



COVENANT & CONVERSATION

Family Edition

וילך תש"ף
Vayelech 5780

**The Torah
as God's
Song**

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Covenant & Conversation: Family Edition is a new and exciting initiative from *The Office of Rabbi Sacks*. 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 VAYELECH IN A NUTSHELL

Vayelech is the very shortest parsha, only thirty verses long. Moses tells the people, "I am now a hundred and twenty years old, and I can no longer go forth" (Devarim 31:2). He will not be leading them across the Jordan into the Promised Land. He then summons his successor Joshua and, in the presence of the people, gives him words of encouragement. He instructs the people to gather every seven years to hear a public reading of the Torah.

God appears to Moses and Joshua, warning them that the Israelites may eventually stray from the covenant. He instructs them to write down the Torah and teach it to the people, as permanent testimony of the covenant itself. He then encourages Joshua, assuring him that He will be with him as he leads the people.



THE CORE IDEA

At the end of his life, having already given the Israelites 612 of God's commands, Moses gave them the final mitzvah: "Now therefore write down for yourselves this song and teach it to the people of Israel. Put it in their mouths, that this song may be My witness against the people of Israel" (Devarim 31:19).

It may seem like God was speaking to Moses and Joshua and only referring to the song in the following chapter, "Listen, O heavens, and I will speak; hear, O earth, the words of my mouth" (32:1). However, Oral Tradition gave this verse a different and much wider interpretation, understanding it as a command for every Jew to write, or at least take some part in writing, a Sefer Torah:

Said Rabbah: Even though our ancestors have left us a scroll of the Torah, it is our religious duty to write one for ourselves, as it is said: "Now therefore write down for yourselves this song and teach it to the people of Israel. Put it in their mouths, that this song may be My witness against the people of Israel." (Sanhedrin 21b)

The logic of the interpretation seems to be, first, that the phrase "write down for yourselves" could be understood as

referring to every Israelite (Ibn Ezra), not just Moses and Joshua. Second, the passage goes on to say (31:24): "Moses finished writing in the book the words of this law from beginning to end." The Talmud offers a third reason. The verse goes on to say: "That this song may be My witness", implying the Torah as a whole, not just the song in chapter 32 (Nedarim 38a).

Thus understood, Moses' final message to the Israelites was: "It is not enough that you have received the Torah from me. You must make it new again in every generation." The covenant was not to grow old. It had to be frequently renewed.

So it is to this day that Torah scrolls are still written as in ancient times, by hand, on parchment, using a quill – as were the Dead Sea Scrolls two thousand years ago. In a religion that focuses on holy words, and that is almost without holy objects, the Torah scroll is the nearest Judaism comes to a physical object that has sanctity.

Judaism is the story of the love between a people and a book, the Book of books.

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. What are the two possible interpretations of the verse “Now therefore write down for yourselves this song and teach it to the people of Israel. Put it in their mouths...”?

2. Why do you think there is a mitzvah for every person to play a part in the writing of a Sefer Torah?
3. How can we make the Torah new in every generation?



IT ONCE HAPPENED...

Joachim Joseph celebrated his bar mitzvah in the most unlikely of places. He was in Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in 1944, and had been taught in secret, late at night. The only family member with him was a younger brother. He read from a tiny Sefer Torah that his teacher, Rabbi Dasberg, had kept hidden throughout the war. It was barely four inches in height. Afterwards, everyone congratulated Joseph, and some even gave him gifts. He received a small piece of chocolate, a tiny pack of playing cards, and a very special gift that would remain with him until he was an old man. The Rabbi gave him the tiny Sefer Torah, on condition that if he survived, he must tell the story of his bar mitzvah. A few months later the Rabbi died, but Joseph escaped.

After the war he made his way to Israel and saw the birth of the Jewish State. He later became a professor of physics, and was part of the team that sent Israel's first astronaut, Ilan Ramon,

into space. When he told Ilan the story of the tiny Sefer Torah, Ilan was inspired to take it with him aboard the space shuttle, Columbia. In a live telecast from aboard the space shuttle, Ilan held up the Sefer Torah and told its story to millions of people. “This was given by a Rabbi to a scared, thin young boy in Bergen-Belsen,” said Ilan from the space shuttle... “It represents more than anything the ability of the Jewish people to survive. From horrible periods, black days, to reaching periods of hope and belief in the future.”

Joseph knew then that he had kept his promise to the Rabbi.

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. Why was the Sefer Torah so important to Joseph? What did it represent to him?
2. Why do you think Ilan Ramon chose to take it to space with him?



THINKING MORE DEEPLY

If we take this command to refer to the whole Torah and not just one chapter, what is the significance of the word “song” (*shira*): “Now therefore write down for yourselves this song”? The word *shira* appears five times in this passage. It is clearly a key word. Why? On this, two nineteenth-century scholars offered striking explanations.

The Netziv (Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin, 1816–1893, one of the great yeshiva heads of the nineteenth century) interprets it to mean that the whole Torah should be read as poetry, not prose; the word *shira* in Hebrew means both a song and a poem.

To be sure, most of the Torah is written in prose, but the Netziv argued that it has two characteristics of poetry. First, it is allusive rather than explicit. It leaves unsaid more than is said. Secondly, like poetry, it hints at deeper reservoirs of meaning, sometimes by the use of an unusual word or sentence construction. Descriptive prose carries its meaning on the surface. The Torah, like poetry, does not.

In this brilliant insight, the Netziv anticipates one of the great twentieth-century essays on biblical prose, Erich Auerbach's “*Odysseus' Scar*.” Auerbach points out that biblical narrative is spare and understated, not at all like a work of fiction. For example, explains Auerbach, in the story of the binding of Isaac

we do not know any of the usual narrative details: what the main characters look like, what they are feeling, what they are wearing, what landscapes they are passing through.

The decisive points of the plot alone are emphasised, what lies between is non-existent; time and place are undefined and call for interpretation; thoughts and feelings remain unexpressed, only suggested by the silence and the fragmentary speeches; the whole, permeated with the most unrelieved suspense and directed towards a single goal, remains mysterious and “fraught with background.”

A completely different aspect is alluded to by Rabbi Yechiel Michel Epstein, author of the halachic code *Aruch HaShulchan*. Epstein points out that the rabbinic literature is full of arguments, about which the sages said: “These and those are the words of the living God.” This, says Epstein, is one of the reasons the Torah is called “a song” – because a song becomes more beautiful when scored for many voices interwoven in complex harmonies.

I would suggest a third dimension. The 613th command is not simply about the Torah, but about the duty to make the Torah new in each generation. To make the Torah live anew, it is not enough to hand it on cognitively – as mere history and law. It must speak to us affectively, emotionally.

Judaism is a religion of words, and yet whenever the language of Judaism aspires to the spiritual it breaks into song, as if the words themselves sought escape from the gravitational pull of finite meanings. There is something about melody that intimates a reality beyond our grasp, what William Wordsworth called the "sense sublime. Of something far more deeply interfused. Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns. And the round ocean and the living air."

Words are the language of the mind. Music is the language of the soul.

The 613th command, to make the Torah new in every generation, symbolises the fact that though the Torah was

given once, it must be received many times, as each of us, through our study and practice, strives to recapture the pristine voice heard at Mount Sinai. That requires emotion, not just intellect. It means treating Torah not just as words read, but also as a melody sung. The Torah is God's libretto, and we, the Jewish people, are His choir, the performers of His choral symphony. And though when Jews speak they often argue, when they sing, they sing in harmony, as the Israelites did at the Red Sea, because music is the language of the soul, and at the level of the soul Jews enter the unity of the Divine which transcends the oppositions of lower worlds.

The Torah is God's song, and we collectively are its singers.



FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

The story of the Jewish people, especially after the second Temple, is about one of the great love affairs of all time, the love of a people for a book, the Torah. Much of the rabbinic literature, especially the tractate *Avot*, *Ethics of the Fathers*, reads like an extended poem in praise of Torah and the life of learning. The Torah was, said the Rabbis, the architecture of creation, written in letters of black fire on white fire. It was, said a later mystical tradition, nothing less than a single extended name of God. For Rabbi Akiva it was the very air Jews breathed. It was life itself...

The result was a constant dialogue with revelation. In Talmud study Jews found themselves entering into a conversation not only with the Torah but with successive generations of its commentators, Hillel and Shammai, Rav and Shmuel, Abaya and Rava, Rashi and the Tosafists, Rambam and Ramban. On virtually every subject they had

access to a millennial heritage of wisdom. Landless and powerless, they inhabited a mental universe whose horizons in space and time were vast. And as each community, each age, added its *chiddushim*, its new insights into the ancient text, they could feel some of the excitement of Sinai. Judaism is not a religion of continuing revelation, but rather one of continuing interpretation.

Radical Then, Radical Now, p. 157-159

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. How does the Jews' love of the Torah manifest itself (i.e. where can we practically see it)?
2. How can you be a link in the chain of "writing the Torah" and renewing it in our generation?



AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. Why do you think there is a mitzvah for every person to play a part in the writing of a Sefer Torah themselves?
2. How can we make the Torah new in every generation?
3. How do the Netziv and the Aruch HaShulchan explain that the Torah is like a *shira*?
4. What is Rabbi Sacks' alternative interpretation?
5. How do we make the Torah new in every generation and what does this have to do with the Torah being likened to a *shira*?



QUESTION TIME

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THE CORE IDEA

1. It could either be referring to a *mitzvah* given to Moses and Joshua to write down the song that appears in the following chapter, or a *mitzvah* to all of the people, to write down the entire Torah, which the verse describes as "a song".
2. This is a way for every person to create a connection with the Sefer Torah, and to feel an ownership of the Torah in a general sense. We should each play a role in keeping the Torah and passing it on to others. The Torah is not just for the Prophets, Priests, and scholars. It belongs to each and every one of us, and we must take ownership and develop a relationship with it.
3. We renew the Torah in every generation by learning it, teaching it, and adding our own commentary and understanding of it, applying it to our own modern world. We can do this through our understanding of both the narrative and philosophical parts of the Torah, as well as the legal parts and the application of halacha in general.

IT ONCE HAPPENED...

1. During a period where the Jewish people were facing a very real threat of extinction and annihilation, the Sefer Torah represented thousands of years of tradition and survival. This was especially true for Joseph while he was in the camps. It also represented faith that the Jewish people and Judaism will survive for eternity. This is what the Sefer Torah represented to him in the years that followed the war, when against all the odds the Jewish people not only survived, but began to thrive once again.
2. Ramon said he was taking the Torah scroll "from the depths of hell to the heights of space." And by doing that, he made it 'an article of hope.' Ilan Ramon was Israel's first astronaut. He was a fighter pilot in the Israeli army, and had flown many dangerous and important missions to protect the State of Israel. His mother was also a survivor of the Holocaust, having been in Auschwitz during the war. Who better to represent the eternity of the Jewish people and faith that the Jews would always survive and thrive. He played his own part in continuing the story of the Rabbi, of Joseph, and of the Jewish people and their Torah, when he held up the tiny Sefer Torah and explained its significance in the live teleconference from aboard the space shuttle Columbia.

FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

1. Answers might include the way they treat the physical Sefer Torah, such as the reverence and respect shown to it. Examples of this are; standing up when the Torah is removed from the ark, kissing it when it is carried past, not touching the parchment directly, and fasting in the case where, God forbid, a Sefer Torah is dropped, and dancing with the Torah on Simchat Torah. However, the passion for the words written in the scroll can also be clearly seen in the dedication Jews have always shown to learning Torah. This is how they have earned their reputation as the People of the Book.
2. The Torah is renewed in each generation as new interpretations are found and the message and values of the Torah are applied to contemporary times. This can be achieved through continuing and developing interpretations of both the narrative and philosophical parts of the Torah, as well as the legal parts and the halacha in general.

AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. See *The Core Idea*, answer 2
2. See *The Core Idea*, answer 3.
3. The Netziv interprets the verse to mean the Torah should be read as poetry, not prose; the word *shira* in Hebrew means both a song and a poem. The Torah is similar to poetry in that its meaning is allusive rather than explicit. It leaves more unsaid than is said. Also, like poetry, it hints at deeper reservoirs of meaning, sometimes by the use of an unusual word or sentence construction. Descriptive prose carries its meaning on the surface. The Torah, like poetry, does not. The Aruch Hashulchan draws our attention to the fact that the rabbinic literature is full of arguments, about which the Sages said: "These and those are the words of the living God." This is one of the reasons the Torah is called "a song" – because a song becomes more beautiful when scored for many voices interwoven in complex harmonies.
4. Rabbi Sacks suggests that the 613th command is not simply about the Torah, but about the duty to make the Torah new in each generation. To make the Torah live anew, it is not enough to hand it on cognitively – as mere history and law. It must speak to us emotionally. Words are the language of the mind. Music is the language of the soul. We must treat the Torah not just as words read, but also as a melody sung because music is the language of the soul.
5. The 613th command, to make the Torah new in every generation, expresses the fact that though the Torah was given only once, it must be received many times. Each of us, through our study and practice, strives to recapture the Divine voice heard at Mount Sinai, as well as develop the chain of interpretation, contributing our own voice in our generation. This requires emotion, not just intellect, and therefore means treating the Torah not just as words read, but also as a melody sung. The Torah is God's song, and we are all its singers.