



COVENANT & CONVERSATION

Family Edition

וארא תשע"ט
Va'era 5779

**The God
Who Acts in
History**

WELCOME TO COVENANT & CONVERSATION 5779 FAMILY EDITION

Covenant & Conversation: Family Edition is a new and exciting initiative from The Office of Rabbi Sacks for 5779. Written as an accompaniment to Rabbi Sacks' weekly *Covenant & Conversation* essay, the *Family Edition* is aimed at connecting older children and teenagers 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 VA'ERA IN A NUTSHELL

In *Va'era*, the story of the exodus begins in earnest, with an unprecedented series of divine interventions into history. Time and again plagues hit the Egyptians. Moses repeatedly asks Pharaoh to release the people. Repeatedly,

Pharaoh refuses. An immense drama is taking place. All the power of imperial Egypt is powerless against the God of creation and redemption.



THE CORE IDEA

We are at the lowest point in Israelite history so far. They have been enslaved. Pharaoh has decreed that every Jewish male child is to be killed. Moses is sent to liberate them, but the first effect of his intervention is to make matters worse, not better. Now they have to provide their own straw, and still make the same number of bricks as before. At first they believed Moses when he performed the various signs God had given him, and told them that God was about to rescue them, but now they turn on him and his leadership.

None of this, however, has been accidental. The Torah is preparing the ground for one of its most epic assertions: It is in the darkest night that Israel has its greatest visions. Hope is born in the depth of despair. There is nothing natural about this, nothing inevitable. No logic can give rise to hope; no law of history charts a path from slavery to redemption, exile to return. The entire sequence of events has been a run-up to the single most formative moment in the history of Israel: the intervention of God in history – the supreme Power intervening on behalf of the supremely powerless, not (as in every other culture) to endorse the status quo, but to overturn it.

This is a world-changing idea. What is revolutionary in Judaism is not simply the concept of monotheism – that the universe is not a blind clash of conflicting powers but the result of a single creative will. It is that God is *involved* in His creation. God is not simply the force that brought the universe into being, nor is He reached only in an individual's private soul. At a certain point He intervened in history, to rescue His people from slavery and set them on the path to freedom.

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. Why do you think Jewish history had to start at such a low point?
2. Judaism believes that God acts in history (as seen so clearly in the Exodus story). What are the alternative ways to look at God and history?
3. Why is this idea more clearly seen here in the Book of Exodus rather than the Book of Genesis and the stories that have preceded this one?



IT ONCE HAPPENED...

Several years after the destruction of the Holy Temple, Rabban Gamliel, Rabbi Eliezer ben Azarya, Rabbi Yehoshua, and Rabbi Akiva were going up to Jerusalem. When they reached Mount Scopus, the site of the Temple came into view, and they tore their garments in mourning. When they reached the Temple Mount, they saw a fox dart out from the spot where the Holy of Holies had stood in the Holy Temple. The rabbis began to weep, but Rabbi Akiva laughed. They said to him: “Akiva, you never cease to amaze us. We are crying, and you laugh!” But Rabbi Akiva said, “And you, why are you crying?”

The rabbis responded: “What? Shall we not weep? The place about which Scripture states (Bamidbar 1:51), ‘And the stranger who draws close shall die,’ has become a den of foxes! Indeed, this is a fulfillment of the verse, ‘For Mount Zion which lies desolate, foxes prowl over it’ (Eikha 5:18).”

Rabbi Akiva answered them: “This is exactly why I laugh. For just as we have seen the prophecies of Jerusalem’s destruction have come to pass, so too, know that the prophecies of her future consolation shall also be fulfilled. I

laughed because I remembered the verses (Zekharya 8:4–5), ‘Old men and old women will once again sit in the streets of Jerusalem, each with his staff in his hand because of advanced age; and the city will be filled with boys and girls playing in its streets.’ The Holy One, blessed be He, has declared that just as the first prophecies have been fulfilled, so shall the latter. I am joyous that the first have already come to pass, for the latter shall be fulfilled in the future.”

Said the rabbis, “You have comforted us, Akiva, you have comforted us. May you be comforted by the footsteps of the Messiah.” (Adapted from *Midrash Raba Eikha*, 5)

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. What do you think is the connection between the message of this *Midrash* and the message of *The Core Idea*?
2. Is it hard to have the faith in God and Jewish history displayed by Rabbi Akiva in this *Midrash*? Do you find it difficult or easy yourself?



THINKING MORE DEEPLY

God’s speech to Moses that delivers the world-changing idea discussed in *The Core Idea*, in Exodus 6:2-8, is breathtaking in its grandeur and literary structure. But what will concern us – as it has successive generations of interpreters – is the proposition signalled at the outset: “I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob as the Lord Almighty, but by My name God I was not known to them.” A fundamental distinction is being made between the experience the patriarchs had of God, and the experience the Israelites are about to have. Something new, unprecedented, is about to happen. What is it?

Clearly it has to do with the names by which God is known. The verse distinguishes between *E-l Shaddai* (“the Lord Almighty”) and the four-letter name of God which, because of its sanctity, Jewish tradition referred to simply as *Hashem* – “the name” par excellence (which is translated above simply as “God”).

As the classic Jewish commentators point out, the verse must be read with great care. It does not say that the patriarchs “did not know” this name; nor does it say that God did not “make this name known” to them. The four-letter name appears no less than 165 times in the book of Genesis. God Himself uses the phrase “I am *Hashem*” to both Abraham (Genesis 15:7) and Jacob (Genesis 28:13).

For the sages of the Midrash, *Hashem* signified the divine attribute of compassion: God said to Moses, “You wish to know My name? I am called according to My deeds... When I judge creatures, I am called *Elokim*. When I wage war against the wicked I am called ‘*Lord of hosts*.’ When I suspend judgment for man’s sins I am called *E-l Shaddai*. When I am merciful towards My world I am called *Hashem*.”

For Judah Halevi and Nahmanides, the key difference has to do with God’s acts within and beyond nature. This is how Halevi puts it in *The Kuzari*: This is perhaps what the Bible means when it says, “and I appeared to Abraham... as *E-l Shaddai*,” namely, in the way of power and dominion... He did not, however, perform any miracle for the patriarchs as he did for Moses.

Rashi’s explanation is the simplest and most elegant: I was not recognised by them in My attribute of “keeping faith,” (implied by My name “*Hashem*,”), namely that I am faithful to fulfil My word, for I made promises to them but I did not fulfil them [during their lifetime].

Something was about to change. The patriarchs had received the covenantal promise. They would become a nation. They would inherit a land. None of this, however, happened in their lifetime. To the contrary, as the Book of Genesis reaches

its close, the family of the patriarchs numbers a mere seventy souls and they are in exile in Egypt. Now, the fulfilment is about to begin. Already, in the first chapter of the Book of Exodus, we hear, for the first time, the phrase *Am Bnei Yisrael*, “the people of the children of Israel” (Exodus 1:9). Israel has at last become, not merely a family, but a nation. Moses at the burning bush has been told, by God, that He will bring them to “a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey” (Exodus 3:8). *Hashem* therefore means the God who acts in history to fulfil His promises.

At the heart of most visions of the human condition is what Mircea Eliade (in his book *Cosmos and History*) calls “the terror of history.” The passage of time, with its disasters, its apparent randomness, its radical contingency, is profoundly threatening to the human search for order and coherence. There seems to be no meaning in history. We live, we die, and it is as if we had never been. The universe gives no sign of any interest in our existence. If that was so in ancient times, when people believed in the existence of gods, how much more so is it true today for those neo-Darwinians who see life as no more than the operation of “chance and necessity” (Jacques Monod) or “the blind watchmaker” (Richard Dawkins). Time seems to obliterate all meaning. Nothing lasts. Nothing endures.

In ancient Israel, by contrast, “for the first time, the prophets placed a value on history... For the first time, we find affirmed and increasingly accepted the idea that historical events have a value in themselves, insofar as they are determined by the will of God... Historical facts thus become situations of man in respect to God, and as such they acquire a religious value that nothing had previously been able to confer on them. It may, then, be said with truth that the Hebrews were the first to discover the meaning of history as the epiphany of God.” Judaism is the escape into history, the unique attempt to endow events with meaning, and to see in the chronicles of mankind something more than a mere succession of happenings – to see them as nothing less than a drama of redemption in which the fate of a nation reflects its loyalty or otherwise to a covenant with God.

Some 3,300 years ago, God told Moses that He would intervene in the arena of time, not only (though primarily) to rescue the Israelites but also “so that My name may be declared throughout the world” (Exodus 9:16). The script of history would bear the mark of a hand – not human, but divine. And it began with these words: “Therefore say to the Israelites: I am God, and I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians.”



FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

Somewhere in the tale of Jewish survival was a mystery of great significance... there was one people whose history broke all the rules... [the] encounter with the Jewish story [suggests] the important idea that God might be found not only in nature but in history. And if we search for revelation in history, we will find it, more compellingly than anywhere else, in the history of that unusual people, our ancestors. For almost two thousand years Jews remained a distinctive nation without any of the usual prerequisites of nationhood. They had no land, no sovereignty, no power, no overarching political structures, not even a shared culture. They were scattered over the face of the earth and almost everywhere they were a minority. For the most part they refused active efforts to

convert them, and resisted the passive pull of assimilation. No other people kept its identity intact for so long in such circumstances.

Radical Then, Radical Now, p.33-36
(also published as *A Letter in the Scroll*)

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. When you learn Jewish history do you find that it challenges your faith in God or strengthens it?
2. What is the most powerful and faith-engendering period of Jewish history for you?



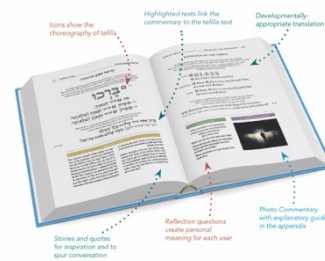
AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. How is the entire Torah a testament to the notion that God intervenes in history?
2. Why is this message especially clear at the beginning of the Book of Exodus?
3. How does this give our lives more meaning and hope?
4. Do you think this a controversial or radical idea?
5. Would you say that Jewish history can be used as evidence for this (and therefore is a source of faith) or is a challenge against this idea?



QUESTION TIME

Do you want to win a **Koren Aviv Weekday Siddur**? This siddur has been designed to help young people explore their relationship to their God, and the values, history and religion of their people. Email CCFamilyEdition@rabbisacks.org with your name, age, city and your best question or observation about the *parsha* from the *Covenant & Conversation Family Edition*. **Entrants must be 18 or younger**. Each month we will select two of the best entries, and the individuals will each be sent a siddur inscribed by Rabbi Sacks! Thank you to Koren Publishers for kindly donating these wonderful siddurim.



EDUCATIONAL COMPANION TO THE QUESTIONS

THE CORE IDEA

1. There are no definitive answers to this question, but if one believes in the God who acts in history, then it is reasonable to presume there has to be some meaning behind the national narrative of the Jewish people in history. Many different Jewish thinkers have suggested a rationale to answer this question and presenting them here is beyond the remit of this publication. However, in the context of the message of this *Covenant & Conversation*, we might postulate that the nature of the situation the Israelites found themselves in before God intervened to fulfill the covenant He had made with the forefathers highlights the magnificence of God acting in history, in order to clearly highlight and emphasise this message.
2. There could be no God at all and history is a random sequence of events that are unexplainable. Alternatively, there could be a Creator who created the world but does not play an active role in it (this is a position found in Greek philosophy).
3. In the Book of Genesis, we see a personal God, who has intimate relationships with individuals, including communicating with them and influencing the trajectories of their lives. But we do not see a God who intervenes on the larger stage of the history of nations and the world as a whole.

IT ONCE HAPPENED...

1. In the Midrash Rabbi Akiva demonstrates faith that God acts in history, fulfilling promises, covenants, and prophecies. This is the central message of *The Core Idea* – that God acts in history.
2. This is a subjective question that must be answered on an individual basis. Faith is hard for some and easier for others. History is a great source of religious faith for some (see *From the Thought of Rabbi Sacks* below) but a challenge to the faith of others.

FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

1. See *It Once Happened...* question 2. For many, including Rabbi Sacks, it is a great source of faith. This quote, from Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein, expresses this in a personal way: “[My] faith [in God] has been persistently reinforced by Jewish history... ‘These are His awesome effects, for were it not for awe of God, how could one nation survive among the nations?’ (Yoma, 69b) ... Our singular history has provided much reinforcement.”
2. This could be answered in many ways, and it is obviously asking for a personal response. However, we can encourage our children and/or students to consider the period in history that we are living through as a possibility (and at the very least the period immediately preceding ours, including the early years of the State of Israel).

AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. The entire narrative, from the creation story, until the Israelites are about to enter the Promised Land, is a testament to the fact that not only did God create the world, and not only did God form intimate relationships with individuals (such as the forefathers), but God continually interacts and intervenes in history, on a national and world level.
2. See *The Core Idea* question 3. Further to this, the nature of God’s intervention during the narrative of the Book of Exodus, is spectacular in its nature, both because of its supernatural aspects (miracles beyond nature) and because of the manner in which God intervenes on behalf of a small and downtrodden people at the expense of the most advanced and powerful nation on earth.
3. The knowledge (or faith) that God acts in history and has a plan for history helps us live in a world that at times feels like it has no order and no justice.
4. It is an idea that is based on faith and can never be proven scientifically. There are many, and always have been many, that find it hard to believe this to be the case. In the world of philosophy, both today and in ancient times, there were many that attacked this notion. And, in fact, Rabbi Sacks presents it as one of the core ideas that Judaism brought to the world that flew in the face of the conventional thought of that time, and on some level even in our time.
5. See *It Once Happened...* question 2 and *From the Thought of Rabbi Sacks* question 1.