

COVENANT & Conversation

A STUDY OF SPIRITUALITY IN THE PARSHA WITH RABBI SACKS



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— RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS



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From Despair to Hope

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There have been times when one passage in today's parsha was for me little less than life-saving. No leadership position is easy. Leading Jews is harder still. And spiritual leadership can be hardest of them all. Leaders have a public face that is usually calm, upbeat, optimistic and relaxed. But behind the façade we can all experience storms of emotion as we realise how deep are the divisions between people, how intractable are some of the problems, and how thin the ice on which we stand. Perhaps we all experience such moments at some point in our lives, when we know where we are and where we want to be, but simply cannot see a route from here to there. That is the prelude to despair.

Whenever I felt that way I would turn to the searing moment in our parsha when Moses reached his lowest ebb. The precipitating cause was seemingly slight. The people were engaged in their favourite activity: complaining about the food. With self-deceptive nostalgia, they spoke about the fish they ate in Egypt, and the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic. Gone is their memory of slavery. All they can recall is the cuisine. At this, understandably, God was very angry (Num. 11:10). But Moses was more than angry. He suffered a complete emotional breakdown. He said this to God:

“Why have You brought this evil on Your servant? Why have I failed to find favour in Your eyes, that You have placed the burden of this whole people on me? Did I conceive this whole people? Did I give birth to it, that You should say to me, Carry it in your lap as a nurse carries a baby? ... Where can I find meat to give to this whole people when they cry to me saying, ‘Give us meat to eat’? I cannot carry this whole people on my own. It is

too heavy for me. If this is what You are doing to me, then, if I have found favour in Your eyes, kill me now, and let me not look upon this my evil.” (Num. 11:11-15).

This for me is the benchmark of despair. Whenever I felt unable to carry on, I would read this passage and think, “If I haven’t yet reached this point, I’m OK.” Somehow the knowledge that the greatest Jewish leader of all time had experienced this depth of darkness was empowering. It said that the feeling of failure does not necessarily mean that you have failed. All it means is that you have not yet succeeded. Still less does it mean that *you are* a failure. To the contrary, failure comes to those who take risks; and the willingness to take risks is absolutely necessary if you seek, in however small a way, to change the world for the better.

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What is striking about Tanakh is the way it documents these dark nights of the soul in the lives of some of the greatest heroes of the spirit. Moses was not the only prophet to pray to die. Three others did so: Elijah (1 Kings 19:4), Jeremiah (Jer. 20: 7-18) and Jonah (Jon. 4: 3).¹ The Psalms, especially those attributed to King David, are shot through with moments of despair: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Ps. 22:2). Many of the most powerful psalms come from this same emotional territory. “From the depths I cry to You” (Ps. 130:1). “I am a helpless man abandoned among the dead ... You have laid me in the lowest pit, in the dark, in the depths” (Ps. 88:5-7).

What Tanakh is telling us in these stories is profoundly liberating. Judaism is not a recipe for blandness or bliss. It is not a guarantee that you will be spared heartache and pain. It is not what the Stoics sought, *apatheia*, a life undisturbed by passion. Nor is it a path to *nirvana*, stilling the fires of feeling by extinguishing the self. These things have a spiritual beauty of their own, and their counterparts can be found in the more mystical strands of Judaism. But they are not the world of the heroes and heroines of Tanakh.

Why so? Because Judaism is a faith for those who seek to change the world. That is unusual in the history of faith. Most religions are about accepting the world the way it is. *Judaism is a protest against the world that is in the name of the world that ought to be.* To be a Jew is to seek to make a difference, to change lives for the better, to heal some of the scars of our fractured world. But *people don’t like change.* That’s why Moses, David, Elijah and Jeremiah found life so hard.

We can say precisely what brought Moses to despair. He had faced a similar challenge before. Back in the book of Exodus the people had made the same complaint: “If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate bread

¹ So of course did Job, but Job was not a prophet, nor according to many commentators was he even Jewish. The book of Job is about another subject altogether, namely, Why do bad things happen to good people? That is a question about God, not about humanity.

to the full, for you have brought us out into this desert to starve this whole assembly to death” (Ex. 16: 3). Moses, on that occasion, experienced no crisis. The people were hungry and needed food. That was a legitimate request.

Since then, though, they had experienced the twin peaks of the revelation at Mount Sinai and the construction of the Tabernacle. They had come closer to God than any nation had ever done before. Nor were they starving. Their complaint was not that they had no food. They had the manna. Their complaint was that it was boring: “Now we have lost our appetite (literally, “our soul is dried up”); we never see anything but this manna!” (Ex. 11:6). They had reached the spiritual heights but they remained the same recalcitrant, ungrateful, small-minded people they had been before.²

That was what made Moses feel that his entire mission had failed and would continue to fail. His mission was to help the Israelites create a society that would be the opposite of Egypt, that would liberate instead of oppress, dignify, not enslave. But the people had not changed. Worse: they had taken refuge in the most absurd nostalgia for the Egypt they had left: memories of fish, cucumbers, garlic and the rest. Moses had discovered it was easier to take the Israelites out of Egypt than to take Egypt out of the Israelites. If the people had not changed by now, it was a reasonable assumption that they never would. Moses was staring at his own defeat. There was no point in carrying on.

God then comforted him. First He told him to gather seventy elders to share with him the burdens of leadership, then He told him not to worry about the food. The people would soon have meat in plenty. It came in the form of a huge avalanche of quails.

What is most striking about this story is that thereafter Moses appears to be a changed man. Told by Joshua that there might be a challenge to his leadership, he replies: “Are you jealous on my behalf? Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets, that the Lord would put His spirit on them” (Num. 11:29). In the next chapter, when his own brother and sister begin to criticise him, he reacts with total calm. When God punishes Miriam, Moses prays on her behalf. It is specifically at this point in the long biblical account of Moses’ life that the Torah says, “The man Moses was very humble, more so than any other man on earth” (Num. 12:3).

The Torah is giving us a remarkable account of the psychodynamics of emotional crisis. The first thing it is telling us is that it is important, in the midst of

despair, not to be alone. God performs the role of comforter. It is He who lifts Moses from the pit of despair. He speaks directly to Moses’ concerns. He tells him he will not have to lead alone in the future. There will be others to help him. Then He tells him not to be anxious

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² Note that the text attributes the complaint to the *asafsuf*, the rabble, the riffraff, which some commentators take to mean the “mixed multitude” who joined the Israelites on the exodus.

about the people's complaint. They would soon have so much meat that it would make them ill, and they would not complain about the food again.

The essential principle here is what the sages meant when they said, "A prisoner cannot release himself from prison." It needs someone else to lift you from depression. That is why Judaism is so insistent on not leaving people alone at times of maximum vulnerability. Hence the principles of visiting the sick, comforting mourners, including the lonely ("the stranger, the orphan and the widow") in festive celebrations, and offering hospitality – an act said to be "greater than receiving the Shekhinah." Precisely because depression isolates you from others, remaining alone intensifies the despair. What the seventy elders actually did to help Moses is unclear. But simply *being there with him* was part of the cure.

The other thing it is telling us is that surviving despair is a character-transforming experience. It is when your self-esteem is ground to dust that you suddenly realise that *life is not about you*. It is about others, and ideals, and a sense of mission or vocation. What matters is the cause, not the person. That is what true humility is about. As C. S. Lewis wisely said: *humility is not about thinking less of yourself. It is about thinking of yourself less.*

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When you have arrived at this point, even if you have done so through the most bruising experiences, you become stronger than you ever believed possible. You have learned not to put your self-image on the line. You have learned not to think in terms of self-image at all. That is what Rabbi Yohanan meant when he said, "Greatness is humility." Greatness is a life turned outward, so that other people's suffering matters to you more than your own. The mark of greatness is the combination of strength and gentleness that is among the most healing forces in human life.

Moses believed he was a failure. That is worth remembering every time we think we are failures. His journey from despair to self-effacing strength is one of the great psychological narratives in the Torah, a timeless tutorial in hope.



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