



COVENANT & CONVERSATION

Family Edition

ואתחנן תשע"ט
Va'etchanan 5779

Why is the Jewish People So Small?

WELCOME TO COVENANT & CONVERSATION 5779 FAMILY EDITION

Covenant & Conversation: Family Edition is a new and exciting initiative from *The Office of Rabbi Sacks for 5779*. Written as an accompaniment to Rabbi Sacks' weekly *Covenant & Conversation* essay, the Family Edition is aimed at connecting teenagers and families with his ideas and thoughts on the parsha. To receive this via email please make sure you are subscribed to Rabbi Sacks' main mailing list at www.RabbiSacks.org/Subscribe.



PARSHAT VA'ETCHANAN IN A NUTSHELL

Va'etchanan contains some of the most magnificent theological passages in the whole of Judaism. Moses tells the people that their laws and history are unique, and will be seen as such by other nations. Their laws were given by God; their history was written by God – there is no other nation of which either can be said.

Moses then begins his second great speech. He reminds the people of the Ten Commandments and the revelation at Mount Sinai and commands them to set God at the centre of their lives. This passage became the first paragraph of the Shema, and our supreme expression of the love of God. We recite it, morning and night, we teach it to our children, men wear it, in the form of tefillin, and it is placed as mezuzot “on the doorposts of your house” (Devarim 6:9).



THE CORE IDEA

Near the end of Va'etchanan, is a short statement which can be easy to miss, but it is an almost radical point of great importance, because it seems to challenge the image of the people of Israel that we have been given until now in the Torah. Moses says, “The Lord did not set His affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you are the fewest of all peoples” (Devarim. 7:7).

This is not what we have heard thus far. In Bereishit, God promised the patriarchs that they would have so many descendants, that they would be like the stars of the heaven, the sand on the seashore, the dust of the earth, uncountable. And Abraham was told he was fated to become the father, of not just one nation but of many. At the beginning of Shemot, we read of how the covenantal family, numbering a mere seventy when they went down to Egypt, “became so numerous that the land was filled with them” (Shemot 1:7). Three times in the book of Devarim, Moses describes the Israelites as being “as many as the stars of the sky” (1:10; 10:22; 28:62).

In all these texts, as well as in several others, it is the size of the people that is emphasised. The idea that one day we will be great in number. So what does Moses mean by speaking of our smallness? There is something in this verse that connects to the reality of Jewish history. Historically Jews were a small people. Still today, we form less than 0.2 per cent of the population of the world. There are two reasons for this. First is the heavy toll taken through the ages by exile and persecution. It has been hard for our scattered people to flourish, as in many other countries over the years, Jews were attacked, expelled or forced to convert. The Jewish population is a mere fraction of what it might have been had there been no Hadrian, no Crusades, and no antisemitism.

The second reason is that Jews did not seek to convert others. Had they done so they would have been closer in numbers to Christianity (2.4 billion) or Islam (1.6 billion). In fact, Malbim (a Biblical commentator born in 1809 in Ukraine) reads something like this into our verse. The previous verses have said that the Israelites were about to enter a land with seven nations, Hittites, Gergashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites. Moses warns them against intermarriage with the other

nations, not for racial but for religious reasons: “They will turn your children away from following Me to serve other gods” (Devarim 7:4). Malbim interprets our verse as Moses saying to the Israelites: Do not justify out-marriage on the grounds that it will increase the number of Jews. God is not interested in numbers.



IT ONCE HAPPENED...

Mark Twain is widely considered to be one of America’s finest writers. His real name was Samuel Langhorne Clemens (1835–1910). The following famous passage is taken from a magazine article he wrote in answer to a request to clarify his views about the Jews.

If the statistics are right, the Jews constitute but one percent of the human race. It suggests a nebulous dim puff of star dust lost in the blaze of the Milky Way.

Properly the Jew ought hardly to be heard of; but he is heard of, has always been heard of. He is as prominent on the planet as any other people, and his commercial importance is extravagantly out of proportion to the smallness of his bulk.

His contributions to the world’s list of great names in literature, science, art, music, finance, medicine, and abstruse learning are also away out of proportion to the weakness of his numbers. He has made a marvelous fight in this world, in all the ages; and has done it with his hands tied behind him. He could be vain of himself, and be excused for it.

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. Why do you think God and Moses described the Israelites several times as numerous?
2. How can Israel's small number be explained? Does this mean God's promises have not been fulfilled?
3. If God is not interested in numbers, what is He interested in?

The Egyptian, the Babylonian, and the Persian rose, filled the planet with sound and splendor, then faded to dream-stuff and passed away; the Greek and the Roman followed, and made a vast noise, and they are gone; other peoples have sprung up and held their torch high for a time, but it burned out, and they sit in twilight now, or have vanished. The Jew saw them all, beat them all, and is now what he always was, exhibiting no decadence, no infirmities of age, no weakening of his parts, no slowing of his energies, no dulling of his alert and aggressive mind.

All things are mortal but the Jew; all other forces pass, but he remains. What is the secret of his immortality?

Mark Twain, Concerning the Jews, Harper’s Magazine, 1899

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. Can you explain the contribution of the Jewish people to the world despite being a tiny people?
2. What do you think is the secret of Jewish immortality (and success)?



THINKING MORE DEEPLY

Tanach itself offers one extraordinary episode that sheds a different light on the issue of the size of the Jewish people. It occurs in the seventh chapter of the book of Judges. God has told Gidon to assemble an army and do battle with the Midianites. He gathers a force of 32,000 men. God tells him, “You have too many men. I cannot deliver Midian into their hands, or Israel would boast against Me, ‘My own strength has saved me’” (Judges 7:2).

God tells Gidon to say to the men: Whoever is afraid and wishes to go home may do so. Twenty-two thousand men leave. Ten thousand remain. God tells Gidon, “There are still too many men.” He proposes a new test. Gidon is to take the men to a river and see how they drink the water. Ninety-seven hundred kneel down to drink, and are dismissed. Gidon is left

with a mere three hundred men. “With the three hundred men that lapped [the water] I will save you and give the Midianites into your hands,” God tells him (Judges 7:1–8). By a brilliant and unexpected strategy, the three hundred men then put the entire Midianite army to flight.

The Jewish people are small but have achieved great things to testify within themselves to a force beyond themselves. It has achieved things no other nation its size could have achieved. Its history has been living testimony to the force of Divine Providence and the impact of high ideals. That is what Moses meant when he said:

“Ask now about the former days, long before your time, from the day God created human beings on the earth; ask from one end of the heavens to the other. Has anything so great as this ever happened, or has anything like it ever been heard of? Has

any other people heard the voice of God speaking out of fire, as you have, and lived? Has any god ever tried to take for himself one nation out of another nation, by tests, by signs and wonders, by war, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, or by great and awesome deeds, like all the things the Lord your God did for you in Egypt before your very eyes?" (Dev. 4:32–34)

Israel defies the laws of history because it serves the Author of history. Attached to greatness, it becomes great. Through the Jewish people, God is telling humankind that you do not need to be numerous to be great. Nations are judged not by their size but by their contribution to human heritage. Of this the most compelling proof is that a nation as small as the Jews could produce an ever-renewed flow of prophets, priests, poets, philosophers, sages, saints, halachists, aggadists, codifiers, commentators, rebbes, and *rashei yeshivot*. It has also yielded some of the world's greatest writers, artists, musicians, filmmakers, academics, intellectuals, doctors, lawyers, businesspeople, and technological innovators. Out of all proportion to their numbers, Jews could and can be found working as lawyers fighting injustice, economists fighting poverty, doctors fighting disease, teachers fighting ignorance, and therapists fighting depression and despair.

You do not need numbers to enlarge the spiritual and moral horizons of humankind. You need other things altogether: a

sense of the worth and dignity of the individual, of the power of human possibility to transform the world, of the importance of giving everyone the best education they can have, of making each feel part of a collective responsibility to ameliorate the human condition. Judaism asks of us the willingness to take high ideals and enact them in the real world, unswayed by disappointments and defeats.

This is still evident today, especially among the people of Israel in the State of Israel. Defamed in the media and scorned by much of the world, Israel continues to produce human miracles in medicine, agriculture, technology, and the arts, as if the word "impossible" did not exist in the Hebrew language. Israel remains a small nation, surrounded, as in biblical times, by "nations larger and stronger than you" (Dev. 7:1). Yet the truth remains, as Moses said: "The Lord did not set His affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you are the fewest of all peoples."

This small people has outlived all the world's great empires to deliver to humanity a message of hope: you need not be large to be great. What you need is to be open to a power greater than yourself. It is said that King Louis XIV of France once asked Blaise Pascal, the brilliant mathematician and theologian, to give him proof of the existence of God. Pascal is said to have replied, "Your Majesty, the Jews!"



FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

Jews were always a tiny people, yet our ancestors survived by believing that eternity is found in the simple lives of ordinary human beings. They found God in homes, families and relationships. They worshipped God in synagogues, the first places ever to become holy because of the mere fact that people gathered there to pray. They discovered God in the human heart and in our capacity to make the world different by what we do. They encountered God, not in the wind or the thunder or the earthquake, but in words, the words of Torah, the marriage contract between God and the people He took as His own. They studied those words endlessly and tried to put them into practice. They brought heaven

down to earth, because they believed that God lives wherever we dedicate our lives to Him.

Radical Then, Radical Now, p. 50

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. What is the connection between being a small people and finding God in simple places and people?
2. Do you think there is a message contained in the fact that the Jewish people has always been small?



AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. Why do you think the Jewish people have always been tiny in number? Does this mean God's promises to the patriarchs have not been fulfilled?
2. If God is not interested in numbers, what is He interested in?
3. What is the message from the story about Gidon in the seventh chapter of Judges?
4. How do you think Jews have achieved things no other nation its size could have achieved?
5. What is the message from Jewish history contained in the size of the Jewish people?



QUESTION TIME

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EDUCATIONAL COMPANION TO THE QUESTIONS

THE CORE IDEA

1. The context of each of these times in the Torah when the strength found in the numbers of the Jewish people is mentioned is a promise about the future. The patriarchs were promised that their family would grow into a large vibrant people who would fulfill the covenant with God. Moses was also reassuring the people about the future. At these stages of Jewish history the future was far from certain, and the people were indeed tiny in number. In fact, the Jewish people of today, despite its relative smallness compared to other nations, is "numerous like the stars" compared to the early biblical times.
2. Rabbi Sacks explains that because of persecution during thousands of years of exile and wandering, including and culminating in the Holocaust, and secondly Judaism has never been a proselytising religion, and has never aimed to convert non-Jews to Judaism or to bring them into the Jewish people (as opposed to the other major monotheistic religions who now comprise more than half the population of the planet. Despite this, the Jewish people are strong and vibrant, and compared to biblical times, even numerous. This means we can still argue that God's promise has indeed been fulfilled.
3. God is more interested in quality than quantity. Despite only comprising less than 0.2% of the world's population, the contribution the Jewish people have made to humanity is incalculable and certainly way beyond its numbers. The Jewish national mission as set out in the Torah is not dependent on the Jewish people being a large and powerful nation.

IT ONCE HAPPENED...

1. Many scholars and academics have suggested various theories to explain this, and these are beyond the scope of this *Covenant & Conversation*. However, it would be interesting to explore with your children/students/friends what they think, and why it seems that this tiny people always seems to be at the centre of humanity and its achievements (and challenges), and whether they think this is part of God's plan for the Jewish people, and the fulfillment of their national destiny (and what that may be).
2. No one has the answer to this. But some believe it is God's influence. Some believe it is the by-product of a lengthy exile experience. Others believe this is a direct result of the family- and education-centered culture of traditional Judaism, as Rabbi Sacks explored in last week's *Covenant & Conversation*.

FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

1. As opposed to the Almighty Infinite God choosing a mighty and numerous nation to be his "chosen people" to testify to His greatness, God chose a small and insignificant people who found God and godliness in all humans, and in simple places. The message here is that all human beings can have an intimate relationship with the one true God, not just the wealthy and powerful.
2. This is the message of the Jewish people and Jewish history. God is not interested in numbers and power. This tiny insignificant people have outlasted all the mighty empires of the world (see *It Once Happened...*). There are no hierarchies based on wealth, power, or even education, when it comes to worship of God. Every human is created in the image of God, and has inalienable value and worth, and equal right to intimate relationship with God.

AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. See *The Core Idea*, answer 2.
2. See *The Core Idea*, answer 3.
3. God taught Gidon a profound lesson that numbers do not necessarily contain power. Power and strength can come from brilliant intellect (the strategy the tiny army of 300 employed) or with the help and providence of God, numbers become irrelevant, both in battle and in surviving and thriving in history (Jewish history is a case in point).
4. See *It Once Happened...* answer 1.
5. See *From the Thought of Rabbi Sacks*, answers 1 and 2.