



# COVENANT & CONVERSATION

.....Family Edition.....

FINDING FAITH IN THE PARSHA WITH RABBI SACKS

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בס"ד

שמות תש"ף  
Shemot 5780

**Faith in the Future**

## \*\* KEY IDEA OF THE WEEK \*\*

**We need to have faith in the future and then, with God's help, we can build it.**



### PARSHAT SHEMOT IN A NUTSHELL

Shemot tells the story of how a family became a nation called the Jewish People. The descendants of Jacob were away from their homeland, living instead in Egypt. They grew and grew until they were no longer a family but a people. Pharaoh, the King of Egypt, became scared they would become so strong and powerful, they might rebel against him and take over Egypt. So he decided to make them his slaves. Then, just to be doubly sure they couldn't flourish, he ordered all male Israelite babies to be killed.

Yocheved, a Jewish woman, saved her baby son by hiding him in a basket and placing him on the River Nile, hoping someone would find him and look after him. That baby was Moses. He was found and adopted by Pharaoh's daughter, and he grew up in Pharaoh's royal household.

Moses saved a Jewish slave from a harsh Egyptian taskmaster and then was forced to run away from Egypt to

Midian, where he married Tziporah, and became a shepherd.

While looking after his sheep Moses discovered the Burning Bush, through which God spoke to him, giving him the mission of returning to Egypt to set the people free. Moses didn't feel he was the right man for the job, but he nervously agreed, and travelled back to Egypt, to carry out this task with the help of his brother Aaron.

Unfortunately, Pharaoh's response to Moses' request for the people's freedom was to increase the work expected of his Jewish slaves. The *parsha* ends with God telling Moses that He would soon act to save the people from Pharaoh.

#### QUESTION TO PONDER:

How do you think the people must have felt at the moment when Moses was sent to save them?



### THE CORE IDEA

At the Burning Bush, Moses listened to his new mission, and asked God how to explain Him to the people: "Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is His name?' Then what shall I tell them?" (Exodus 3:14). God replied with three keywords: *Ehyeh asher ehyeh*

This is often translated as 'I am who I am', or 'I am He who is'. Early and medieval Christian thinkers understood it to mean God was saying He was 'Being-itself, timeless, infinite and purely spiritual. The source of all life'.

But this is not a Jewish definition of God, and

*Ehyeh asher ehyeh* means none of these things.

It means 'I will be what, where, or how I will be'. What is important here (and what is missed by all other translations) is the future tense. God is defining Himself as the Lord of history who is soon to get involved in human history like never before, to make great change, to set free a group of slaves from the mightiest empire of the ancient world and lead them on a journey towards freedom.

"I will be what I will be" means that God was about to enter history and transform it. God was telling Moses that there was no way he or anyone else could know in advance what

God was about to do, but that if they would just have trust in God, they were about to see the future that He will bring about.

### QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. Had God played a role in history before this? What was different about what was about to happen?
2. Is it a radical idea that God intervenes and guides our future?



### IT ONCE HAPPENED...

*In the year 68 C.E., Jerusalem was besieged by the Roman general Vespasian and his troops. The powerful Roman army was undefeatable, and it was only a matter of time before the city would fall, and with it, the Temple destroyed. Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai, the spiritual leader of the community, felt they could find a peaceful resolution with the Romans. But the city was controlled by the Jewish Zealots, who would rather die than surrender to Rome (these were the same people who controlled Masada).*

*Jews fought one another inside the walls of Jerusalem, and food supplies were destroyed. Soon, all would perish and the city would fall. Rabbi Yochanan tried to find a way for the people, and their study of Torah, to survive, even if they lost Jerusalem as their capital and religious focus. But the Zealots strengthened the siege, and refused to allow any Jews to leave the city, for fear they would negotiate with the Romans.*

*So Rabbi Yochanan faked his own death and had his students smuggle him out of Jerusalem in a coffin. They carried the coffin to Vespasian's tent, and then opened the coffin. The Rabbi told Vespasian "You are destined to rule over the Roman Empire!",*

*and he asked Vespasian to set aside a place in Yavneh (near modern-day Rehovot) where he could start a small school and study Torah in peace. Vespasian promised that if the prophecy came true, he would grant the request. Within a few days, news arrived that Vespasian was the new Emperor, and he kept his word, allowing the school to be established after the war was over.*

*The school Rabbi Yochanan established at Yavneh became the centre of Jewish learning for centuries, and replaced Jerusalem as the seat of the Sanhedrin. Because of Rabbi Yochanan's forward-thinking and hope and faith in the future (even during a time when the present looked dire and doomed) the Jewish people's spiritual, and ultimately physical, future was saved.*

### QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. Why didn't Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai ask Vespasian to save Jerusalem?
2. How did his request show he had faith and hope in the future?



### THINKING MORE DEEPLY

God used the words *Ehyeh asher ehyeh* to tell Moses that great change was coming, and His actions would soon speak for themselves. But until that time, they just needed faith, for the events to come could not be imagined. He also told Moses in general terms that He was about to rescue the Israelites and bring them to a land flowing with milk and honey. But as for the specifics, Moses and the people would know God not through His essence but through His acts, and so they could not know Him *until* he acted.

He would be a God of surprises. He would do things never seen before, create signs and wonders that would be spoken about for thousands of years. They would set in motion wave after wave of repercussions. People would learn that slavery is not an inevitable condition, that might is not right, that empires are not impregnable, and that a tiny people like the Israelites could do great things if they attached their destiny to heaven. But none of this could be predicted in advance. God was saying to Moses and to the people, *You will have to trust Me. The destination to which I am calling you is just beyond the visible horizon.*

It is very hard to understand how revolutionary this was. Ancient religions were deeply conservative, designed to show that the existing social hierarchy was inevitable, part of the deep structure of reality, timeless and unchangeable. Just as there was a hierarchy in the heavens, and another within the animal kingdom, so there was a hierarchy in human society. That was order. Anything that challenged it represented chaos. Until Israel appeared on the scene, religion was a way of consecrating the status quo.

That is what the story of Israel would overturn. The greatest empire on earth was about to be overthrown. The most powerless of people were going to go free. This was not simply a blow to Egypt. Although it would take thousands of years, it was a deadly blow to the very concept of a hierarchical society, or of time as what Plato called it, "a moving image of eternity," a series of passing shadows on a wall of reality that never changes.

Instead, history became an arena of change. Time became something understood as a narrative, a journey or a quest. All this hinted at in those three words, "I will be what I will be." I am the God of the future tense.

So Judaism, in the concept of a Messianic age, became the only civilisation whose golden age is in the future. And throughout the Torah, the promised land lies in the future. Abraham does not acquire it. Nor does Isaac. Nor does Jacob. Even Moses, who spends forty years leading the people there, never gets to enter it. It is always just beyond. Soon but not yet.

After years of practicing psychology, the founder of positive psychology, Martin Seligman, came to the conclusion that the people with a positive psychology tended to be future-oriented, whereas those with a negative mindset – he called this, in a brilliant phrase, “learned helplessness” – were often fixated on the past. He asked, what is it that makes Homo sapiens different from other species? His answer was that we have an unrivalled ability “to be guided by imagining alternatives stretching into the future – propection.” We are the future-oriented animal.

A misconception dominates the scientific study of humankind. Science searches for causes; a cause always precedes its effect; therefore science will always seek to explain a phenomenon in the present by reference to something that happened in the past – anything from the genome to early childhood experiences to brain chemistry to recent stimuli. It will follow that science will inevitably deny the existence of human freewill. The denial may be soft or hard, gentle or brutal, but it will come. Freedom will be seen as an illusion.

But this is a fallacy. Human action is always oriented to the future. I put the kettle on because I want a cup of coffee. I work hard because I want to pass the exam. I act to bring about a future that is not yet. Science cannot account for the future because something that hasn't happened yet cannot be a cause. Therefore there will always be something about intentional human action that science cannot fully explain.

When God said, “I will be what I will be,” He was telling us something not only about God but about us when we are open to God and have faith in His faith in us.

We can be what we will be if we choose the right and the good. And if we fail and fall, we can change, because God lifts us and gives us strength.

And if we can change ourselves, then together we can change the world. We cannot end evil and suffering but we can diminish it. We cannot eliminate injustice, but we can fight it. We cannot abolish sickness but we can treat it and search for cures.

Whenever I visit Israel, I find myself awestruck by the way this ancient people in its history-saturated land is one of the most future-oriented nations on earth, constantly searching for new advances in medical, informational, and nano-technology. Israel writes its story in the future tense.

And the future is the sphere of human freedom, because I cannot change yesterday but I can change tomorrow by what I do today. Therefore, because Judaism is a religion of the future it is a religion of human freedom, and because Israel is a future-oriented nation, it remains, in the Middle East, an oasis of freedom in a desert of oppression. Tragically, most of Israel's enemies are fixated on the past, and as long as they remain so, their people will never find freedom and Israel will never find peace.

**I believe that we must honour the past but not live in it. Faith is a revolutionary force. God is calling to us as once He called to Moses, asking us to have faith in the future and then, with His help, build it.**

#### QUESTION TO PONDER:

How does having faith in the future lead to a partnership with God in building it?



#### FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

*“To be a Jew is to be an agent of hope. Every ritual, every command, every syllable of the Jewish story is a protest against escapism, resignation and the blind acceptance of fate. Judaism, the religion of the free God, is a religion of freedom. Jewish faith is written in the future tense. It is belief in a future that is not yet but could be, if we heed God's call, obey His will and act together as a covenantal community. The name of the Jewish future is hope.”*

**Future Tense, p. 250**



#### AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. What is the difference between the ancient Greek understanding of God (the God of Aristotle) compared to the Jewish understanding of God (the God of Abraham)?
2. Why is it healthier to focus on the future than the past?
3. What support for the idea that God is the "God of the future tense" can you see in Judaism?



## QUESTION TIME

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## EDUCATIONAL COMPANION TO THE QUESTIONS

### IN A NUTSHELL

1. The people well may have lost all hope of salvation and freedom even before Moses arrived. When he arrived and interceded on their behalf, we read that Pharaoh actually reacted by making the work harder for the Israelites. It must have been hard to find hope in their hearts that Moses could ultimately succeed. Under these extreme circumstances it is easy to understand how a people can despair. But the message of this week's *Covenant & Conversation* is to find faith that the future will be better, and that God will intercede on our behalf in history. This faith is a core idea of Judaism.

### THE CORE IDEA

1. The Book of Bereishit is all about God interacting with human beings and making an impact in their lives. But this was only ever on an individual basis. God had never influenced history on a national level like He was about to in the Book of Shemot. For the first time, He was building a relationship with an entire people. Shemot is testament to our belief that God influences and guides history on the largest scale, bringing the world to its ultimate destiny.
2. This was certainly radical in the time of the Torah, as ancient philosophy (including Greek philosophy) believed that God was the source of all life, and the first cause that initiated life, but that the divine played no role after creation. However, the God of Judaism, as described in the Torah, continued to influence history after creation, and it is our faith that He continues to do so to this day. (This is a radical belief in our secular world today also.)

### IT ONCE HAPPENED...

1. Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai knew Vespasian would refuse a request to give up Jerusalem. The Roman conquest of the Land of Israel revolved around the capture and destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. They wanted to remove all vestiges of Jewish sovereignty over the land of Israel. Knowing this, Rabbi Yochanan limited his request to something they might consider, but also wisely requested something that was significant enough to save the Jewish future.
2. Rabbi Yochanan had faith that there would be a Jewish future. That despite this dark time, God had not forsaken the Jewish people, and that the people could survive, and one day return to the Land of Israel, and regain independence there. For this to happen he needed to guarantee the continuity of the Jewish religion, and he did this by transferring the religious focus of Judaism from the Temple to Torah learning and halachic observance. For this he needed an academy and a court, and so he chose Yavneh as a base for this new beginning, and ensured Jewish continuity.

### THINKING MORE DEEPLY

1. Judaism does not believe in passive faith. Faith in the future does not mean waiting for God to make the future happen. It means believing that the future will be better but this must lead to action. God expects an active partnership with humanity. This is the message of the Torah and Judaism.

### AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

These questions are all open, to encourage thought and debate. There are no wrong answers. However, here are some thoughts to consider:

1. The ancient Greek conception of God was as a Prime Mover – they thought that God created the world, setting it on its course, with the laws of nature, and then withdrew from history. This is the meaning of God as "Being-itself, timeless, immutable, incorporeal, the subsisting act of all existing, immutable, simple, self-sufficient, and the cause and principal of every creature". The God of our Torah did not withdraw after creation, and is more than the cause of all life. The God of the Torah is the God of History, who has a continual relationship with humanity in history.
2. Focusing on the past prevents a person from moving forward and growing. If your past is painful, and you focus only on that pain, you will feel helpless and desolate. Future-oriented people have a more positive and creative approach to life. The founder of positive psychology, Martin Seligman, suggests this trait, of being able to focus on the future, and hope for something better than what came before, is what separates humankind from other species. Humans have a unique ability to "be guided by imagining alternatives stretching into the future – prospection." We are the future-oriented animal.
3. Judaism is predicated on the belief in freewill. It says that time is an arena of change, where tomorrow can be better than today. The Torah is one long narrative about achieving a destiny – both national and universal – that will herald a better age. Judaism's concept of a Messianic age created a civilisation whose golden age is in the future. The national mission of the Jewish people is to redeem the world and bring about that age – in the future. This is the core focus of Judaism.