Covenant & Conversation

SHEMOT • שמות

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

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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 5773 (2012–2013).
These timeless messages are accompanied by a new Family Edition created to inspire intergenerational learning on the Parsha.

Leadership and the People

The sedra of Shemot, in a series of finely etched vignettes, paints a portrait of the life of Moses, culminating in the moment at which God appears to him in the bush that burns without being consumed. It is a key text of the Torah view of leadership, and every detail is significant. I want here to focus on just one passage in the long dialogue in which God summons Moses to undertake the mission of leading the Israelites to freedom – a challenge which, no less than four times, Moses declines. I am unworthy, he says. I am not a man of words. Send someone else.It is the second refusal, however, which attracted special attention from the Sages and led them to formulate one of their most radical interpretations. The Torah states:

> Moses replied: "But they will not believe me. They will not listen to me. They will say, 'God did not appear to you.'"
>
> Shemot 4:1

The Sages, ultra-sensitive to nuances in the text, evidently noticed three strange features of this response. The first is that God had already told Moses, "They will listen to you" (Ex. 3:18). Moses' reply seems to contradict God's prior assurance. To be sure, the commentators offered various harmonising interpretations. Ibn Ezra suggests that God had told Moses that the elders would listen to him, whereas Moses expressed doubts about the mass of the people. Ramban says that Moses did not doubt that they would believe initially, but he thought that they would lose faith as soon as they saw that Pharaoh would not let them go. There are other explanations, but the fact remains that Moses was not satisfied by God's assurance. His own experience of the fickleness of the people (one of them, years earlier, had already said, "Who made you ruler and judge over

us?") made him doubt that they would be easy to lead.

The second anomaly is in the signs that God gave Moses to authenticate his mission. The first (the staff that turns into a snake) and third (the water that turned into blood) reappear later in the story. They are signs that Moses and Aaron perform not only for the Israelites but also for the Egyptians. The second, however, does not reappear. God tells Moses to put his hand in his cloak. When he takes it out, he sees that it has become "leprous as snow". What is the significance of this particular sign? The Sages recalled that later, Miriam was punished with leprosy for speaking negatively about Moses (Bamidbar 12:10). In general they understood leprosy as a punishment for *lashon hara*, derogatory speech. Had Moses, perhaps, been guilty of the same sin?

The third detail is that, whereas Moses' other refusals focused on his own sense of inadequacy, here he speaks not about himself but about the people. They will not believe him. Putting these three points together, the Sages arrived at the following comment:

> Resh Lakish said: He who entertains a suspicion against the innocent will be bodily afflicted, as it is written, *Moses replied: But they will not believe me.* However, it was known to the Holy One blessed be He, that Israel would believe. He said to Moses: *They are believers, the children of believers, but you will ultimately disbelieve. They are believers, as it is written, and the people believed* (Ex. 4:31). The children of believers [as it is written], and he [Abraham] believed in the Lord. But you will ultimately disbelieve, as it is said, [And the Lord said to Moses] *Because you did not believe in Me* (Num. 20:12). How do we know that he was afflicted? Because it is written, *And the Lord said to him, 'Put your hand inside your cloak'* (Ex. 4:6).
>
> Shabbat 97a

This is an extraordinary passage. Moses, it now becomes clear, was entitled to have doubts about his own worthiness for the task. What he was not entitled to do was to have doubts about the people. In fact, his doubts were amply justified. The people were fractious. Moses calls them a "stiff-necked people". Time and again during the wilderness years they complained, sinned, and wanted to return to Egypt. Moses was not wrong in his estimate of their character. Yet God reprimanded him; indeed punished him by making his hand leprous. A fundamental principle of Jewish leadership is intimated here for the first time: a leader does not need faith in himself, but he must have faith in the people he is to lead.

This is an exceptionally important idea. The political philosopher Michael Walzer has written insightfully about social criticism, in particular about two stances the critic may take vis-à-vis those he criticises. On the one hand there is the

critic as outsider. At some stage, beginning in ancient Greece:

> Detachment was added to defiance in the self-portrait of the hero. The impulse was Platonic; later on it was Stoic and Christian. Now the critical enterprise was said to require that one leave the city, imagined for the sake of the departure as a darkened cave, find one's way, alone, outside, to the illumination of Truth, and only then return to examine and reprove the inhabitants. The critic-who-returns doesn't engage the people as kin; he looks at them with a new objectivity; they are strangers to his new-found Truth.

This is the critic as detached intellectual. The prophets of Israel were quite different. Their message, writes Johannes Lindblom, was "characterized by the principle of solidarity". "They are rooted, for all their anger, in their own societies," writes Walzer. Like the Shunamite woman (Kings 2 4:13), their home is "among their own people". They speak, not from outside, but from within. That is what gives their words power. They identify with those to whom they speak. They share their history, their fate, their calling, their covenant. Hence the peculiar pathos of the prophetic calling. They are the voice of God to the people, but they are also the voice of the people to God. That, according to the Sages, was what God was teaching Moses: What matters is not whether they believe in you, but whether you believe in them. Unless you believe in them, you cannot lead in the way a prophet must lead. You must identify with them and have faith in them, seeing not only their surface faults but also their underlying virtues. Otherwise, you will be no better than a detached intellectual – and that is the beginning of the end. If you do not believe in the people, eventually you will not even believe in God. You will think yourself superior to them, and that is a corruption of the soul.

The classic text on this theme is Maimonides' *Epistle on Martyrdom*. Written in 1165, when Maimonides was thirty years old, it was occasioned by a tragic period in medieval Jewish history when an extremist Muslim sect, the Almohads, forced many Jews to convert to Islam under threat of death. One of the forced converts (they were called *anusim*; later they became known as *marranos*) asked a rabbi whether he might gain merit by practising as many of the Torah's commands as he could in secret. The rabbi sent back a dismissive reply. Now that he had forsaken his faith, he wrote, he would achieve nothing by living secretly as a Jew. Any Jewish act he performed would not be a merit but an additional sin.

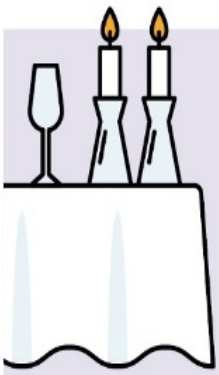
Maimonides' *Epistle* is a work of surpassing spiritual beauty. He utterly rejects the rabbi's reply. Those who keep Judaism in secret are to be praised, not blamed. He quotes a whole series of rabbinic passages in which God rebukes prophets who criticised the people of

Israel, including the one above about Moses. He then writes:

> If this is the sort of punishment meted out to the pillars of the universe – Moses, Elijah, Isaiah, and the ministering angels – because they briefly criticised the Jewish congregation, can one have an idea of the fate of the least among the worthless [i.e. the rabbi who criticised the forced converts] who let his tongue loose against Jewish communities of Sages and their disciples, priests and Levites, and called them sinners, evildoers, gentiles, disqualified to testify, and heretics who deny the Lord God of Israel?

The *Epistle* is a definitive expression of the prophetic task: to speak out of love for one's people; to defend them, see the good in them, and raise them to higher achievements through praise, not condemnation.

Who is a leader? To this, the Jewish answer is, one who identifies with his or her people, mindful of their faults, to be sure, but convinced also of their potential greatness and their preciousness in the sight of God. "Those people of whom you have doubts," said God to Moses, "are believers, the children of believers. They are My people, and they are your people. Just as you believe in Me, so you must believe in them."



Around the Shabbat Table

1. Why might believing in people be harder than believing in an idea or a mission?
2. How should a leader strike a balance between believing in their people while simultaneously seeing their flaws?
3. How does faith in others change the way we speak about them?

- 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 rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation-family-edition/shemot/-leadership-and-the-people/