



WHY AM I BOUND BY A COVENANT I DIDN'T PERSONALLY AGREE TO?

Exploring Rabbi Sacks' answers to the ultimate question in Judaism:
What Obligates Me To Keep The Torah?

BACKGROUND

The covenant of Sinai was when God gave the Torah to the Jewish people, on the day we now celebrate as Shavuot. After this event, the Jewish people wandered in the desert for forty years, in which time a new generation arose. Just before they entered the Land of Israel, Moshe brought the people together for a second covenant with God, where the Jewish people committed to keeping the Torah in return for being God's special, protected nation.

WHAT IS A COVENANT? RABBI SACKS EXPLAINS ("MORALITY", CHAPTER 4):

In a covenant, two or more individuals, each respecting the dignity and integrity of the other, come together in a bond of love and trust, to share their interests, sometimes even to share their lives, by pledging their faithfulness to one another, to do together what neither can achieve alone. A contract is a transaction. A covenant is a relationship. Or to put it slightly differently: a contract is about interests. A covenant is about identity. It is about you and me coming together to form an 'Us'.



RABBI SACKS IN "RADICAL THEN, RADICAL NOW" / "A LETTER IN THE SCROLL", CHAPTER 1:

We have reached the Torah portion of *Nitzavim* (near the end of the book of Devarim) in which Moses, at the end of his life, renews the covenant of Sinai, some forty years later, with the members of the new generation:

1 | DEVARIM 29:9-14

אַתֶּם נֹצְבִים הַיּוֹם כְּלֶכֶם לִפְנֵי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם רִאשֵׁיכֶם שְׂבִיטֵיכֶם זְקֵנֵיכֶם וְשִׁטְרֵיכֶם כָּל אִישׁ יִשְׂרָאֵל. טַפְכֶּם וְנָשֵׁיכֶם וְגֵרְךָ אֲשֶׁר בְּקֶרֶב מַחֲנֶיךָ מֵחֻטָּב עַצִּיךָ עַד שְׂאֵב מִימֶיךָ לְעַבְדְּךָ בְּבְרִית ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ וּבְאַלְתּוֹ אֲשֶׁר ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ כָּרַת עִמָּךְ הַיּוֹם. לְמַעַן הָקִים אֶתֶּךָ הַיּוֹם לֹא לָעַם וְהוּא יִהְיֶה לָּךְ לְאֵלֹהִים כְּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר לְךָ וְכָאֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּע לְאַבְרָהָם לְיִצְחָק וּלְיַעֲקֹב. וְלֹא אַתֶּם לְבַדְכֶם אֲנֹכִי כָרַת אֶת הַבְּרִית הַזֹּאת וְאֵת הָאֱלֹהִים הַזֹּאת. כִּי אֵת אֲשֶׁר יִשְׁנֹנוּ פֹה עִמָּנוּ עַד הַיּוֹם לִפְנֵי ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְאֵת אֲשֶׁר אֵינָנוּ פֹה עִמָּנוּ הַיּוֹם.

All of you are standing today before the Lord your God – the leaders among you, the tribes, the elders and officials, all the men of Israel, the children, the women, the strangers in your camp, from woodcutter to water drawer – to enter into the covenant of the Lord your God, and the oath the Lord your God is making with you today, to establish you today as His people, that He may be your God, as He promised you and swore to your ancestors, Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov. **Not with you alone am I making this covenant and oath; with you who are standing here with us today before the Lord our God I make it, and with those, too, who are not with us here today.**

POINTS TO PONDER

- Who do you think 'those who are not with us here today' are?
- As a consequence of this text, what do they now have to do?

2 | MIDRASH TANCHUMA, NITZAVIM 3

אמר רבי אבהו בשם רבי שמואל בר נחמני, למה כתיב: כי את אשר ישנו פה וגו' ואת אשר איננו פה. לפי שהנשמות היו שם ועדין גוף לא נברא.

Rabbi Avahu said in the name of Rabbi Shmuel bar Nahmani, "Why does it say, 'with you who are standing here', and 'with those, too, who are not with us here [omitting the word 'standing']'? **Because all the souls were there**, even though the bodies had not yet been created.

3 | RASHI ON DEVARIM 29:14

ואת אשר איננו פה. ואף עם דורות העתידים להיות.

With those who are not here: Even with generations yet to come.

4 | RABBI YITZCHAK BEN MOSHE ARAMA, AKEIDAT YITZCHAK 99:1

The obligation to perform mitzvot requires both body and soul... Since halachah, Jewish law, teaches that obligations cannot be imposed upon anyone unless he is present and expresses his consent... How much more would the consent of someone be required that had not even been born at the time the obligation had been imposed upon him?

POINTS TO PONDER

- What does the Akeidat Yitzchak find difficult with the Midrash and Rashi (Sources 2 & 3)?
- According to the Midrash and Rashi, do we have a choice whether we are bound to keep the Torah or not?
- Do you have a sense of obligation based on this agreement made over 3,000 years ago? If so, how? If not, why not?



RABBI SACKS IN "RADICAL THEN, RADICAL NOW" / "A LETTER IN THE SCROLL", CHAPTER 1:

Judaism is a religion of continuity. It depends for its very existence on the willingness of successive generations to hand on their faith and way of life to their children, and on the loyalty of children to the heritage of their past... So when in the past Jews asked why they should continue to be Jewish, what was the answer?

FOR ADVANCED LEARNERS

5 | RABBI YITZCHAK BEN MOSHE ARAMA, AKEIDAT YITZCHAK 99:1

The crucial aspect of the eternal nature of the covenant is, that just as mass suicide committed by a whole people simultaneously is unthinkable, so the alienation of the entire Jewish people from its Torah and its God simultaneously, is equally beyond the realm of possibility...

Just as God had promised never to bring another Flood, since conditions would not be allowed to recur which would call for such mass extinction, so conditions allowing a total rupture between Israel and its God would also not be allowed to recur. This is what the oath in our *parsha* wishes to convey.

6 | ABARBANEL ON DEVARIM 29:9

Therefore, our Sages said that every Jew has been sworn into the covenant since Mount Sinai, since that was when we entered into the service of God; and all descendants have the same obligation...

The children were obligated and included into the covenant made by their ancestors, not because of the oath that they made but because they accepted upon themselves being servants [to God] when He took them out of the Land of Egypt.

POINTS TO PONDER



- From a modern perspective, what is strange or challenging about the answer of the Akeidat Yitzchak?
- Do you relate to Abarbanel's description of all Jews as 'servants of God'? Does the fact that God has saved us from slavery in Egypt, and many more things since, cause us to be His servants?
- In a society that emphasises the individual's right to choose, how do you relate to the idea of being commanded to do various actions?

7 | YECHEZKEL 20:32-33

וְהָעֵלָה עַל רוּחְכֶם הָיָה לֹא תִהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אַתֶּם אֹמְרִים נִהְיֶה כְּגוֹיִם כְּמִשְׁפָּחוֹת הָאָרְצוֹת לְשֶׁרֶת עֵץ וְאֶבֶן. חִי אֲנִי נֹאֵם אֲדֹנָי ה' אִם לֹא בְיַד חֲזָקָה וּבְזֹרֹעַ נְטוּיָה וּבְחִמָּה שְׁפוּכָה אֶמְלֹךְ עֲלֵיכֶם.

And that which is your thoughts will never be. You say: We will be like the nations, like the families of the lands, serving wood and stone. As I live, declares the Lord God, with a strong hand, with an outstretched arm, and with an outpouring of fury, I will rule over you.



RABBI SACKS IN "RADICAL THEN, RADICAL NOW" / "A LETTER IN THE SCROLL", CHAPTER 2:

The message Ezekiel was conveying was this: Jews might try to assimilate but they would never succeed. History would conspire to prevent it. Jews would find that even though they converted, they were still regarded as Jews.

POINT TO PONDER

- Does this make you feel more, or less, inclined to feel a sense of obligation to the Torah and mitzvot?

8 | RABBI SACKS, COVENANT AND CONVERSATION, NITZAVIM: WHY BE JEWISH?

Not every obligation that binds us is one to which we have freely given our assent. There are obligations that come with birth. The classic example is a crown prince or princess. To be the heir to a throne involves a set of duties and a life of service to others. It is possible to neglect these duties. In extreme circumstances it is even possible for a monarch to abdicate. But no one can choose to be heir to a throne. That is a fate, a destiny, that comes with birth.

The people of whom God Himself said, "My child, My firstborn, Israel" (Shemot 4:22) knows itself to be royalty. That may be a privilege. It may be a burden. It is almost certainly both. It is a peculiar post-Enlightenment delusion to think that the only significant things about us are those we choose. For the truth is that we do not choose some of the most important facts about ourselves. We did not choose to be born. We did not choose our parents. We did not choose the time and place of our birth. Yet each of these affects who we are and what we are called on to do.

POINT TO PONDER

- Do you have a responsibility to continue the Jewish people or should it simply be a matter of personal choice?

9 | DEVARIM 30:19

הַעֲדֵיתִי בְּכֶם הַיּוֹם אֶת הַשְּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ הַחַיִּים וְהַמָּוֶת נְתַתִּי לְפָנֶיךָ הַבְּרָכָה וְהַקְּלָלָה וּבִבְחֹרֶת בְּחַיִּים לְמַעַן תִּחְיֶה אִתָּה וְזִרְעֶךָ.

I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you today: I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. Choose life – so that you and your children may live.

10 | RABBI SACKS, COVENANT AND CONVERSATION, NITZAVIM: WHY JUDAISM?

Choose life. No religion, no civilisation, has insisted so strenuously and consistently that we can choose. We have it in us, says Rambam, to be as righteous as Moshe or as evil as Yerovam. We can be great. We can be small. We can choose.

...Choice is like a muscle: use it or lose it. Jewish law is an ongoing training regime in willpower. Can you eat this and not that? Can you exercise spiritually three times a day? Can you rest one day in seven? Can you defer the gratification of instinct? ...To be a Jew means not going with the flow, not doing what others do just because they are doing it. It gives us 613 exercises in the power of will to shape our choices. That is how we, with God, become co-authors of our lives.

Choose life. Nothing sounds easier yet nothing has proved more difficult over time. Instead, people choose substitutes for life. They pursue wealth, possessions, status, power, fame, and to these gods they make the supreme sacrifice, realising too late that true wealth is not what you own but what you are thankful for, that the highest status is not to care about status, and that influence is more powerful than power.

That is why, though few faiths are more demanding, most Jews at most times have stayed faithful to Judaism, living Jewish lives, building Jewish homes, and continuing the Jewish story. That is why, with a faith as unshakeable as it has proved true, Moses was convinced that “not with you alone am I making this covenant and oath... with those, too, who are not with us today.” ...Why Judaism? Because there is no more challenging way of choosing life.

11 | RABBI SACKS, "RADICAL THEN, RADICAL NOW" / "A LETTER IN THE SCROLL", CHAPTER 4

Imagine that, while browsing in the library, you come across one book unlike the rest, which catches your eye because on its spine is written the name of your family. Intrigued, you open it and see many pages written by different hands in many languages. You start reading it, and gradually you begin to understand what it is. It is the story each generation of your ancestors has told for the sake of the next, so that everyone born into this family can learn where they came from, what happened to them, what they lived for and why. As you turn the pages, you reach the last, which carries no entry but a heading. It bears your name. According to the intellectual conventions of modernity, this should make no difference. There is nothing in the past that can bind you in the present, no history that can make a difference to who you are and who you are free to be. But this cannot be the whole truth. Were I to find myself holding such a book in my hands, my life would already have been changed. Seeing my name and the story of my forebears, I could not read it as if it were just one story among others; instead, reading it would inevitably become, for me, a form of self-discovery. Once I knew that it existed, I could not put the book back on the shelf and forget it, because I would now know that I am part of a long line of people who travelled toward a certain destination and whose journey remains unfinished, dependent on me to take it further. With that newfound knowledge, I could no longer see the world simply as a library. Other books may make no special claim on me; they may be interesting, inspiring, entrancing, but this one is different. Its very existence poses a set of questions addressed, not to the universe, but to me. Will I write my own chapter? Will it be a continuation of the story of those who came before? Will I, when the time comes, hand the book on to my children, or will I by then have forgotten it or given it away to a museum as an heirloom from the past? This is more than an imaginative exercise. There is such a book, and to be a Jew is to be a life, a chapter, in it.



...The fact that any of us is born a Jew is no mere fact. It happened because more than a hundred generations of our ancestors decided to be Jews and hand on that identity to their children, thus writing the most remarkable story of continuity ever known. Nor was this mere happenstance. It flowed from their most basic conviction, that Jews had entered into a covenant with God that would take them on a journey whose destination lay in the distant future but whose outcome was of immense consequence for humankind.

...I am a Jew because, knowing the story of my people, I hear their call to write the next chapter ... I continue their journey because, having come this far, I may not let it and them fail. I cannot be the missing letter in the scroll. I can give no simpler answer, nor do I know of a more powerful one.

POINTS TO PONDER

- Which, of all the answers to our central question, speaks to you the most?
- What does it mean to you to write the next chapter in the story of the Jewish people?