Covenant & Conversation

FROM THE TEACHINGS OF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

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Bereishit

WRITTEN BY RABBI SACKS IN 5768 (2007–2008)

The Garments of Light

The context is one of the best-known stories of the Bible. Together in the Garden of Eden, surrounded by the rich panoply of creation, the first human couple have everything they could possibly want – except one thing, a tree from which they are forbidden to eat. Needless to say, that is the one thing they want. "Stolen waters taste sweet," says the Book of Proverbs. They eat; their eyes are opened; they lose their innocence; for the first time they feel shame. When they hear the "Voice of God" they try to hide, but they discover that God is someone from whom we cannot hide. God asks them what they have done. Adam blames his wife. She blames the serpent. The result is paradise lost.

The episode is rich in its implications, but I want us to study one of its strangest features. The woman has been told that "with pain she will give birth to children." Next, Adam is informed that he will face a life of painful toil. There then follows a sequence of three verses which seem to have no connection with one another. Indeed, they sound like a complete non sequitur:

> "By the sweat of your brow," God says to Adam, "will you eat bread, until you return to the land, for from there you were taken. You are dust, and you will return to dust." Then the man named his wife Eve, for she would become the mother of all life. Then the Lord, God made garments of skins for Adam and his wife, and clothed them.
>
> Genesis 3:19-21

The problems are obvious. Adam has just blamed his wife for leading him into sin. He has also been condemned to mortality. Why, at just this juncture, does he turn to her and give her a new name? And why, immediately afterward, as they are about to be exiled from Eden, does God perform an act of kindness to the couple – giving dignity to the very symbol of their sin, the clothes with which they hide their shame? The mood seems to have changed for no reason. The bitter acrimony of the previous verses suddenly dissolves, and instead – between Adam and his wife, and between God and the couple – there is a new tenderness. Rashi is so perplexed that he suggests that the middle verse is out of chronological sequence. It is the end, not of the story of the sin of eating the forbidden fruit, but of the earlier scene in which Adam gave names to the animals and while doing so found "no suitable companion." As we will see, that is not the only way of interpreting it.

Stranger still is the interpretation given by the first century sage Rabbi Meir to the phrase "garments of skin", "*katnot or*" (or "*bigdei or*"). Rabbi Meir reads the *ayin* of the second word as an *aleph*, "*katnot or*" – and thus interprets the phrase as "garments of light." This is an almost mystical suggestion and a deeply intriguing one. Why – not when they were in paradise, but as they were leaving it – were the couple bathed with Divine radiance, clothed in "garments of light"?

Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah said, "It is impossible for there to be a session in the house of study without

some new interpretation." In that spirit let us see whether we can find new meaning in this passage.

When he heard the words, "dust you are and to dust you will return," it was the first time Adam became conscious of his mortality. There is no more profound self-knowledge than this – that the world will one day be without us, and we without the world. Much of civilisation has turned on this single fact, that our lives are finite, a microsecond in the context of eternity; that however long we live, our time is limited and all too short. The Torah is silent on what Adam's thoughts were in the wake of this discovery, but we can reconstruct them. Until then, death had not entered his consciousness, but now it did. What, if we are mortal, will live on? Is there a part of us that will continue, even though we ourselves are no longer here? It was then that Adam remembered God's words to the woman. She would give birth to children – in pain, to be sure, but she would bring new life into the world.

Suddenly Adam knew that though we die, if we are privileged to have children, something of us will live on: our genes, our influence, our example, our ideals. That is our immortality. This was an idea that eventually shaped the character of the whole of Judaism in contradistinction to most other cultures in ancient and modern times. The Tower of Babel and the great buildings of Ramses II – the two most significant glimpses the Torah gives us of the empires of the ancient world – testify to the idea that we defeat mortality by building monuments that outlast the winds and sands of time. Judaism had a quite different idea, that we defeat mortality by engraving our ideals on the hearts of our children, and they on theirs, and so on to the end of time. Where the Mesopotamians and Egyptians thought of buildings, Abraham and his descendants thought of builders ("Call them not 'your children' but 'your builders'"). Judaism became the most child-centred of faiths.

But there is one significant difference between personal immortality and the immortality we gain by those we bring to life and who will live on after us. The latter cannot be achieved alone. Until he became aware of his mortality, Adam could think of his wife as a mere *ezer kenegdo*, usually translated as "a suitable helper." He thought of her as his assistant, not his equal. "She shall be called 'woman' [*ishah*] for she was taken from man [*ish*]." She was, in his eyes, an extension of himself.

Now he knew otherwise. Without Eve, Adam could not have children – and children were his share in eternity. He could no longer think of her as an assistant. She was a person in her own right – even more so than he was, for she, not he, would actually give birth. In this respect she was more like God than he could be, for God is He-who-brings-new-life-into-being.

Once he had thought these thoughts, recrimination ended, for he saw that their physical being, their "nakedness," was not simply a source of shame. There is a spiritual dimension to the physical relationship between husband and wife. At one level it is the most animal of desires, but at another it is as close as we come to the principle of Divine creativity itself, namely that love creates life. That is when he turned to her and for the first time saw her as a person and gave her a personal name, Chava, Eve, meaning, "she who gives life." The significance of this moment cannot be sufficiently emphasised. It was not that previously Adam had given his wife one name and now gave her another. It was that previously Adam had not given her a name at all. He called her *ishah*, "woman," a generic noun not a proper name (Incidentally, he himself had not had a proper name until now either. He is simply called *ha-adam*, "the man" – a word that appears 21 times [3x7] in this early narrative. Not until he confers on the woman a proper name does he acquire one himself, Adam).

With the appearance of proper names, the concept of person is born. A noun designates a class, a group of things linked by common characteristics. Nouns speak of sameness and therefore substitutability. If we lose a belt, we can buy another. If our car is stolen we can replace it. "Belt" and "car" are nouns, in both cases objects defined by their function.

A name is different. It refers not to a class or group of things but to an individual in their individuality. The primary bearer of a name is a person. Only by extension do we give names to non-persons for which we have special affection – a pet, for example. The concepts of "name" and "person" are intimately linked. We cannot have one without the other. The single most important ethical truth about persons is that none is substitutable for any other. As persons, we are unique. "When a human being makes many coins in the same mint," said the Sages, "they all come out alike. [By contrast,] God makes every human

being in the same image, His image, and they are all different."

This is what gives human life its dignity and sanctity. Without it, we would not know love – for love in its primary sense is always directed to a person: to this man, that woman, this child, in their uniqueness. One who truly loves does not love abstractly. The lover in *The Song of Songs* never tires of describing his beloved, her hair, her cheeks, her eyes, her mouth, the things that make her what she is and not woman-in-general.

This is also what gives human love its particular pathos and vulnerability. We know that like us, our beloved will eventually grow old and die, and that they can never be replaced. If we knew we would never die, we would need no intimations of eternity. But because we know we will one day die, one of the greatest things that can happen to us is the moment beyond time (the one we know we will never forget) when two souls touch and between them form a bridge over the abyss of mortality. That is what *Shir HaShirim* means when it says, "Love is as strong as death, its passion as unyielding as the grave" (the idea Dylan Thomas translated into the words, "Though lovers be lost, love shall not; And death shall have no dominion").

At another and more general level, this is what gives human life its sanctity. "A single life," said the Sages, "is like a universe." However life-like robots may one day become, there will always be this fundamental difference between a machine and a person. Machines can be replaced. Persons cannot.

The moment when Adam turned to his wife and gave her a proper name, Chava, was a turning point in the history of civilisation. It was then that God robed the couple in garments of light. For it is only when we relate to one another as persons possessed of non-negotiable dignity, that we respond to the "image of God" in the other. In a sense the whole of Judaism – or at least mitzvot *bein adam le-chavero*, "the commands between us and our fellow human beings" – is an extended commentary to this idea. The rules of justice, mercy, charity, compassion, regard for the poor, love for the neighbour and the stranger, delicacy of speech and sensitivity to the easily injured feelings of others, are all variants on the theme of respect for the human other as an image and likeness of the Divine Other.

The idea goes deeper still. There is an intimate connection between the way we relate to other people and the way we relate to God – and this too is expressed in the difference between a noun and a name.

Though God has many descriptions, two are primary: Elokim and the four-letter name we may not pronounce, known generally as Hashem. The Sages distinguished them by saying that Elokim refers to Divine justice, Hashem to Divine compassion. The eleventh-century poet and philosopher Judah Halevi made a different distinction. The word *E-l* was generally used by pagans to signify a god, by which they meant, a force of nature (the sun, the storm, the earth, the sea, and the many other deities worshipped in ancient times). Monotheism was and is the insistence that none of these forces or powers represents ultimate reality. Each is only a segment of it. The One God is the totality of all powers. That is the God represented by the word Elokim. It is a collective noun, meaning, "the force of forces." Elokim is God as we encounter Him in nature, in the vastness and intricacy of creation.

Hashem, by contrast, is not a noun but a name. It refers to God not as a power, or even the totality of all powers, but as a person, a "Thou." Hashem is the One who speaks to us and to whom we speak, who loves us as a person loves, who hears our prayers, forgives our failures, gives us strength in times of crisis, and teaches us the path of life. In one of the most profound insights in the history of Jewish thought, Halevi taught that the difference between Elokim and Hashem is the difference between the God of Aristotle and the God of Abraham.

A philosopher can come to the realisation that the universe has an author, a creator, a first cause, a "prime mover." But only a prophet (or a child of Abraham and the nation of prophets) can relate to God as a person. Hashem is God as we encounter Him not in creation but revelation.

If we now turn to the biblical text, we see a remarkable phenomenon. In Bereishit 1, God is described as Elokim. In chapters 2 and 3, He is called Hashem-Elokim. In chapter 4, for the first time He is called Hashem alone. Something changes in the course of these chapters: not God (who does not change) but the human perception of God.

In the first chapter, which speaks about the birth of the universe and the slow emergence of order from chaos, man is part of nature. That is the (partial) truth in the discovery that we share much of our DNA with other life forms. It is also why God is described as Elokim, the author of nature. In chapters 2 and 3, man begins to use language. He becomes, in the words of the Targum, "a speaking being." God brings the various forms of life to him "to see what he would name them, and whatever the man called each living thing, that was its name." But thus far he only uses nouns, first for the animals, and then for his wife, whom he calls *ishah*, "woman." He has moved from nature to culture (of which language is the first step), but he has not yet understood the concept of a person. It is only after he gives his wife a proper name that the Torah uses the word Hashem alone. It is only after he has become aware of his wife as a person that he is capable of understanding God as a person.

Judaism was much more than the discovery of monotheism, that there is only one God. That idea is contained in the word Elokim. It was also the discovery that God is a person – that the fact that we are persons, with loves, fears, hopes and dreams, is not an accidental by-product of evolution (as some neo-Darwinians claim) but is an echo of the ultimate reality of the cosmos. We are not gene-producing machines but persons, each of us unique, irreplaceable, here because God wanted us to be. That is the world-transforming concept of Hashem – and it was only when Adam responded to Eve as a person that he could respond to God as a person. That is why the commands between us and God are inseparable from the commands between us and our fellow human beings.

Now we understand that extraordinary sequence of three verses. Discovering his mortality, Adam knew that he could only live on through his children, born through an act of love. That was when he realised that immortality cannot be achieved by one alone, but only by the union of two. For the first time he looked on his wife as a person in her own right, and expressed this by giving her a proper name. Having done this, he was able to experience God through His proper name, Hashem. At that moment humanity ceased to be a mere biological species and became *homo religiosus*, man-in-search-of-God who meets Hashem, God-in-search-of-man. That is the profound message of the first three chapters of Bereishit, a story about language, relationships, and what it is to be a person.

Judaism is the story of how the love we feel for another person leads to the love of God, and robes us in garments of light.

Around the Shabbat Table

- Why must understanding the dignity of the other as a person precede the ability to have a personal relationship with God?
- How does having children help with the feeling of vulnerability that comes from mortality, and provide a sense of immortality?

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FAMILY EDITION

INSPIRED BY THE TEACHINGS OF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

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Bereishit: The Blame Game

DEVELOPED BY RABBI COBI EBRAHIMOFF

parsha recap

After the seven days of Creation, the Torah tells us about Adam and Chava living in Gan Eden. God had told them not to eat from the Etz Hada'at (the Tree of Knowledge), but the serpent tricked Chava into eating the fruit, and she then gave some to Adam. When God asked Adam why he ate it, he didn't take responsibility. Instead, he blamed Chava – and even God – by saying, 'The woman You put here with me – she gave me the fruit'.

- Why do you think Adam chose to blame Chava rather than saying sorry to God?
- Why do you think God put the fruit-tree in the garden if He did not want them to eat from it?

a closer look

הָאִשָּׁה אֲשֶׁר נָתַתָּה עִמָּדִי

"The woman You put here with me..." (BEREISHIT 3:12)

RABBI SACKS TEACHES US:

> Adam blames the woman. The woman blames the serpent. The result is they are both punished and exiled from Eden.
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> Bereishit is a set of variations on the theme of family, and none runs smoothly. With Adam and Chava comes conflict. With each successive generation, new tensions arise. This is the great power of the Book of Books (the Torah) and the reason it has never lost its hold on the human imagination: It is about us, people we can recognise and identify with.
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> The real dramas are not the ones fought in court or on the battlefield. They are the ones fought and resolved in the home, between parents and children, between siblings, between husbands and wives.

moral matters

LET'S DISCUSS:

- Why do you think the Torah tells us stories about **people who make mistakes**?
- Can we learn more from **mistakes** than from **perfect behaviour**?
- Every generation in the Torah seems to face tension or disagreements, this is part of being human. But why do you think that people so often **blame, argue,** and **disagree**?
- Adam blamed Chava, and Chava blamed the serpent. Does blaming someone else **protect you from consequences**? Why does honesty matter, even when it is difficult?

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