Covenant & Conversation

Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

LECH LECHA • לך לך

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

This year's series of essays were originally written and recorded by Rabbi Sacks zt"l in 5772 (2011–2012).
These timeless messages are accompanied by a new Family Edition created to inspire intergenerational learning on the Parsha and Haftara.

The Power of Example

So familiar are we with the story of Abraham that we do not always stop to think about what a strange turn it is in the biblical narrative. If we fail to understand this, though, we may fail to understand the very nature of Jewish identity itself.

Here is the problem: Until now the Torah has been concerned with humanity as a whole. Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel are human archetypes. The former represent the tensions between husband and wife, the latter the rivalry between siblings. Both are stories about individuals and both end tragically, the first with paradise lost, the second with bloodshed, fratricide and death.

Then comes another pair of stories – the Flood and the building of Babel – this time about society as a whole. Each is about the tension between freedom and order. The Flood is about a world where freedom (violence, lawlessness, "everyone doing what was right in their own eyes") destroys order. Babel is about a world where order (the imperialist imposition of a single language on conquered peoples) destroys freedom.

All four narratives are about the human condition as such. Their message is universal and eternal, as befits a book about God who is universal and eternal. God as He appears in the first eleven chapters of Genesis is the God who created the universe, made all humanity in His image, blessed the first humans, and who - after the Flood - made a covenant with all humankind. The God of the universe is the universal God.

Why then does the entire story shift in Genesis 12? From here onward it is no longer about humanity as a whole but about one man (Abraham), one woman (Sarah), and their children, who - by the time of the book of Exodus - have become a large and significant people, but still no more than one nation among many.

What is happening here? Does God lose interest in everyone else? That surely cannot be the case. At the end of Genesis, Joseph says to his brothers:

> "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives."
>
> *Gen 50:20*

It may be that the phrase "many lives" means no more than the lives of his own family (so Targum Yonatan understands it). But the plain sense of the phrase *am rav*, "a great people," suggests Egypt. Not until Exodus are the Israelites called *am*, a people. Joseph is saying that God sent him not merely to save his family from famine, but also the Egyptian people.

That too is the point of the book of Jonah. Jonah is sent to Nineveh, the Assyrian city, to persuade the people to repent and thus avoid their own destruction. In its closing words God says to the prophet:

> "Should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left?"
>
> *Jonah 4:11 (and see Malbim ad loc.)*

God is concerned not only with Israel but with the Assyrians, despite the fact that they would become Israel's enemies, eventually conquering the northern kingdom of Israel itself.

Amos famously says that God not only brought the Israelites from Egypt, but also the Philistines from Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir (Amos 9:7). Isaiah even prophesies a time when the Egyptians will worship God, and He will rescue them from oppression as he once rescued Israel (Isaiah 19:20-21). So it is not that God loses interest in humanity as a whole. He feeds the world. He sustains all life. He is involved in the history of all nations. He is the God of all people. Why then the narrowing of focus from the universal human condition to the story of one family?

The philosopher Avishai Margalit, in his book *The Ethics of Memory*, talks about two ways of thinking: "i.e." and "e.g." The former speaks of general principles, the latter of compelling examples. It's one thing to talk about general principles of leadership, for instance – think ahead, motivate, set clear goals and so on. It's another thing altogether to tell the story of actual leaders, the ones who succeeded, the role-models. It is their lives, their careers, their examples, that illustrate the general principles and how they work in practice.

Principles are important. They set the parameters. They define the subject. But without vivid examples, principles are often too vague to instruct and inspire. Try explaining the general principles of Impressionism to someone who knows nothing about art, without showing them an Impressionist painting. They may understand the words you use, but these will mean nothing until you show them an example.

That, it seems, is what the Torah is doing when it shifts focus from humanity as a whole to Abraham in particular. The story of humanity from Adam to Noah tells us that people do not naturally live as God would wish them to live. They eat forbidden fruit and kill one another. So after the Flood, God becomes not only a Creator but also a teacher. He instructs humanity, and does so in two ways: i.e. and e.g. He sets out general rules – the covenant with Noah – and then He chooses an example, Abraham and his family. They are to become role-models, compelling examples, of what it means to live closely and faithfully in the presence of God, not for their sake alone but for the sake of humanity as a whole.

That is why five times in Genesis the patriarchs are told:

> "Through you all the families, or all the nations, of the earth will be blessed."
>
> *Gen. 12:2, Gen. 18:18, Gen. 22:18, Gen. 26:4, Gen. 28:14*

And people recognise this. In Genesis, Malkitzedek says about Abraham, "Praise be to God Most High, who delivered your enemies into your hand" (Gen. 14:20). Avimelech, king of Gerar, says about him, "God is with you in everything you do " (Gen. 21:22). The Hittites say to him, "You are a prince of God in our midst" (Gen. 23:6). Abraham is recognised as a man of God by his contemporaries, even though they are not a part of his specific covenant.

The same is true of Joseph, the only member of Abraham's family in Genesis whose life among the gentiles is described in detail. He is constantly reminding those with whom he interacts about God. When Potiphar's wife tries to seduce him he says, "How could I do such a great wrong? It would be a sin before God!" (Gen. 39:9).

To the butler and baker, whose dreams he is about to explain, Joseph says:

> "Interpretations belong to God."
>
> *Gen. 40:8*

When he is brought before Pharaoh to interpret his dreams, he says:

> "God will give Pharaoh the answer he desires."
>
> *Gen. 41:16*

Pharaoh himself says of Joseph:

> "Can we find anyone like this man, one in whom is the spirit of God?"
>
> *Gen. 41:38*

Jews are not called on to be Jews for the sake of Jews alone. They are called on to be a living, vivid, persuasive example of what it is to live by the will of God, so that others too come to recognise God and serve Him, each in their own way, within the parameters of the general principles of the covenant with Noah. The laws of Noah are the "i.e.". The history of the Jews is the "e.g.".

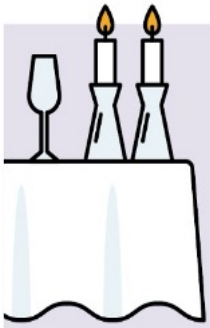
Jews are not called on to convert the world to Judaism. There are other ways of serving God. Malkizedek, Abraham's contemporary, is called, "a Priest of God Most High" (Gen. 14:18).

Malachi says a day will come when God's name "will be great among the nations, from where the sun rises to where it sets" (Mal. 1:11). The prophets foresee a day when "God will be King over all the earth" (Zechariah 14:9) without everyone converting to Judaism.

We are not called on to convert humanity but we are called on to inspire humanity by being compelling role-models of what it is to live, humbly, modestly but unshakably in the presence of God, as His servants, His witnesses, His ambassadors – and this, not for our sake but for the sake of humanity as a whole.

It sometimes seems to me that we are in danger of forgetting this. To many Jews, we are merely one ethnic group among many, Israel is one nation-state among many, and God is something we talk about only among ourselves if at all. There was recently a television documentary about one British Jewish community. A non-Jewish journalist, reviewing the programme, remarked on what seemed to her a strange fact that the Jews she encountered never seemed to talk about their relationship with God. Instead they talked about their relationship with other Jews. That too is a way of forgetting who we are and why.

To be a Jew is to be one of God's ambassadors to the world, for the sake of being a blessing to the world, and that necessarily means engaging with the world, acting in such a way as to inspire others as Abraham and Joseph inspired their contemporaries. That is the challenge to which Abraham was summoned at the beginning of this week's Parsha. It remains our challenge today.



Around the Shabbat Table

1. Why do you think it is important for the Jewish people to be "ambassadors to the world"?
2. Why do you think it's important for other nations to have a relationship with God?
3. Who else in the Tanach plays a similar educational role that Avraham plays - for both the Jewish people and the other nations?

- 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/lech-lecha/the-power-of-example/