



COVENANT & CONVERSATION

THOUGHTS ON THE WEEKLY PARSHA
FROM RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

בס"ד

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COVENANT & CONVERSATION: FAMILY EDITION

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The Politics of Memory

In Eikev Moses sets out a political doctrine of such wisdom that it can never become redundant or obsolete. He does it by way of a pointed contrast between the ideal to which Israel is called, and the danger with which it is faced. This is the ideal:

Observe the commands of the Lord your God, walking in His ways and revering Him. For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land – a land with streams and pools of water, with springs flowing in the valleys and hills; a land with wheat and barley, vines and fig trees, pomegranates, olive oil and honey; a land where bread will not be scarce and you will lack nothing; a land where the rocks are iron and you can dig copper out of the hills. *When you have eaten and are satisfied*, bless the Lord your God for the good land He has given you. (Deut. 8:6–10)

And this is the danger:

Be careful that you do not forget the Lord your God, failing to observe His commands, His laws, and His decrees that I am giving you this day. Otherwise, *when you eat and are satisfied*, when you build fine houses and settle down, and when your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase and all you have is multiplied, then your heart will become proud and *you will forget* the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.... You may say to yourself, “My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me.” But *remember* the Lord your God, for it is He who gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms His covenant, which He swore to your forefathers, as it is today. (Deut. 8:11–18)

The two passages follow directly on from one another. They are linked by the phrase “when you have eaten and are satisfied,” and the contrast between them is a fugue between the verbs “to remember” and “to forget.”

Good things, says Moses, will happen to you. Everything, however, will depend on how you respond. Either you will eat and be satisfied and bless God, remembering that all things come from Him – or you will eat and be satisfied and forget to whom you owe all this. You will think it comes entirely from your own efforts: “My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me.” Although this may seem a small difference, it will, says Moses, make *all* the difference. On this alone will turn your future as a nation in its own land.

Moses’ argument is brilliant and counter-intuitive. You may think, he says, that the hard times are behind you. You have wandered for forty years without a home. There were times when you had no water, no food. You were exposed to the elements. You were attacked by your enemies. You may think this was the test of your strength. It was not. *The real challenge is not poverty but affluence, not slavery but freedom, not homelessness but home.*

Many nations have been lifted to great heights when they faced difficulty and danger. They fought battles and won. They came through crises – droughts, plagues, recessions, defeats – and were toughened by them. When times are hard, people grow. They bury their differences. There is a sense of community and solidarity, of neighbours and strangers pulling together. Many people who have lived through a war know this.

“The real challenge is not poverty but affluence, not slavery but freedom, not homelessness but home.”

The real test of a nation is not if it can survive a crisis but if it can survive the *lack* of a crisis. Can it stay strong during times of ease and plenty, power and prestige? That is the challenge that has defeated every civilisation known to history. Let it not, says Moses, defeat you.

Moses’ foresight was little less than stunning. The pages of history are littered with the relics of nations that seemed impregnable in their day, but which eventually declined and fell and lapsed into oblivion – and always for the reason Moses prophetically foresaw. *They forgot.*¹ Memories fade. People lose sight of the values they once fought for – justice, equality, independence, freedom. The nation, its early battles over, becomes strong. Some of its members grow rich. They become lax, self-indulgent, over-sophisticated, decadent. They lose their sense of social solidarity. They no longer feel it their duty to care for the poor, the weak, the marginal, the losers. They begin to feel that such wealth and position as they have is theirs by right. The bonds of fraternity and collective responsibility begin to fray. The less well-off feel an acute sense of injustice. The scene is set for either revolution or conquest. Societies succumb to external pressures when they have long been weakened by internal decay. That was the danger Moses foresaw and about which he warned.

His analysis has proved true time and again, and it has been restated by several great analysts of the human condition. In the fourteenth century, the Islamic scholar Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406) argued that when a civilisation becomes great, its elites get used to luxury and comfort, and the people as a whole lose what he called their *asabiyyah*, their social solidarity. The people then become prey to a conquering enemy, less civilised than they are but more cohesive and driven.

¹ For a recent study of this idea applied to contemporary politics, see David Andress, *Cultural Dementia: How the West Has Lost Its History and Risks Losing Everything Else* (London: Head of Zeus, 2018).

The Italian political philosopher Giambattista Vico (1668–1744) described a similar cycle: People, he said, “first sense what is necessary, then consider what is useful, next attend to comfort, later delight in pleasures, soon grow dissolute in luxury, and finally go mad squandering their estates.”² Affluence begets decadence.

In the twentieth century few said it better than Bertrand Russell in his *History of Western Philosophy*. He believed that the two great peaks of civilisation were reached in ancient Greece and Renaissance Italy, but he was honest enough to see that the very features that made them great contained the seeds of their own demise:

What had happened in the great age of Greece happened again in Renaissance Italy: traditional moral restraints disappeared, because they were seen to be associated with superstition; the liberation from fetters made individuals energetic and creative, producing a rare fluorescence of genius; but the anarchy and treachery which inevitably resulted from the decay of morals made Italians collectively impotent, and they fell, like the Greeks, under the domination of nations less civilised than themselves but not so destitute of social cohesion.³

Moses, however, did more than prophesy and warn. He also taught how the danger could be avoided, and here too his insight is as relevant now as it was then. He spoke of the vital significance of *memory* for the moral health of a society.

Throughout history there have been many attempts to ground ethics in universal attributes of humanity. Some, like Immanuel Kant, based it on reason. Others based it on duty. Bentham rooted it in consequences (“the greatest happiness for the greatest number”).⁴ David Hume attributed it to certain basic emotions: sympathy, empathy, compassion. Adam Smith predicated it on the capacity to stand back from situations and judge them with detachment (“the impartial spectator”). Each of these has its virtues, but none has proved fail-safe.

“The guardian of conscience is memory.”

Judaism took, and takes, a different view. *The guardian of conscience is memory*. Time and again the verb *zachor*, “remember,” resonates through Moses’ speeches in Deuteronomy:

Remember that you were slaves in Egypt...therefore the Lord your God has commanded you to observe the Shabbat day. (Deut. 5:15)

Remember how the Lord your God led you all the way in the desert these forty years...(Deut. 8:2)

Remember this and never forget how you provoked the Lord your God to anger in the desert...(Deut. 9:7)

Remember what the Amalekites did to you along the way when you came out of Egypt. (Deut. 25:17)

Remember the days of old, consider the years of ages past. (Deut. 32:7)

² Giambattista Vico, *New Science: Principles of the New Science Concerning the Common Nature of Nations* (London: Penguin, 1999), 489.

³ Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2004), 6.

⁴ *The Collected Works of Jeremy Bentham: A Comment on the Commentaries and A Fragment on Government*, ed. James Henderson Burns and Herbert Lionel Adolphus Hart (London: Athlone Press, 1977), 393.

As Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi notes in his great treatise, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, “Only in Israel and nowhere else is the injunction to remember felt as a religious imperative to an entire people.”⁵ *Civilisations begin to die when they forget. Israel was commanded never to forget.*

In an eloquent passage, the American scholar Jacob Neusner once wrote:

Civilisation hangs suspended, from generation to generation, by the gossamer strand of memory. If only one cohort of mothers and fathers fails to convey to its children what it has learned from its parents, then the great chain of learning and wisdom snaps. If the guardians of human knowledge stumble only one time, in their fall collapses the whole edifice of knowledge and understanding.⁶

The politics of free societies depends on the handing on of memory. That was Moses’ insight, and it speaks to us with undiminished power today.

Shabbat Shalom

“The politics of free societies depends on the handing on of memory.”

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⁵ Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982), 11.

⁶ Jacob Neusner, *Conservative, American, and Jewish* (Lafayette, LA: Huntington House, 1993), 35.