

COVENANT & Conversation

A STUDY OF ETHICS IN THE PARSHA WITH RABBI SACKS

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I am deeply touched that Covenant & Conversation 5775 on Ethics has been generously sponsored by **The Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation** in memory of Maurice and Vivienne Wohl נ"ט. Maurice was a visionary philanthropist on a vast scale, driven throughout his life by a sense of Jewish responsibility. Vivienne was a woman of the deepest humanity and compassion, who had a kind word for everyone. Together, they were a unique partnership of dedication and grace, for whom living was giving. Through their Charitable Foundation, they continue to bring blessings into Jewish communities around the world.
— RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS



THE MAURICE WOHL
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Telling the Story

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Go to Washington and make a tour of the memorials and you will make a fascinating discovery. Begin at the Lincoln Memorial with its giant statue of the man who braved civil war and presided over the ending of slavery. On one side you will see the Gettysburg Address, that masterpiece of brevity with its invocation of “a new birth of freedom.” On the other is the great Second Inaugural with its message of healing: “With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right ...”

Walk down to the Potomac basin and you see the Martin Luther King Memorial with its sixteen quotes from the great fighter for civil rights, among them his 1963 statement, “Darkness cannot drive out darkness, only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that.” And giving its name to the monument as a whole, a sentence from the *I have a Dream* speech, “Out of the Mountain of Despair, a Stone of Hope.”

Continue along the tree-lined avenue bordering the water and you arrive at the Roosevelt Memorial, constructed as a series of six spaces, one for each decade of his public career, each with a passage from one of the defining speeches of the time, most famously, “We have nothing to fear but fear itself.”

Lastly, bordering the Basin at its southern edge, is a Greek temple dedicated to the author of the American Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson. Around the dome, are the words he

wrote to Benjamin Rush: "I have sworn upon the altar of God eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man." Defining the circular space are four panels, each with lengthy quotations from Jefferson's writings, one from the Declaration itself, another beginning, "Almighty God hath created the mind free," and a third "God who gave us life gave us liberty. Can the liberties of a nation be secure when we have removed a conviction that these liberties are the gift of God?"

Each of these four monuments is built around texts and each tells a story.

Now compare the monuments in London, most conspicuously those in Parliament Square. The memorial to David Lloyd George contains three words: David Lloyd George. The one to Nelson Mandela has two: Nelson Mandela, and the Churchill memorial just one: Churchill. Winston Churchill was a man of words, in his early life a journalist, later a historian, author of almost fifty books. He won the Nobel Prize not for Peace but for Literature. He delivered as many speeches and coined as many unforgettable sentences as Jefferson or Lincoln, Roosevelt or Martin Luther King, but none of his utterances is engraved on the plinth beneath his statue. He is memorialised only by his name.

The difference between the American and British monuments is unmistakable, and the reason is that Britain and the United States have a quite different political and moral culture. England is, or was until recently, a tradition-based society. In such societies, things are as they are because that is how they were "since time immemorial." It is unnecessary to ask why. Those who belong, know. Those who need to ask, show thereby that they don't belong.

American society is different because from the Pilgrim Fathers onward it was based on the concept of covenant as set out in Tanakh, especially in Exodus and Deuteronomy. The early settlers were Puritans, in the Calvinist tradition, the closest Christianity came to basing its politics on the Hebrew Bible. Covenantal societies are not based on tradition. The Puritans, like the Israelites three thousand years earlier, were revolutionaries, attempting to create a new type of society, one unlike Egypt or, in the case of America, England. Michael Walzer called his book on the politics of the seventeenth century Puritans, "the revolution of the saints." They were trying to overthrow the tradition that gave absolute power to kings and maintained established hierarchies of class.

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Covenantal societies always represent a conscious new beginning by a group of people dedicated to an ideal. The story of the founders, the journey they made, the obstacles they had to overcome and the vision that drove them are essential elements of a covenantal culture. Retelling the story, handing it on to one's children, and dedicating oneself to continuing the work that earlier generations began, are fundamental to the ethos of such a society. A covenanted nation is not simply there because it is there. It is there to fulfil a moral vision. That is what led G. K. Chesterton to call the United States a nation "with the soul of a church," the only one in the world "founded on a creed"

(Chesterton's antisemitism prevented him from crediting the true source of America's political philosophy, the Hebrew Bible).

The history of storytelling as an essential part of moral education begins in this week's parsha. It is quite extraordinary how, on the brink of the exodus, Moses three times turns to the future and to the duty of parents to educate their children about the story that was shortly to unfold: "When your children ask you, 'What is this service to you?' you shall answer, 'It is the Passover service to God. He passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt when He struck the Egyptians, sparing our homes'" (12: 25-27). "On that day, you shall tell your child, 'It is because of this that God acted for me when I left Egypt'" (13: 8). "Your child may later ask you, 'What is this?' You shall answer him, 'With a show of power, God brought us out of Egypt, the place of slavery'" (13: 14).

This is truly extraordinary. The Israelites have not yet emerged into the dazzling light of freedom. They are still slaves. Yet already Moses is directing their minds to the far horizon of the future and giving them the responsibility of passing on their story to succeeding generations. It is as if Moses were saying: Forget where you came from and why, and you will eventually lose your identity, your continuity and *raison d'être*. You will come to think of yourself as the mere member of a nation among nations, one ethnicity among many. Forget the story of freedom and you will eventually lose freedom itself.

Rarely indeed have philosophers written on the importance of story-telling for the moral life. Yet that is how we become the people we are. The great exception among modern philosophers has been Alasdair MacIntyre, who wrote, in his classic *After Virtue*, "I can only answer the question 'What am I to do?' if I can answer the prior question 'Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?'" Deprive children of stories, says MacIntyre, and you leave them "anxious stutterers in their actions as in their words."¹

"Without a specific identity it is almost impossible not to lapse into whatever is the current idolatry of the age."

No one understood this more clearly than Moses because he knew that without a specific identity it is almost impossible not to lapse into whatever is the current idolatry of the age – rationalism, idealism, nationalism, fascism, communism, postmodernism, relativism, individualism, hedonism or consumerism, to name only the most recent. The alternative, a society based on tradition alone, crumbles as soon as respect for tradition dies, which it always does at some stage or another.

Identity, which is always particular, is based on story, the narrative that links me to the past, guides me in the present, and places on me responsibility for the future. And no story, at least in the West, was more influential than that of the exodus, the memory that the supreme power intervened in history to liberate the supremely powerless, together with the covenant that followed whereby the Israelites bound themselves to God in a promise to create a society that would be the opposite of

¹ See Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*. London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981.

Egypt, where individuals were respected as the image of God, where one day in seven all hierarchies of power were suspended, and where dignity and justice were accessible to all. We never quite reached that ideal state but we never ceased to travel toward it and believed it was there at journey's end.

“The Jews have always had stories for the rest of us,” said the BBC’s political correspondent, Andrew Marr. God created man, Elie Wiesel once wrote, because God loves stories. What other cultures have done through systems, Jews have done through stories. And in Judaism, the stories are not engraved in stone on memorials, magnificent though that is. They are told at home, around the table, from parents to children as the gift of the past to the future. That is how story-telling in Judaism was devolved, domesticated and democratised.

Only the most basic elements of morality are universal: “thin” abstractions like justice or liberty that tend to mean different things to different people in different places and different times. But if we want our children and our society to be moral, we need a collective story that tells us where we came from and what our task is in the world. The story of the exodus, especially as told on Pesach at the seder table, is always the same yet ever-changing, an almost infinite set of variations on a single set of themes that we all internalise in ways that are unique to us, yet we all share as members of the same historically extended community.

“Story-telling is the great vehicle of moral education.”

There are stories that ennoble, and others that stultify, leaving us prisoners of ancient grievances or impossible ambitions. The Jewish story is in its way the oldest of all, yet ever young, and we are each a part of it. It tells us who we are and who our ancestors hoped we would be. Story-telling is the great vehicle of moral education. It was the Torah’s insight that a people who told their children the story of freedom and its responsibilities would stay free for as long as humankind lives and breathes and hopes.



Rabbi Sacks is honoured to be the International President of *70 Days for 70 Years*, an inspiring Holocaust remembrance initiative that will see thousands of individuals around the world embark on a 70 day programme of educational learning in memory of those who perished in the Holocaust. For more details on how to participate and receive a book of 70 inspirational essays, visit www.70for70.com.



**70 Days
for 70 Years**

Remember the past to build the future

**RABBI
SACKS**

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