Covenant & Conversation

KI TEITSE • כי תצא

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

Jonathan Sacks THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

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.

Letting Go of Hate

> Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that. Hate multiplies hate, violence multiplies violence, and toughness multiplies toughness . . .
>
> *Martin Luther King*
>
> I imagine one of the reasons people cling to their hates so stubbornly is because they sense, once hate is gone, they will be forced to deal with pain.
>
> *James Arthur Baldwin*

There is a verse in Ki Teitse that is momentous in its implications. It is easy to miss, appearing as it does in the midst of a series of miscellaneous laws about inheritance, rebellious sons, overladen oxen, marriage violations and escaping slaves. Without any special emphasis or preamble, Moses delivers a command so counterintuitive that we must read it twice to make sure we have heard it correctly:

> Do not hate an Edomite, because he is your brother.
> Do not hate an Egyptian, *because you were a stranger in his land*.
>
> Deut. 23:8

What does this mean in its biblical context? The Egyptians of Moses' day had enslaved the Israelites, "embittered their lives", subjected them to a ruthless regime of hard labour and forced them to eat the bread of affliction. They had embarked on a programme of attempted genocide, Pharaoh commanding his people to throw "every male [Israelite] child born, into the river" (Ex. 1:22).

Now, forty years later, Moses speaks as if none of this had happened, as if the Israelites owed the Egyptians a debt of gratitude for their hospitality. Yet he and the people were where they were only because they were escaping from Egyptian persecution. Nor did he want the people to forget it. To the contrary, he told them to recite the story of the Exodus every year, as we still do on Passover, re-enacting it with bitter herbs and unleavened bread so that the memory would be passed on to all future generations. If you want to preserve freedom, he implies, never forget what it feels like to lose it. Yet here, on the banks of the Jordan, addressing the next generation, he tells the people, "Do not hate an Egyptian". What is going on in this verse?

To be free, you have to let go of hate. That is what Moses is saying. If they continued to hate their erstwhile enemies, Moses would have taken the Israelites out of Egypt, but he would not have taken Egypt out of the Israelites. Mentally, they would still be there, slaves to the past. They would still be in chains, not of metal but of the mind – and chains of the mind are the most constricting of all.

You cannot create a free society on the basis of hate. Resentment, rage, humiliation, a sense of injustice, the desire to restore honour by inflicting injury on your former persecutors – these are conditions of a profound lack of freedom. You must live *with* the past, implies Moses, but not *in* the past. Those who are held captive by anger against their former persecutors are captive still. Those who let their enemies define who they are, have not yet achieved liberty.

The Mosaic books refer time and again to the Exodus and the imperative of memory: "you shall remember that you were slaves in Egypt". Yet never is this invoked as a reason for hatred, retaliation or revenge. Always it appears as part of the logic of the just and compassionate society the Israelites are commanded to create: the alternative order, the antithesis of Egypt. The implicit message is: Limit slavery, at least as far as your own people is concerned. Don't subject them to hard labour. Give them rest and freedom every seventh day. Release them every seventh year. Recognise them as *like you*, not ontologically inferior. No one is born to be a slave.

Give generously to the poor. Let them eat from the leftovers of the harvest. Leave them a corner of the field. Share your blessings with others. Don't deprive people of their livelihood. The entire structure of biblical law is rooted in the experience of slavery in Egypt, as if to say: you know in your heart what it feels like to be the victim of persecution, therefore do not persecute others.

Biblical ethics is based on repeated acts of role-reversal, using memory as a moral force. In the books of Shemot and Devarim, we are commanded to use memory not to preserve hate but to conquer it by recalling what it feels like to be its victim. "Remember" – not to *live* in the past but to *prevent a repetition* of the past.

Only thus can we understand an otherwise inexplicable detail in the Exodus story itself. In Moses' first encounter with God at the Burning Bush, he is charged with the mission of bringing the people out to freedom. God adds a strange rider:

> I will make the Egyptians favourably disposed toward this people, so that when you leave you will not go empty-handed. Every woman is to ask her neighbour and any woman living in her house for articles of silver and gold and for clothing, which you will put on your sons and daughters.
>
> Ex. 3:21-22

The point is twice repeated in later chapters (Ex. 11:2, Ex. 12:35). Yet it runs utterly against the grain of biblical narrative. From Genesis (14:23) to the book of Esther (9:10, 9:15, 9:16) taking booty, spoil, plunder from enemies is frowned on. In the case of idolaters, it is strictly forbidden: their property is *cherem*, taboo, to be destroyed, not possessed (Deut. 7:25; 13:16).

When, in the days of Joshua, Achan took spoil from the ruins of Jericho, the whole nation was punished. Besides which, what happened to the gold? The Israelites eventually used it to make the Golden Calf. Why then was it important – commanded – that on this one occasion the Israelites should ask for gifts from the Egyptians? The Torah itself provides the answer in a later law of Deuteronomy about the release of slaves:

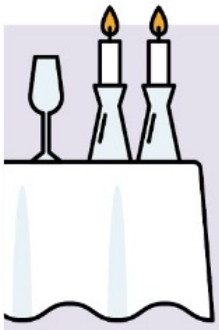
> If a fellow Hebrew, a man or a woman, sells himself to you and serves you six years, in the seventh year you must let him go free. When you release him, *do not send him away empty-handed*. Supply him liberally from your flock, your threshing floor and your winepress. Give to him as the Lord your God has blessed you. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed you. That is why I give you this command today.
>
> Deut. 15:12-15

Slavery needs "narrative closure". To acquire freedom, a slave must be able to leave behind feelings of antagonism to his former master. He must not depart laden with a sense of grievance or anger, humiliation or slight. Were he to do so, he would have been released but not liberated. Physically free, mentally he would still be a slave. The insistence on parting gifts represents the Bible's psychological insight into the lingering injury of servitude. There must be an act of generosity on the part of the master if the slave is to leave without ill-will. Slavery leaves a scar on the soul that must be healed.

When God told Moses to tell the Israelites to take parting gifts from the Egyptians, it is as if He were saying: Yes, the Egyptians enslaved you, but that is about to become the past. Precisely because I want you to remember the past, it is essential that you do so without hate or desire for revenge. What you are to recall is the pain of being a slave, not the anger you feel towards your slave-masters. There must be an act of symbolic closure. This cannot be justice in the fullest sense of the word: such justice is a chimera, and the desire for it insatiable and self-destructive. There is no way of restoring the dead to life, or of recovering the lost years of liberty denied. But neither can a people deny the past, deleting it from the database of memory. If they try to do so it will eventually come back – Freud's "return of the repressed" – and claim a terrible price in the form of high-minded, altruistic vengeance. Therefore the former slave-owner must give the former slave a gift, acknowledging him as a free human being who has contributed, albeit without choice, to his welfare. This is not a squaring of accounts. It is, rather, a minimal form of restitution, of what today is called "restorative justice".

Hatred and liberty cannot coexist. A free people does not hate its former enemies; if it does, it is not yet ready for freedom. To create a non-persecuting society out of people who have been persecuted, you have to break the chains of the past; rob memory of its sting; sublimate pain into constructive energy and the determination to build a different future.

Freedom involves the abandonment of hate, because hate is the abdication of freedom. It is the projection of our conflicts onto an external force whom we can then blame, but only at the cost of denying responsibility. That was Moses' message to those who were about to enter the Promised Land: that a free society can be built only by people who accept the responsibility of freedom, subjects who refuse to see themselves as objects, people who define themselves by love of God, not hatred of the other. "Do not hate an Egyptian, because you were strangers in his land," said Moses, meaning: To be free, you have to let go of hate.



Around the Shabbat Table

1. How does holding on to hatred keep people enslaved even after physical freedom is achieved?
2. Can personal experiences of pain or injustice be transformed into compassion for others?
3. How does the command to remember Amalek differ from the command not to hate the Egyptians?

- 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 https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation-family-edition/ki-teitse/letting-go-of-hate/