



# COVENANT & CONVERSATION

THOUGHTS ON THE WEEKLY PARSHA  
FROM RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

בס"ד



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קדשים תשע"ט  
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## COVENANT & CONVERSATION: FAMILY EDITION

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## From Priest to People

Something fundamental happens at the beginning of this parsha and the story is one of the greatest, if rarely acknowledged, contributions of Judaism to the world.

Until now Vayikra has been largely about sacrifices, purity, the Sanctuary, and the Priesthood. It has been, in short, about a holy place, holy offerings, and the elite and holy people – Aaron and his descendants – who minister there. Suddenly, in chapter 19, the text opens up to embrace the whole of the people and the whole of life:

The Lord said to Moses: “Speak to *the entire assembly of Israel* and say to them, ‘Be holy because I the Lord your God am holy.’” (Lev. 19:1–2)

This is the first and only time in Leviticus that so inclusive an address is commanded. The Sages say that it means that the contents of the chapter were proclaimed by Moses to a formal gathering of the entire nation (*hak'hel*). It is the people as a whole who are commanded to “be holy,” not just an elite, the Priests. It is life itself that is to be sanctified, as the chapter goes on to make clear. Holiness is to be made manifest in the way the nation makes its clothes and plants its fields, in the way justice is administered, workers are paid, and business conducted. The vulnerable – the deaf, the blind, the elderly, and the stranger – are to be afforded special protection. The whole society is to be governed by love, without resentments or revenge.

What we witness here, in other words, is the radical *democratisation of holiness*. All ancient societies had Priests. We have encountered four instances in the Torah thus far of non-Israelite Priests: Malkizedek, Abraham's contemporary, described as a Priest of God Most High; Potipher, Joseph's father-in-law; the Egyptian Priests as a whole, whose land Joseph did not nationalise; and Yitro, Moses' father-in-law, a Midianite Priest. The Priesthood was not unique to Israel, and everywhere it was an elite. Here for the first time, we find a code of holiness directed to the people as a whole. We are all called on to be holy.

In a strange way, though, this comes as no surprise. The idea, if not the details, had already been hinted at. The most explicit instance comes in the prelude to the great covenant-making ceremony at Mount Sinai when God tells Moses to say to the people, “Now if you obey Me fully and keep My covenant, then out of all nations you will be My treasured possession. Although the whole earth is Mine, you will be for Me *a kingdom of Priests and a holy nation*”, (Ex. 19:5–6) that is, a kingdom all of whose members are to be in some sense Priests, and a nation that is in its entirety holy.

The first intimation is much earlier still, in the first chapter of Genesis, with its monumental assertion, “Let Us make mankind in Our image, in Our likeness’.... So God created mankind in His own image, in the image of God He created them; male and female He created them” (Gen. 1:26–27). What is revolutionary in this declaration is not that a human being could be in the image of God. That is precisely how kings of Mesopotamian city states and pharaohs of Egypt were regarded. They were seen as the representatives, the living images, of the gods. That is how they derived their authority. The Torah’s revolution is the statement that not some, but *all*, humans share this dignity. Regardless of class, colour, culture, or creed, we are all in the image and likeness of God.

**“The Torah’s revolution is the statement that regardless of class, colour, culture, or creed, we are all in the image and likeness of God.”**

Thus was born the cluster of ideas that, though they took many millennia to be realised, led to the distinctive culture of the West: the non-negotiable dignity of the human person, the idea of human rights, and eventually, the political and economic expressions of these ideas: liberal democracy on the one hand, and the free market on the other.

The point is not that these ideas were fully formed in the minds of human beings during the period of biblical history. Manifestly, this is not so. The concept of human rights is a product of the seventeenth century. Democracy was not fully implemented until the twentieth. But already in Genesis 1 the seed was planted. That is what Jefferson meant in his famous words, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal,” and what John F. Kennedy alluded to in his Inaugural Address when he spoke of the “revolutionary belief” that “the rights of man come not from the generosity of the state, but from the hand of God.”

The irony is that these three texts, Genesis 1, Exodus 19:6, and Leviticus 19, are all spoken in the Priestly voice Judaism calls *Torat Kohanim*.<sup>1</sup> On the face of it, Priests were not egalitarian. They all came from a single tribe, the Levites, and from a single family, that of Aaron, within the tribe. To be sure, the Torah tells us that this was not God’s original intention. Initially, it was to have been the firstborn – those who were saved from the last of the plagues – who were charged with special holiness as the ministers of God. It was only after the sin of the Golden Calf, in which the tribe of Levi did not participate, that the change was made. Even so, the Priesthood would have been an elite, a role reserved specifically for firstborn

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<sup>1</sup> There is, of course, a prophetic call to equality also. We hear, in all the prophets, a critique of the abuse of power and the exploitation of the poor and powerless. What made the Priestly voice so significant is that it is the voice of law, and thus of the legal structures that alleviated poverty and set limits to slavery.

males. So deep is the concept of equality written into monotheism that it emerges precisely from the Priestly voice, from which we would least expect it.

The reason is this: religion in the ancient world was, not accidentally but essentially, a defence of hierarchy. With the development, first of agriculture, then of cities, what emerged were highly stratified societies with a ruler on top, surrounded by a royal court, beneath which was an administrative elite, and at the bottom, an illiterate mass that was conscripted from time to time either as an army or as a *corvée*, a labour force used in the construction of monumental buildings.

What kept the structure in place was an elaborate doctrine of a heavenly hierarchy whose origins were told in myth, whose most familiar natural symbol was the sun, and whose architectural representation was the pyramid or ziggurat, a massive building broad at the base and narrow at the top. The gods had fought and established an order of dominance and submission. To rebel against the earthly hierarchy was to challenge reality itself. This belief was universal in the ancient world. Aristotle thought that some were born to rule, others to be ruled. Plato constructed a myth in his *The Republic*, in which class divisions existed because the gods had made some people with gold, some with silver, and others with bronze. This was the “noble lie” that had to be told if a society was to protect itself against dissent from within.

Monotheism removes the entire mythological basis of hierarchy. There is no order among the gods because there are no gods, there is only the One God, Creator of all. Some form of hierarchy will always exist: armies need commanders, films need directors, and orchestras, conductors. But these are functional, not ontological. They are not a matter of birth. So it is all the more impressive to find the most egalitarian sentiments coming from the world of the Priest, whose religious role *was* a matter of birth.

The concept of equality we find in the Torah specifically and Judaism generally is not an equality of wealth: Judaism is not communism. Nor is it an equality of power: Judaism is not anarchy. It is fundamentally an equality of dignity. We are all equal citizens in the nation whose sovereign is God. Hence the elaborate political and economic structure set out in Leviticus, organised around the number seven, the sign of the holy. Every seventh day is free time. Every seventh year, the produce of the field belongs to all, Israelite slaves are to be liberated, and debts released. Every fiftieth year, ancestral land was to return to its original owners. Thus the inequalities that are the inevitable result of freedom are mitigated. The logic of all these provisions is the Priestly insight that God, creator of all, is the ultimate owner of all: “The land must not be sold permanently, because the land is Mine and you reside in My land as strangers and temporary residents” (Lev. 25:23). God therefore has the right, not just the power, to set limits to inequality. No one should be robbed of dignity by total poverty, endless servitude, or unrelieved indebtedness.

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What is truly remarkable, however, is what happened *after* the biblical era and the destruction of the Second Temple. Faced with the loss of the entire infrastructure of the holy, the Temple, its Priests, and sacrifices, Judaism translated the entire system of *avoda*, divine service, into the everyday life of ordinary Jews. In prayer, every Jew became a Priest offering a

sacrifice. In repentance, he became a High Priest, atoning for his sins and those of his people. Every synagogue, in Israel or elsewhere, became a fragment of the Temple in Jerusalem. Every table became an altar, every act of charity or hospitality, a kind of sacrifice.

Torah study, once the speciality of the Priesthood, became the right and obligation of everyone. Not everyone could wear the crown of Priesthood, but everyone could wear the crown of Torah. A *mamzer talmid chacham*, a Torah scholar of illegitimate birth, say the Sages, is greater than an *am ha'aretz Kohen Gadol*, an ignorant High Priest. Out of the devastating tragedy of the loss of the Temple, the Sages created a religious and social order that came closer to the ideal of the people as “a kingdom of Priests and a holy nation” than had ever previously been realised. The seed had been planted long before, in the opening of Leviticus 19: “Speak to *the entire assembly of Israel* and say to them, ‘Be holy because I the Lord your God am holy.’”

Holiness belongs to all of us when we turn our lives into the service of God, and society into a home for the Divine Presence.

Shabbat shalom

Jonathan Sacks

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