

COVENANT & Conversation

A STUDY OF ETHICS IN THE PARSHA WITH RABBI SACKS

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— RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS



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The Labour of Gratitude

Terumah - 21 February 2015 / 2 Adar 5775

There is an important principle in Judaism, a source of hope and also one of the structuring principles of the Torah. It is the principle that *God creates the cure before the disease*. Bad things may happen but God has already given us the remedy if we know where to look for it.

So for instance in *Chukat* we read of the deaths of Miriam and Aaron and how Moses was told that he would die in the desert without entering the Promised Land. This is a terrifying encounter with mortality. Yet we read before any of this, we first hear the law of the red heifer, the rite of purification after contact with death. The Torah has placed it here to assure us in advance that we can be purified after any bereavement. Human mortality does not ultimately bar us from being in the presence of Divine immortality.

This is the key to understanding *Terumah*. Though not all commentators agree, its real significance is that it is God's answer in advance to the sin of the golden calf. In strict chronological terms it is out of place here. It (and *Tetzaveh*) should have appeared after *Ki Tissa*, which tells the story of the calf. It is set here *before* the sin to tell us that the cure existed before the disease, the *tikkun* before the *kilkul*, the mending before the fracture, the rectification before the sin.

So to understand *Terumah* and the phenomenon of the *mishkan*, the Sanctuary and all that it entailed, we have first to understand what went wrong at the time of the golden calf. Here the Torah is very subtle and gives us, in *Ki Tissa*, a narrative that can be understood at three quite different levels.

The first and most obvious is that the sin of the golden calf was due to a failure of leadership on the part of Aaron. This is the overwhelming impression we receive on first reading Exodus 32. We sense that Aaron should have

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resisted the people's clamour. He should have told them to be patient. He should have shown leadership. He did not. When Moses comes down the mountain and asks him what he has done, Aaron replies:

“Do not be angry, my lord. You know how prone these people are to evil They said to me, 'Make an oracle to lead us, since we do not know what happened to Moses, the man who took us out of Egypt.' So I told them, 'Whoever has any gold jewellery, take it off.' Then they gave me the gold, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf!” (Ex. 32: 22-24).

This is a failure of responsibility. It is also a spectacular act of denial (“I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf!”).¹ So the first reading of the story is of Aaron's failure.

But only the first. A deeper reading suggests that it is about Moses. It was his absence from the camp that created the crisis in the first place. “The people began to realize that Moses was taking a long time to come down from the mountain. They gathered around Aaron and said to him, 'Make us an oracle to lead us. We have no idea what happened to Moses, the man who brought us out of Egypt.’” (Ex. 32: 1).

God told Moses what was happening and said: “Go down, because your people, whom you brought up out of Egypt, have wrought ruin” (32: 7). The undertone is clear. “Go down,” suggests that God was telling Moses that his place was with the people at the foot of the mountain, not with God at the top. “Your people” implies that God was telling Moses that the people were his problem, not God's. He was about to disown them.

Moses urgently prayed to God for forgiveness, then descended. What follows is a whirlwind of action. Moses descends, sees what has happened, breaks the tablets, burns the calf, mixes its ashes with water and makes the people drink, then summons help in punishing the wrongdoers. He has become the leader in the midst of the people, restoring order where a moment before there had been chaos. On this reading the central figure was Moses. He had been the strongest of strong leaders. The result, though, was that when he was not there, the people panicked. That is the downside of strong leadership.

But there then follows a chapter, Exodus 33, that is one of the hardest in the Torah to understand. It begins with God announcing that, though He would send an “angel” or “messenger” to accompany the people on the rest of their journey, He Himself would not be in their midst “because you are a stiff-necked people and I might destroy you on the way.” This deeply distresses the people (33: 1-6).

In verses 12-23, Moses challenges God on this verdict. He wants God's presence to go with the people. He asks, “Let me know Your ways” and “Pray let me see Your glory.” This is hard to understand. The entire exchange between Moses and God, one of the most intense in the Torah, is no longer about sin and forgiveness. It seems almost to be a metaphysical inquiry into the nature of God. What is its connection with the golden calf?

It is what happens *between* these two episodes that is the most puzzling of all. The text says that Moses “took his tent and pitched it for himself outside the camp, far from the camp” (33: 7). This must surely have been *precisely the wrong thing to do*. If, as God and the text have implied, the problem had been the *distance* of Moses as a leader, the single most important thing for him to do now would be to stay in the people's midst, not position himself outside the camp. Moreover, the Torah has just told us that God had said He would not be in the midst of the people – and this caused the people

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¹ In Deuteronomy 9: 20, Moses discloses a fact which has been kept from us until that point: “God also expressed great anger toward Aaron, threatening to destroy him, so, at that time, I also prayed for Aaron.”

distress. Moses' decision to do likewise would surely have doubled their distress. Something deep is happening here.

It seems to me that in Exodus 33 Moses is undertaking the most courageous act of his life. He is saying to God: "It is not *my* distance that is the problem. It is Your distance. The people are terrified of You. They have witnessed Your overwhelming power. They have seen You bring the greatest empire the world has ever known to its knees. They have seen You turn sea into dry land, send down food from heaven and bring water from a rock. When they heard Your voice at Mount Sinai, they came to me to beg me to be an intermediary. They said, 'You speak to us and we will hearken, but let not God speak to us lest we die' (Ex. 20: 16). They made a calf not because they wanted to worship an idol, but because they wanted some symbol of Your presence that was not terrifying. They need You to be close. They need to sense You not in the sky or the summit of the mountain but in the midst of the camp. And even if they cannot see Your face, for no one can do that, at least let them see some visible sign of Your glory."

That, it seems to me, is Moses' request to which this week's parsha is the answer. "Let them make for Me a sanctuary that I may dwell in their midst" (25: 8). This is the first time in the Torah that we hear the verb *sh-kh-n*, meaning "to dwell," in relation to God. As a noun it means literally, "a neighbour." From this is derived the key word in post-biblical Judaism, *Shekhinah*, meaning God's immanence as opposed to His transcendence, God-as-One-who-is-close, the daring idea of God as a near neighbour.

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In terms of the theology of the Torah, the very idea of a *mishkan*, a sanctuary or Temple, a physical "home" for "God's glory," is deeply paradoxical. God is beyond space. As King Solomon said at the inauguration of the first Temple, "Behold the heavens and the heavens of the heavens cannot encompass You, how much less this house?" Or as Isaiah said in God's name: "The heavens are My throne and the earth My foot-stool. What house shall you build for Me, where can My resting place be?"

The answer, as the Jewish mystics emphasized, is that God does not live in a building but rather in the hearts of the builders: "Let them make for me a sanctuary and I will dwell among them" (Ex. 25: 8) – "among *them*," not "in it." How, though, does this happen? What human act causes the Divine presence to live within the camp, the community? The answer is the name of our parsha, *Terumah*, meaning, a gift, a contribution.

"The Lord spoke to Moses, saying "Tell the Israelites to bring Me an offering. You are to receive the offering for Me from everyone whose heart moves them to give." This would prove to be the turning point in Jewish history.

Until that moment the Israelites had been recipients of God's miracles and deliverances. He had taken them from slavery to freedom and performed miracles for them. There was only one thing God had not yet done, namely, *give the Israelites the chance of giving back something to God*. The very idea sounds absurd. How can we, God's creations, give back to the God who made us? All we have is His. As David said, at the gathering he convened at the end of his life to initiate the building the Temple:

Wealth and honour come from you; you are the ruler of all things ... Who am I, and who are my people, that we should be able to give as generously as this? Everything comes from you, and we have given you only what comes from your hand. (I Chronicles 29: 12, 14)

That ultimately is the logic of the *mishkan*. God's greatest gift to us is the ability to give to Him. From a Judaic perspective the idea is fraught with risk. The idea that God might be in need of gifts is close to paganism and heresy. Yet, knowing the risk, God allowed Himself to be persuaded by Moses to cause His spirit to rest within the camp and allow the Israelites to give something back to God.

At the heart of the idea of the sanctuary is what Lewis Hyde beautifully described as the labour of gratitude. His classic study, *The Gift*,² looks at the role of the giving and receiving of gifts, for example, at critical moments of transition. He quotes the Talmudic story of a man whose daughter was about to get married, but who had been told that she would not survive to the end of the day. The next morning the man visited his daughter and saw that she was still alive. Unknown to both of them, when she hung up her hat after the wedding, its pin pierced a serpent that would otherwise have bitten and killed her. The father wanted to know what his daughter had done that merited this divine intervention. She answered, “A poor man came to the door yesterday. Everyone was so busy with the wedding preparations that they did not have time to deal with him. So I took the portion that had been intended for me and gave it to him.” It was this act of generosity that was the cause of her miraculous deliverance.³

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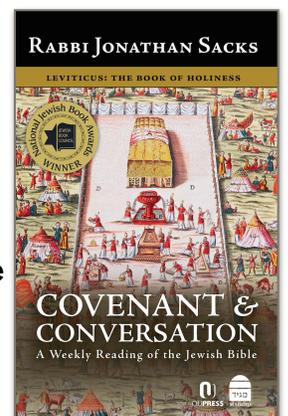
The construction of the sanctuary was fundamentally important because it gave the Israelites the chance to give back to God. Later Jewish law recognised that giving is an integral part of human dignity when they made the remarkable ruling that even a poor person completely dependent on charity is still obliged to give charity.⁴ To be in a situation where you can only receive, not give, is to lack human dignity.

The *mishkan* became the home of the Divine presence because God specified that it be built only out of voluntary contributions. Giving creates a gracious society by enabling each of us to make our contribution to the public good. That is why the building of the sanctuary was the cure for the sin of the golden calf. A people that only received but could not give was trapped in dependency and lack of self-respect. God allowed the people to come close to Him, and He to them, by giving them the chance to give.

That is why a society based on rights not responsibilities, on what we claim from, not what we give to others, will always eventually go wrong. It is why the most important gift a parent can give a child is the chance to give back. The etymology of the word *Terumah* hints at this. It means, not simply a contribution, but literally something “raised up.” When we give, it is not just our contribution but we who are raised up. We survive by what we are given, but we achieve dignity by what we give.

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² Lewis Hyde, *The Gift: How the Creative Spirit Transforms the World*. Edinburgh: Canongate, 2006.

³ Shabbat 156b.

⁴ Maimonides *Hilkhos Shekalim* 1: 1, *Mattenos Ani'im* 7: 5.,