethical undertaking. That is why telling the story is essential to a covenant society. It reminds all citizens of why they are there.

The classic example of telling the story occurs in this week’s *parsha*, in the context of bringing first-fruits to Jerusalem:

The Priest shall take the basket from your hands and set it down in front of the altar of the Lord your God. Then you shall declare before the Lord your God: “My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down into Egypt with a few people and lived there and became a great nation, powerful and numerous . . . So the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror and with signs and wonders. He brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey; and now I bring the

first-fruits of the soil that You, Lord, have given me.”

Deut. 26:4-10

We all know the passage. Instead of saying it on Shavuot when bringing first-fruits, we now say it on Pesach as the central part of the Haggadah. What remains remarkable is that, even in biblical times, every member of the nation was expected to know the story of the nation, and recite it annually, and make it part of his or her personal memory and identity – “My father... so the Lord brought us out.”

A covenant is more than a myth of origin – like the Roman story of Romulus and Remus, or the English story of King Arthur and his knights. Unlike a myth, which merely claims to say what happened, a covenant always contains a specific set of undertakings that bind its citizens in the present and into the future.

Here for example is Lyndon Baines Johnson talking about the American covenant:

“They came here – the exile and the stranger... They made a covenant with this land. Conceived in justice, written in liberty, bound in union, it was meant one day to inspire the hopes of all mankind; and it binds us still. If we keep its terms, we shall flourish.”

Covenant societies – of which the USA is the supreme contemporary example – are moral societies, meaning not that their members are more righteous than others but that they see themselves as publicly accountable to certain moral standards that are part of the text and texture of their national identity. They are honouring the obligations imposed upon them by the founders.

Indeed, as the Johnson quotation makes clear, covenant societies see their very fate as tied up with the way they meet or fail to meet those obligations. “If we keep its terms, we shall flourish” – implying that if we don’t, we won’t. This is a way of thinking the West owes entirely to the book of Devarim, most famously in the second paragraph of the Shema:

If you faithfully obey the commands I am giving you today . . . then I will send rain on your land in its season . . . I will provide grass in the fields for your cattle, and you will eat and be satisfied.

Be careful, lest you are enticed to turn away and worship other gods and bow down to them. Then the Lord’s anger will burn against you, and He will shut up the heavens so that it will not rain and the ground will yield no produce, and you will soon perish from the good land the Lord is giving you.

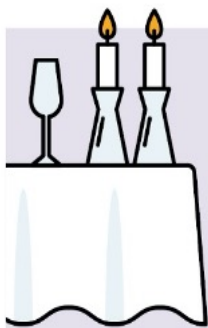
Deut. 11:13-17

Covenant societies are not ethnic nations bound by common racial origin. They make room for outsiders – immigrants, asylum seekers, resident aliens – who become part of the society by taking its story and making it their own, as

Ruth did in the biblical book that bears her name (“Your people will be my people, and your God, my God”) or as successive waves of immigrants did when they came to the United States. Indeed conversion in Judaism is best understood not on the model of conversion to another religion – such as Christianity or Islam – but as the acquisition of citizenship in a nation like the USA.

It is utterly astonishing that the mere act of telling the story, regularly, as a religious duty, sustained Jewish identity across the centuries, even in the absence of all the normal accompaniments of nationhood – land, geographical proximity, independence, self-determination – and never allowed the people to forget its ideals, its aspirations, its collective project of building a society that would be the opposite of Egypt, a place of freedom and justice and human dignity, in which no human being is sovereign; in which God alone is King.

One of the most profound truths about the politics of covenant – the message of the first-fruits’ declaration in this week’s *parsha* – is: If you want to sustain freedom, never stop telling the story.



Around the Shabbat Table

1. Why is the king in the Torah commanded to be humble, and what might this teach us about leadership?
2. Why do you think self-restraint is necessary in politics?
3. Consider some of the greatest leaders in Tanach. Did they embody these noble qualities of leadership?

● 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/ki-teitse/two-types-of-hate/