

# 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 ז"ל. 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



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## The World's Most Enduring Moral Voice

**Introduction - 14 October 2014 / 20 Tishrei 5775**

Judaism entered the world as a moral voice. It did so from the beginning, from its account of creation itself. There we read, almost like a litany, "God said, Let there be ... and there was ... and God saw that it was good." The emphasis is on the word *good*. This is the language of morality, not myth. Nor is it science. Physics and chemistry do not speak about the "goodness" of the cosmos. Yet the Torah does, and for a reason. It wants us to know that there is a moral dimension to existence. Goodness is not something we invent. It is part of the text and texture of life as seen through the eye of faith.

**"The Torah teaches us that there is a moral dimension to existence."**

Almost immediately the Torah plunges us into the drama of the human situation. Though God made humans "in His image," they failed to live up to the challenge in those words. Adam and Eve, the first humans, disobeyed the first command. Cain, the first human child, became the first murderer. By the time we reach Noah the world is full of violence. "The Lord regretted that he had made human beings on the earth, and his heart was deeply troubled." God creates order. Man creates chaos. That, according to the Torah, is the human drama this side of the messianic age. Do we create life or death, good or evil, justice or corruption, love or hate?

The story of Noah and the flood is testimony to the power of Torah to see history in moral terms. As is well known, other flood narratives existed in the ancient Near East, most famously the Akkadian *Enuma Elish*. On the surface the two narratives are similar but in reality they belong to different worlds. In the Akkadian story the gods send a flood because they are irritated

by the noise humans are making. They decide to silence humanity much as we might swat a fly. In the Torah the flood narrative is inescapably moral. Humans have become corrupt. They live by might, not right. They are frustrating the very nature of creation. Noah alone is righteous. Therefore God will start again with him.

Eventually it was Abraham who was chosen as the role-model for humanity, specifically on ethical grounds: “For I have chosen him so that he will instruct his children and his household after him that they may *keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just.*” Almost immediately there is a momentous change in the terms of the relationship between humanity and God. Abraham challenges God, specifically on moral grounds: “Shall the Judge of all the earth not do justice?” Such a challenge might seem the height of hubris – who are humans to judge God? – were it not clear from the text that God had invited Abraham to speak (“Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?”). We have here the first appearance of what Einstein would later call the “almost fanatical love of justice” that made him “thank his stars” he was a Jew.

Judaism is about our relationship with God, but it is also about our relationships with our fellow humans. Indeed the two are indivisible. The rabbis emphasized this at one of the climactic moments of the Jewish year, on Yom Kippur, when they chose as the haftarah this blazing passage from Isaiah:

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“Is this the kind of fast I have chosen, only a day for people to humble themselves? Is it only for bowing one’s head like a reed and for lying in sackcloth and ashes? Is that what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord?

Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?

Equally emphatic is the haftarah (Isaiah 1) for the Shabbat before Tisha B’av, the day of Jewish grief: “Learn to do right. Seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless. Plead the case of the widow.”

Piety without justice, religious stringency without compassion, love of God without love of human beings – all these, argued the prophets, testify to a profound spiritual failure: the failure to understand that God wants us to act to others as we ask God to act toward us.

My reasons for choosing this topic this year are simple. Much Torah study today, beautiful though it is, is conducted by microscope rather than telescope. It focuses on individual brushstrokes, not the larger picture. One example illustrates the problem. There is a town in Israel where some very religious people objected to the clothes of an eight year old (modern Orthodox) girl on her way to school. Though modestly dressed, for them it was not enough. They spat at her and insulted her.

What struck me about that episode was that undoubtedly each of the men concerned was punctilious to cover the challah on Shabbat while making Kiddush. The reason we do so is to avoid shaming the challah by letting it see that we have chosen to do a mitzvah with the wine before the bread. When people are fastidious not to humiliate a loaf of bread but have no

compunction in shaming a fellow human, then, as Shakespeare said, something is rotten in the state of Denmark.

The secular societies of the West also seem to have lost their way. There is a crisis of trust, as scandal has followed scandal: bankers taking irresponsible risks, journalists tapping phones, sexual misconduct by people in public life, leaders failing to lead, politicians failing to be statesmen, the collapse of basic values like honesty, integrity, duty and honour, and fundamental institutions like marriage and the family.

Great attempts were made during the Enlightenment to construct an ethic in purely secular terms. Kant found it in reason, David Hume in emotion: empathy, sympathy and fellow feeling. Jeremy Bentham located it in calculation of consequences: the greatest happiness for the greatest number. G. E. Moore thought it was a matter of intuition. We just *know* what is good without being able to say how or why. These theories, all interesting, are incompatible with one another. Several centuries of intellectual reflection have left us with no clear, coherent picture of the moral life.

More than fifty years ago, historian Will Durant gave the most apt description of what happens to societies when they lose their faith:

Intellectual history takes on the character of a "conflict between science and religion". Institutions which were at first in the hands of the clergy, like law and punishment, education and morals, marriage and divorce, tend to escape from ecclesiastical control, and become secular, perhaps profane. The intellectual classes abandon the ancient theology and—after some hesitation—the moral code allied with it; literature and philosophy become anticlerical. The movement of liberation rises to an exuberant worship of reason, and falls to a paralyzing disillusionment with every dogma and every idea. Conduct, deprived of its religious supports, deteriorates into epicurean chaos; and life itself, shorn of consoling faith, becomes a burden alike to conscious poverty and to weary wealth. In the end a society and its religion tend to fall together, like body and soul, in a harmonious death.

Durant's conclusion was one Israel's prophets would have endorsed: "A great civilization is not conquered from without until it has destroyed itself within." The message of the prophets was that a society that is not moral – not marked by justice, compassion, respect for human dignity, and honesty and integrity in public life – will not long survive. A free society is ultimately a moral achievement, brought about by an ethic of self restraint and commitment to the common good. Order in a free society is brought about less by police and surveillance than by a sense of right and wrong engraved on the hearts of citizens through lessons learned in school, observed in the home, and kept by the community as the template of its common life.

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As large parts of the world in the Middle East, sub-Saharan Africa and Asia begin to resemble the world before the Flood, the future of Western freedom is at stake. The barbarians are not yet at the gates, but their progress has been steady and disturbing. That young people, many of them from the West itself, are prepared to kill and die rather than “Choose life, that you and your children may live,” is testimony to the depth of the crisis. Already in 1897, Emile

Durkheim observed that in societies where there is moral confusion – he called it *anomie* – suicide rates rise. People need meaning, order, direction, self-restraint and a community in which they can find identity and self-respect. Without it they can do violence to others and themselves.

Now, therefore, is a time to listen again to what the Torah teaches about the moral life. These are the basic features of Jewish ethics:

1. **There is a supreme emphasis on the dignity of the individual.** We are each in the image and likeness of God. A single life is like a universe. Belief in the one God, singular and alone, has momentous implications for our respect for the human individual, singular and alone.
2. **We are free and responsible moral agents, charged with choosing between good and bad, and we can be held to account for our deeds.** Judaism is an ethic of will and choice, in contrast to ancient Greece which had, for the most part, an ethic of character and fate.
3. **Life is sacred.** Murder is more than a crime: it is a form of sacrilege since we are each in the image of God. In general, the Torah is a protest against the use of violence to attain human ends.
4. **Love is at the centre of the moral life.** Judaism is constructed on the foundation of three great loves: loving God “with all your heart, with all your soul and all your might,” loving “your neighbour as yourself,” and loving the stranger, a principle that, according to the sages, appears thirty-six times in the Torah.
5. **Forgiveness is a central feature of Jewish ethics.** Joseph forgives his brothers. God, responding to the pleas of Moses, forgives the people for the sin of the golden calf. A supreme day of atonement and forgiveness was written into the Jewish calendar on Yom Kippur. Forgiveness liberates us from being held captive by the burden of the past.
6. **At the heart of Jewish ethics is the concept of covenant, a mutually binding pledge or promise between God and human beings.** It was Nietzsche who saw that the capacity to make promises was the foundation of the moral life. Promises, freely undertaken and vigilantly honoured, allow us to create order without a loss of liberty.
7. **Judaism embodies a dual ethic.** There is the covenant made with Noah and through him all humanity, and the covenant accepted by the Israelites at Mount Sinai and renewed periodically since. The first is universal, the second particular. This is similar to the distinction made by Michael Walzer between “thin” moral principles that apply everywhere at all times, and the “thick” concepts that emerge out of Israel’s unique historical experience and its vocation as “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”
8. **Much of Jewish ethics exists in the form of rules and commands: halakhah (Jewish law). But there are other features of the moral life that cannot be prescribed by rules.** There is “the right and the good,” emphasized by Ramban. There is an ethic of virtue, set out by Maimonides in *Hilkhot Deot*. There is the concept of *lifnim mishurat ha-din*, acting within or beyond the limits of the law. There is *middat hassidut*, “saintly conduct,” not required of everyone. There is the general imperative of “walking in God’s ways.”
9. **There is more than one ethical voice in Judaism and this is what gives it its richness and complexity.** There is the voice of the priest, summoning us to holiness and purity. There is the voice of the prophet calling us to righteousness, justice, loving-kindness and compassion. And there is the voice of wisdom, reminding us of the lessons of experience and the importance of deliberative judgment.

10. **Judaism remembers what philosophy sometimes forgets, that morality is not just a matter of *knowledge* but also of *action*.** It can sometimes be easy to know what is wrong, but painfully hard to avoid it. We suffer weakness of will. We yield to temptation. We act intemperately out of high emotion. There are times when we are led by the crowd. Morality is tested not only in the rarefied air of the academy but in the pressures of the market place and the public square. Jewish life is about the cultivation of virtue through loving families, caring communities, study, ritual, story-telling, celebration, historical recollection, symbolic action, prayer and penitence. If it takes a village to raise a child, it takes a community to sustain the life of virtue. The better angels of our nature need help if they are to prevail.

Matthew Arnold wrote that “as long as the world lasts, all who want to make progress in righteousness will come to Israel for inspiration as to the people who have had the sense of righteousness most glowing and strongest.” Paul Johnson concluded his *History of the Jews* with the observation that to the Jews “we owe the idea of equality before the law, both divine and human; of the sanctity of life and the dignity of the human person; of the individual conscience and so of personal redemption; of the collective conscience and so of social responsibility; of peace as an abstract ideal and love as the foundation of justice, and many other items which constitute the basic moral furniture of the human mind.”

There are tensions between Jewish ethics and the individualism and relativism of the contemporary West, but the greatness of Judaism has been its iconoclasm, its willingness to challenge the idols of the age.

It is a pleasure and honour to dedicate these studies to the memory of two great Jewish individuals, Maurice and Vivienne Wohl of blessed memory, who lived and loved the life of virtue. 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 them, living meant giving. Through their Charitable Foundation, they continue to bring blessings into Jewish communities around the world. It was a privilege to know them. May these studies help sustain their memory as a source of blessing and inspiration.



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