Covenant & Conversation

Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

BEHAR-BECHUKOTAI • בהר-בחוקתי

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

The Chronological Imagination

I want, in this study, to look at one of Judaism's most distinctive and least understood characteristics – the chronological imagination.

Sometimes a modern discovery so changes our ways of looking at things that it allows us to revisit ancient truths that have become deeply obscured and see them with pristine clarity as if for the first time. That is surely the case with quantum physics. What it allows us to do is to understand afresh a biblical way of thinking about truth that is profoundly different from the way we have been accustomed to think in the West. I call the Greek approach the *logical* imagination, and the Jewish approach, the *chronological* imagination.

Niels Bohr famously said about quantum mechanics that if it hasn't profoundly shocked you, you haven't understood it yet. Without entering the details of this tangled territory, the most profoundly shocking thing about the subatomic reality it exposed is that it does not fit our standard logical categories. Is light a wave or a particle? Do subatomic particles have position or momentum? Is Schrödinger's cat alive or dead?[1]

The answer to each of these questions reminds us of the story about the rabbi who listens to a husband's account of an unhappy marriage and says, "You're right." He then listens to the wife's conflicting account and says, "You're right." His disciple, who has been present at both meetings, says to the rabbi, "But they can't both be right," to which the rabbi replies, "You're also right."

[1] Schrödinger's cat is the name given to the thought experiment proposed by the Austrian physicist Erwin Schrödinger in 1935 to dramatize the paradoxical nature of quantum physics. It involves thinking about a cat in a sealed box whose fate depends on an earlier random event involving subatomic particles. According to the Copenhagen interpretation of quantum theory, the particles exist only in a state of probability until they are measured. It follows that the cat is only alive or dead once the box is opened. Until then, it is equally true to say that it is alive and that it is dead.

There are phenomena, from subatomic particles to domestic disputes, to which the standard rules of Aristotelian logic do not apply. Chief of these is the principle of contradiction that states that a proposition and its negation cannot both be true. Two contradictory statements cannot be true at the same time. Bohr's complementarity theory, Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, and other counterintuitive ideas, challenge this head-on. Light is both a wave and a particle. Schrödinger's cat is both dead and alive. There are phenomena that bear contradictory characteristics until we, the observer, enter the scene, at which point the contradiction is resolved retroactively.

Bohr tells the story of how he came to his theory. It happened after his young son was caught stealing sweets from a local store. Niels experienced mixed emotions towards his son and was conflicted as to the best way to approach him in light of this event. First he found himself thinking about this as a judge would. His son was guilty of a crime and justice must be done. But he also felt parental emotions of love and compassion. He realised that he could not hold both thoughts equally in his mind at the same time, and this led to his research on complementarity theory. As a fair judge of the situation, he had to think impartially. As a father he could not help but have compassion for his son, who had made a mistake. One way of thinking leads to justice, the other to mercy, but these are conflicting perspectives and involve different kinds of relationships.

The same is true about the well-known drawing that can be seen as a duck or a rabbit, but not both at the same time. The multi-dimensionality of reality may simply be too complex for us to grasp it all at one time. But what we cannot think simultaneously we can often think sequentially. That is what I mean by the chronological imagination.

We owe our concepts of logic to the ancient Greeks. The Greeks thought of knowledge as a special kind of seeing. We still, in Western languages, preserve this visual metaphor. We speak of foresight and insight, of people of vision, and of 'making an observation'. When we understand something we say, "I see." For Plato, knowledge was deep insight into a world beyond the senses, where you see not the physical embodiments but the true form of things. The guiding metaphor for Greek epistemology, buried deep in the culture, was the image of Zeus, chief of the gods, looking down on the affairs of human beings from his lofty perch on Mount Olympus.

The worldview of the Torah is quite different. True knowledge is acquired less though seeing (God is not visible, and throughout the Hebrew Bible appearances deceive[2]) than through listening. The keyword is *shema*, meaning, "listen, hear, understand, respond." Knowledge, *daat*, is not detached observation but intimate personal engagement: "And Adam *knew* his wife and she conceived." God in the Torah is not a detached observer of the affairs of humankind, but an active participant. In

[2] Think of Joseph, seen by his brothers but not recognised, or the spies sent by Moses who saw the land but misinterpreted what they saw.

Judaism, words are not just pictures of reality, the "forms" of things. They affect relationships. Words can injure and inspire. Words can bless or curse. Words can create new moral facts, such as when we make a promise. Words shape the reality they describe. This is more like Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, in which the observer affects the reality he observes, than like Greek-inspired theories of knowledge in which a sentence can be true or false but not both.

The psychotherapist Viktor Frankl pointed out that what can be a contradiction in two-dimensional space need not be when we add a third dimension. So a square cannot be a circle, and a circle cannot be a square. But they can both be shadows cast by a single object, a canister, lit first from the side, then from above. Add the third dimension and the contradiction disappears. Nor is this a mere mathematical curiosity. As Niels Bohr, one of the masters of quantum physics put it, "The opposite of a trivial true is a falsehood, but the opposite of a profound true may well be another profound truth."

This is absolutely fundamental to Judaism. There is more than one valid way of looking at the universe. Minimally, there is the point of view of God and there is the point of view of humankind, and they are radically distinct. The only time in the whole of Tanach in which a human being is invited to see the world from the vantage point of God occurs in the last four chapters of the book of Job, when Job finally understands that the universe is not anthropocentric. Not everything exists for the benefit of humankind. God is at the centre, not us.

No less significantly, though the Torah has a single Author, it does not speak in a single voice. I have argued throughout these studies that there are at least three discernible voices - a wisdom voice, a priestly voice, and a prophetic voice - corresponding to the three modes in which God discloses Himself: through creation, revelation, and redemption. Each captures something of reality but none, on its own, portrays it all. That is why the Torah is such a complex interplay of different genres and tones of voice. The book of Numbers, for example, is structured as a fugue between law and narrative. There is no other book in the whole of literature that is quite like it. Throughout Numbers we see the interplay between prophetic and priestly sensibilities, and we begin to understand how law - the "ought-ness" of things - grows out of, and in turn influences, history, the "is- or was-ness" of things.

How then do you represent the three-dimensional nature of reality with its conflicting perspectives and multifaceted truths? One way in which the Torah does it is through what I call the *dialogical imagination*. We are shown a situation from two radically opposed viewpoints at the same time.

Two powerful examples occur in Genesis 21 and 27. In Genesis 21, first we see Sarah and her joy as at last she holds her long-awaited son. Then we see the pathos of Hagar and Ishmael, dismissed from the household and on the brink of death under the heartless desert sky. In Genesis 27, first we see Rebecca arrange for her beloved son Jacob

to be blessed, then we see Isaac and Esau, bound together in shock and dismay, as they realise what has happened.

These narratives subvert any simplistic tendency to moralise, to divide reality into black and white. They force us to see the world from more than one point of view. The only way of bridging these perspectives is through conversation. Hence the idea of truth as dialogue. In Genesis, when speech breaks down, violence - the attempt to impose my version of the truth on you by force - is often waiting in the wings.

The other way is through the chronological imagination. Conflicting propositions may both be valid - the opposite of a profound truth may be another profound truth - but not at the same time. A classic example of this is the interpretation by Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik in *The Lonely Man of Faith* of the two Creation accounts in Genesis 1, and in chapters 2-3. In the first, man is created in the image of God and given dominion over all other life forms. In the second, man is formed from the dust of the earth, and told to "serve and conserve" the garden. In the first, man and woman are created simultaneously, side-by-side. In the second, woman is created in the wake of the loneliness of man, and they exist face-to-face.

Rabbi Soloveitchik argued that the first account describes the 'majestic' man, whereas the second depicts the "covenantal" man, and we are both. The result, he explained, was that to be human is to be conflicted, torn between the different facets of our being. In fact, though, the Torah resolves this contradiction in the simplest and most elegant way: through time.

> 'Six days you shall labour and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath day to the Lord your God.'
>
> Ex. 20:9-10

For six days we are majestic; on the seventh we are covenantal.

The chronological imagination - what Bohr meant when he said he could see his son through the eyes of a judge and a parent, but not both at the same time - was one of the great gifts of *Torat Kohanim*. The priest guards the border between sacred and secular, eternity and mortality, the physical and the spiritual, the infinite and finite. He knows these are two different orders of reality and is all too conscious of the danger that awaits and blurring of the boundary. At one level of reality, all that exists is God. At another, all that exists is human beings and their devices and desires. The separation between heaven and earth is what makes the universe and human life possible. But their connection is what makes human life meaningful.

The priest resolves the contradiction between sacred and secular by seeing both as true and valid, but we can only experience them at different times. The times and places at which we focus on our human, mortal condition are *chol*, secular. Those in which we focus on God, the infinite Eternal, we call *kodesh*. They are integrated in the form of a precisely calibrated rhythm of time: six units (days, months, years) of *chol*, followed by a seventh that is holy. with the occasional

addition of a fiftieth (day, year) after a sequence of seven sevens.

Biblical texts using the priestly voice are conspicuous for their mathematical precision. So, as Umberto Cassuto pointed out,[3] the creation account is not only divided into seven days. It also contains the word "good" seven times, "God" thirty-five times, and "earth" twenty-one times. The first verse contains seven words, the second fourteen, and the description of the seventh day, thirty-five. The whole passage is 469 (7x67) words. Likewise Leviticus 23, 25, and 26 are all structured around the repeated words "seven" and "Shabbat". Mathematical precision is essential to the priestly understanding of reality, just as we now know it is to the universe, almost unimaginably finely-tuned for the emergence of conscious life. Had any of the mathematical constants that govern the shape of the universe been even slightly different, the chemical elements necessary for life would simply not have formed.[4]

But the precision of the priest is different from that of the scientist. The division of time in the priestly calendar is a way of living out sequentially different and conflicting truths. We have already seen one in our study of Succot. Judaism embraces both the universal and the particular, the universality of our humanity, given religious force in the Noahide covenant, and the particularity of our people's relationship with God, epitomised in the covenant at Mount Sinai. The Jewish calendar gives weight to both. There is the cycle of the three pilgrimage festivals; Passover, Shavuot, and Succot, representing the particularity of Jewish history - the Exodus, the Giving of the Torah, and the years of wandering the desert. And there is the cycle of festivals of the seventh month, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and again Succot, representing the universals of the human condition: Creation, Divine sovereignty, justice, judgment, life, death, rain, and the renewal of nature.

One of the most beautiful consequences of the chronological imagination - seen clearly in our parsha of Behar - is its ability to reconcile the real with the ideal. History is full of ideal worlds. We call them utopias, a word that means "no place" because no utopia has ever happened. Torah Kohanim has a different, indeed unique, approach to ideal worlds. We live them, periodically, in the here-and-now of real time. On Shabbat we engage in a full dress rehearsal for the Messianic Age when no one will exercise power, political or economic, over anyone else. Something similar is true of the two great institutions in the parsha: *Shemittah* and the Jubilee year, the seventh and fiftieth years. By cancelling debts, releasing slaves, leaving the produce of the land to be enjoyed by everyone equally, and restoring ancestral property to its original owners, we inhabit a world in which the inequities of the market economy have been redressed and, for a year, sometimes two, we suspend the world of competition and live in a world of co-operation and the fellowship of equals.

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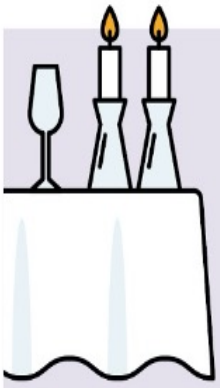
[3] Umberto Cassuto, *Commentary on Genesis*, vol 1 (Jerusalem: Magnes Press 1961), pp. 12-15.

[4] One classic account is Martin Rees, *Just Six Numbers* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1999).

There is no other system quite like this, and it gives truth - not the truth we think or discover, but the truths we live and to which we owe loyalty - a three-dimensional character it does not have in the either/or world of Aristotelian logic.[5] That is the power of dialogical and chronological thought, and it comes from the depth reality acquires when we add to the two-dimensional nature of humanity the third dimension that is God.



Around the Shabbat Table

1. Why is dialectical thinking (holding two different truths in your head or heart at the same time) so difficult?
2. Which truths do you live, and owe loyalty to?
3. How does taking off one day each week change how you view success and worth?

- 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/behar/the-chronological-imagination/

[5] Not that Aristotle was narrowly Aristotelian. He was one of the first philosophers to realise that different intellectual disciplines had different criteria of truth and different internal logics.