

COVENANT & CONVERSATION

LIFE-CHANGING IDEAS IN THE PARSHA WITH RABBI SACKS



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I am deeply touched that *Covenant & Conversation* 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 to Jewish communities around the world.



God Loves Those Who Argue

Shemot 2018 / 5778

I have become increasingly concerned about the assault on free speech taking place throughout the West, particularly in university campuses.¹ This is being done in the name of “safe space,” that is, space in which you are protected against hearing views which might cause you distress, “trigger warnings”² and “micro-aggressions,” that is, any remark that someone might find offensive even if no offence is meant.

So far has this gone that at the beginning of the 2017 academic year, students at an Oxford College banned the presence of a representative of the Christian Union on the grounds that some might find their presence alienating and offensive.³ Increasingly, speakers with controversial views are being disinvented: the number of such incidents on American college campuses rose from 6 in 2000 to 44 in 2016.⁴

Undoubtedly this entire movement was undertaken for the highest of motives, to protect the feelings of the vulnerable. That is a legitimate ethical concern. Jewish law goes to extremes in condemning *lashon hara*, hurtful or derogatory speech, and the sages were careful to use what they called *lashon sagi nahor*, euphemism, to avoid language that people might find offensive.

¹ I first wrote about this ten years ago in my book, *The Home We Build Together* (2007), in the chapter entitled “The Defeat of Freedom in the Name of Freedom,” 37-48. The situation has become significantly worse since then.

² See on this, Mick Hume, *Trigger Warning: Is the Fear of Being Offensive Killing Free Speech?* London, William Collins, 2016.

³ See <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/2017/10/10/oxford-college-bans-harmful-christian-union-freshers-fair>.

⁴ Jean M. Twenge, *iGen*, Atria, 2017, 253.

But a safe space is not one in which you silence dissenting views. To the contrary: it is one in which you give a respectful hearing to views opposed to your own, knowing that your views too will be listened to respectfully. That is academic freedom, and it is essential to a free society.⁵ As George Orwell said, “*If liberty means anything at all, it means the right to tell people what they do not want to hear.*”

John Stuart Mill likewise wrote that one of the worst offences against freedom is “to stigmatise those who hold the contrary opinion as bad and immoral men.” That is happening today in institutions that are supposed to be the guardians of academic freedom. We are coming perilously close to what Julian Benda called, in 1927, “*The treason of the intellectuals*,” in which he said that academic life had been degraded to the extent that it had allowed itself to become an arena for “the intellectual organisation of political hatreds.”⁶

What is striking about Judaism, and we see this starkly in this week’s parsha, is that *argument and the hearing of contrary views is of the essence of the religious life*. Moses argues with God. That is one of the most striking things about him. He argues with Him on their first encounter at the burning bush. Four times he resists God’s call to lead the Israelites to freedom, until God finally gets angry with him (Ex. 3:1–4:7). More significantly, at the end of the parsha he says to God:

“*Lord, why have you brought trouble on this people? Why did You send me? Since I came to Pharaoh to speak in Your name, he has brought trouble on this people, and You have not rescued Your people at all.*” (Ex. 5:22-23).

“Argument and the hearing of contrary views is of the essence of the religious life.”

This is extraordinary language for a human being to use to God. But Moses was not the first to do so. The first was Abraham, who said, on hearing of God’s plan to destroy the cities of the plain, “*Shall the Judge of all the earth not do justice?*” (Gen. 18:25).

Similarly, Jeremiah, posing the age-old question of why bad things happen to good people and good things to bad people, asked: “*Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why do all the faithless live at ease?*” (Jer. 12:1). In the same vein, Habakkuk challenged God: “*Why do You tolerate the treacherous? Why are You silent while the wicked swallow up those more righteous than themselves?*” (Hab. 1:13). Job who challenges God’s justice is vindicated in the book that bears his name, while his friends who defended Divine justice are said not to have spoken correctly (Job 42:7-8). Heaven, in short, is not a safe space in the current meaning of the phrase. To the contrary: *God loves those who argue with Him* – so it seems from Tanakh.

⁵ I salute the University of Chicago, Princeton and other universities, that have taken a strong stand in defence of free speech on campus; and Professor Jonathan Haidt and his colleagues at the Heterodox Academy, founded to promote intellectual diversity in academic life.

⁶ Julian Benda, *The Treason of the Intellectuals*, Transaction, 2007, 27.

Equally striking is the fact that the sages continued the tradition and gave it a name: argument for the sake of heaven,⁷ defined as debate for the sake of truth as opposed to victory.⁸ The result is that Judaism is, perhaps uniquely, *a civilisation all of whose canonical texts are anthologies of arguments*. Midrash operates on the principle that there are “seventy faces” to Torah and thus that every verse is open to multiple interpretations. The Mishnah is full of paragraphs of the form, “Rabbi X says this while Rabbi Y says that.” The Talmud says in the name of God himself, about the conflicting views of the schools of Hillel and Shammai, that “*These and those are the words of the living God.*”⁹

A standard edition of Mikraot Gedolot consists of the biblical text surrounded by multiple commentaries and even commentaries on the commentaries. The standard edition of the Babylonian Talmud has the text surrounded by the often conflicting views of Rashi and the Tosafists. Moses Maimonides, writing his masterpiece of Jewish law, the Mishneh Torah, took the almost unprecedented step of presenting only the halakhic conclusion without the accompanying arguments. The ironic but predictable result was that the Mishneh Torah was eventually surrounded by an endless array of commentaries and arguments. In Judaism there is something holy about argument.

Why so? First, because only God can see the totality of truth. For us, mere mortals who can see only fragments of the truth at any one time, there is an irreducible multiplicity of perspectives. We see reality now one way, now another. The Torah provides us with a dramatic example in its first two chapters, which give us two creation accounts, both true, from different vantage points. The different voices of priest and prophet, Hillel and Shammai, philosopher and mystic, historian and poet, each capture something essential about the spiritual life. Even within a single genre, the sages noted that “*No two prophets prophesy in the same style.*”¹⁰ Torah is a conversation scored for many voices.

“Only God can see the totality of truth.”

Second, because justice presupposes the principle that in Roman law is called *audi alteram partem*, “hear the other side.” That is why God wants an Abraham, a Moses, a Jeremiah and a Job to challenge Him, sometimes to plead for mercy or, as in the case of Moses at the end of this week’s parsha, to urge Him to act swiftly in defence of His people.¹¹ Both the case for the prosecution and the defence must be heard if justice is to be done and seen to be done.

⁷ Mishnah, Avot 5:17.

⁸ Meiri to Avot ad loc.

⁹ Eruvin 13b.

¹⁰ Sanhedrin 89a.

¹¹ See Pesachim 87a-b for a remarkable passage in which God criticises the prophet Hosea for not coming to the defence of his people.

The pursuit of truth and justice require the freedom to disagree. The Netziv argued that it was the prohibition of disagreement that was the sin of the builders of Babel.¹² What we need, therefore, is not “safe spaces” but rather, civility, that is to say, giving a respectful hearing to views with which we disagree. In one of its loveliest passages the Talmud tells us that the views of the school of Hillel became law “because they were pleasant and did not take offence, and because they *taught the views of their opponents as well as their own, indeed they taught the views of their opponents before their own.*”¹³

And where do we learn this from? From God Himself, who chose as His prophets people who were prepared to argue with Heaven for the sake of Heaven in the name of justice and truth.

When you learn to listen to views different from your own, realising that they are not threatening but enlarging, then you have discovered the life-changing idea of argument for the sake of heaven.

Shabbat shalom,



LIFE-CHANGING IDEA #13

When you learn to listen to views different from your own, realising that they are not threatening but enlarging, then you have discovered the life-changing idea of argument for the sake of heaven.

LIFE-CHANGING IDEAS IN SEFER SHEMOT

- **SHEMOT:** When you learn to listen to views different from your own, realising that they are not threatening but enlarging, then you have discovered the life-changing idea of argument for the sake of heaven.



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¹² Ha’amek Davar to Gen. 11:4.

¹³ Eruvin 13b.