



# COVENANT & CONVERSATION

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

FINDING FAITH IN THE PARSHA WITH RABBI SACKS



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**The Story  
We Tell  
About  
Ourselves**

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

**To be a Jew is to see yourself as part of a story, with your own chapter to write.**



### PARSHAT BO IN A NUTSHELL

Last week we read of the first seven plagues. In *parshat Bo* the eighth plague of locusts and the ninth plague of darkness are described. Pharaoh still refuses to free the Israelite slaves, so God tells Moses that the 10th plague will sent, to bring death to all the firstborn Egyptians sons. Each Israelite family must paint lamb's blood on their doorposts, in order to protect their firstborns.

After the death of the Egyptian firstborns, Pharaoh finally lets the Israelites go. In fact, he demands that they leave!

Finally the people have been set free, and are ready to journey to the Promised Land. Then the Torah describes the very first Pesach celebration, and Moses tells the people how to celebrate Pesach in the future also.

#### QUESTION TO PONDER:

How do we tell this story every year on Pesach?



### THE CORE IDEA

Every culture has its stories. The tradition goes back to the days when our ancestors were hunter-gatherers, sharing stories around the campfire at night.

Storytelling has always been central to the Jewish tradition. But what is truly remarkable is the way in which, in this week's parsha, just before finally leading the Israelites out of Egypt, Moses tells them three times how they are to tell the story to their children in future generations.

[1] When your children ask you, 'What does this ceremony mean to you?' *then tell them*, 'It is the Passover sacrifice to the Lord, who passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt and spared our homes when He struck down the Egyptians.' (Shemot 12:26-27)

[2] *On that day tell your child*, 'I do this because of what the Lord did for me when I came out of Egypt.' (Shemot 13:8)

[3] "In days to come, when your child asks you, 'What does this mean?' *say*, 'With a mighty hand the Lord

brought us out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.  
(Shemot 13:14)

The Israelites had not yet left Egypt, and yet already Moses was telling them how to tell the story. That is an extraordinary fact. Why so? Why this focus on storytelling?

The simplest answer is that *we are the story we tell about ourselves*. There is a basic link between narrative (stories) and identity (who we think we are). In the words of the thinker who first brought this to our attention, Alasdair MacIntyre, "man is in his actions and practice, as well as in his fictions, essentially a story-telling animal." We come to know who we are by discovering of which story or stories we are a part.

#### QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. Can you think of other examples of storytelling in Judaism and Jewish culture?
2. What stories have formed your Jewish identity?



## IT ONCE HAPPENED...

On the 28<sup>th</sup> November 1947, member countries voted on the United Nations Partition Plan for Palestine.

The plan proposed creating two states, a Jewish and Arab state side by side. If the plan gained two-thirds of the votes, it would herald the creation of the first Jewish State since biblical times and with it, the realisation of the Zionist dream. But this was by no means a sure verdict. It took much lobbying and convincing on the part of the Zionist movement to persuade other nations to vote for the plan. In his speech to the United Nations, David Ben-Gurion argued the case for the creation of the State of Israel by referring to Pesach and the story told in the Haggadah:

*“Three hundred years ago a ship called the Mayflower set sail to the New World. This was a great event in the history of England. Yet I wonder if there is one Englishman who knows at what time the ship set sail? Do the English know how many people embarked on this voyage? What quality of bread did they eat? Yet more than three thousand three hundred years ago, before the Mayflower set sail, the Jews left Egypt. Every Jew in*

*the world, even in America or Soviet Russia, knows on exactly what date they left – the fifteenth of the month of Nissan. Everyone knows what kind of bread they ate. Even today the Jews worldwide eat matzah on the fifteenth of Nissan. They retell the story of the Exodus and all the troubles Jews have endured since being exiled. They conclude this evening with two statements: This year, slaves. Next year, free people. This year here. Next year in Jerusalem, in Zion, in Eretz Yisrael. That is the nature of the Jews.”*

Jews don't remember their history, they live and breathe it, and relive and experience it every year on Pesach, by using the Haggadah to tell the story of the Exodus.

### QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. What point was Ben-Gurion making?
2. Why do you think the Jewish people care so much about learning all the details of the Exodus story?



## THINKING MORE DEEPLY

Jerome Bruner is an American psychologist who has persuasively argued that narrative is central to the construction of meaning, and meaning is what makes the human condition human. No computer needs to be persuaded of its purpose in life before it does what it is supposed to do. Genes need no motivational encouragement. No virus needs a coach. We do not have to enter their mindset to understand what they do and how they do it, because they do not have a mindset to enter.

But humans do. We act in the present because of things we did, or that happened to us, in the past, and in order to realise a sought-for future. Even minimally to explain what we are doing is already to tell a story. Take three people eating salad in a restaurant, one because he needs to lose weight, the second because she's a principled vegetarian, the third because of religious dietary laws. These are three outwardly similar acts, but they belong to different stories and they have different meanings for the people involved.

Even so, why such focus on telling our specific story of the Exodus?

One of the most powerful passages I have ever read on the nature of Jewish existence is contained in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Considerations on the Government of Poland* (1772). This is an unlikely place to find insight on the Jewish condition, but it is there. Rousseau is talking about the greatest of political leaders. The very first of these, he says, was Moses, who “formed and executed the astonishing enterprise of instituting as a national body a swarm of wretched fugitives who had no arts, no weapons, no talents, no virtues, no courage, and who,

since they had not an inch of territory of their own, were a troop of strangers upon the face of the earth.”

Moses, he says, “dared to make out of this wandering and servile troop a body politic, a free people, and while it wandered in the wilderness without so much as a stone on which to rest its head, gave it the lasting institution, proof against time, fortune and conquerors, which 5000 years have not been able to destroy or even to weaken.” This singular nation, he says, so often subjugated and scattered, “has nevertheless maintained itself down to our days, scattered among the other nations without ever merging with them.”

Moses' genius, he says, lay in the nature of the laws that kept Jews as a people apart. But that is only half the reason. The other half lies in this week's parsha, in the institution of storytelling as a fundamental religious duty, recalling and re-enacting the events of the Exodus every year, and in particular, making children central to the story. Noting that in three of the four storytelling passages (three in our parsha, the fourth in *Va'etchanan*) children are the ones asking questions, the Sages held that the narrative of Seder night should be told in response to a question asked by a child wherever possible. If we are the story we tell about ourselves, then as long as we never lose the story, we will never lose our identity.

This idea found expression some years ago in a fascinating encounter. Tibet has been governed by the Chinese since 1950. During the 1959 uprising, the Dalai Lama, his life in danger, fled to Dharamsala in India where he and many of his followers have lived ever since. Realising that their stay in exile might be

prolonged, in 1992 he decided to ask Jews, whom he regarded as the world's experts in maintaining identity in exile, for advice. What, he wanted to know, was the secret? The story of that week-long encounter has been told by Roger Kamenetz in his book, *The Jew in the Lotus*. One of the things they told him was the importance of memory and storytelling in keeping a people's culture and identity alive. They spoke about Pesach and the Seder service in particular. In 1997 Rabbis and American dignitaries held a special Seder service in Washington DC with the Dalai Lama. He wrote this to the participants:

"In our dialogue with Rabbis and Jewish scholars, the Tibetan people have learned about the secrets of Jewish spiritual survival in exile: one secret is the Passover Seder. Through it for 2000 years, even in very difficult times, Jewish people remember their liberation from slavery to freedom and this has brought you hope in times of difficulty. We are grateful to our Jewish brothers and sisters for adding to their celebration of freedom the thought of freedom for the Tibetan people."

Cultures are shaped by the range of stories to which they give rise. Some of these have a special role in shaping the self-understanding of those who tell them. We call them *master-narratives*. They are about large, ongoing groups of people: the tribe, the nation, the civilisation. They hold the group together

horizontally across space and vertically across time, giving it a shared identity handed on across the generations.

No narrative has been more powerful than the Exodus story, whose frame and context is set out in our parsha. It gave Jews the most tenacious identity ever held by a nation. In the eras of oppression, it gave hope of freedom. At times of exile, it promised return. It told two hundred generations of Jewish children who they were and of what story they were a part. It became the world's master-narrative of liberty, adopted by an astonishing variety of groups, from Puritans in the 17<sup>th</sup> century to African-Americans in the 19<sup>th</sup> and to Tibetan Buddhists today.

**I believe that I am a character in our people's story, with my own chapter to write, and so are we all. To be a Jew is to see yourself as part of that story, to make it live in our time, and to do your best to hand it on to those who will come after us.**

#### QUESTION TO PONDER:

What do you think it is about storytelling that makes it such a powerful factor in building our identity?



#### FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

*"Through the Haggadah more than a hundred generations of Jews have handed on their story to their children. The word haggadah means "relate," "tell," "expound." But it is closely related to another Hebrew root that means "bind," "join," "connect." By reciting the Haggadah, Jews give their children a sense of connectedness to Jews throughout the world and to the Jewish people through time. It joins them to a past and future, a history and destiny, and makes them characters in its drama. Every other nation has been united because its members lived in the same place, spoke the same language, were part of the same culture. Jews alone, dispersed across continents, speaking different languages and participating in different cultures, have been bound together by a narrative, the Pesach narrative, which they tell in the same way on the same night. More than the Haggadah is the story of a people, Jews are the people of a story."*

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks Haggadah, p. 2



#### AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. Why do you think the Jews have the reputation of being a people who tell stories?
2. Why is it particularly important in Jewish tradition to tell stories to children?
3. What is it about the Exodus story that makes it so critical that the Jewish people remember and retell it?



#### QUESTION TIME

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## **IN A NUTSHELL**

1. We tell this story every year on Seder night by reciting the Haggadah. But the Haggadah is just an aid to the real storytelling, which must be experiential. It must involve a reenactment and re-experiencing of the story. We do this through eating matzah and maror, and reclining, and feeling like liberated royalty. This is the best way to tell a story – in a way that the listener feels they are actually experiencing the story.

## **THE CORE IDEA**

1. Storytelling is central to Jewish culture. The foundational text of the Jewish people – the Tanach - is largely a narration of ancient Jewish history. Our other classical texts such as the Talmud and Midrash are full of stories. Education is a core value of Judaism, and storytelling is a fundamental tool of the educator. While Rabbis and teachers have always told stories, the more modern Jewish movement of Hassidut has elevated storytelling to a new level. The Hassidic Rebbe enraptures his Hasidim with tales of tzaddikim and miracles. Jews have always been passionate about Jewish history, and every parent and educator invests time telling the next generation the tales of their people's history.
2. While this is a personal question, no doubt every Jewish child can name the biblical stories and other stories from Jewish history that have formed the foundation of their Jewish identity. Childhood experiences of Seder night in particular will likely give them life-long memories and associations that will accompany most Jews into adulthood.

## **IT ONCE HAPPENED...**

1. The point Ben-Gurion was urging the United Nations delegates to understand was that Jews have always felt connected to the Land of Israel, to the extent that they know, in minute detail, the history that took them there at the dawn of their existence as a nation. Because of the Jewish commitment to ritual and historical Judaism throughout their 4000-year history, especially in the form of the Seder night rituals and telling of the Exodus story, every Jew knows every single detail of the story, because it is an intrinsic part of their identity. And central to that national identity, is their connection to their ancestral homeland.
2. Perhaps without this obsessive attention to every detail, Jews would have lost their national narrative and with it their national identity. The fact that 2000 years after exile from the Land of Israel there was still a strong connection to our homeland, even though it had not had a significant Jewish presence in all that time, is indicative of the national narrative created by the storytelling Jews do.

## **THINKING MORE DEEPLY**

1. Rabbi Sacks quotes several thinkers that explain that humans are a "storytelling animal", and that there is an intrinsic connection between narrative and identity. We come to know who we are by discovering of which stories we are a part. Narrative is central to the construction of meaning, and meaning is what makes the human condition human.

## **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. Jewish classical texts are replete with narrative, such as the Tanach, which presents ancient Jewish history, and the rabbinic texts of the Talmud and Midrash, which explores the doctrines and theology of Judaism through stories and legends. There are also core mitzvot that revolve around storytelling, such as Seder night, and the weekly public reading of the Torah. This has led to Jews becoming known as a people who tell stories. This has also led to the modern Jewish movement of Hassidut, where the telling of the legends of tzadikim is a central tenet.
2. Judaism has always focused on educating the next generation as a way to ensure Jewish continuity. Storytelling is a powerful way to build identity and socialise young Jews into the adult community and into the norms and beliefs of their nation. This is why the ritual of the Passover Seder has become so central and widely observed (even by Jews who in general are not ritually observant).
3. The Exodus story teaches us about the creation of the Jewish people as a nation. It is the beginning of a long story where we are the most recent chapters. To understand the rest of Jewish history you have to understand the beginning of Jewish history. More than a way to understand Jewish history, the core values of Judaism were born in the experience of slavery in Egypt and the story of liberation. Fundamental Jewish beliefs and values, such as God acting in history to protect the weak and vulnerable, and the responsibility to learn from our experience in Egypt to protect the weak in society today, were all formed in the collective memory of the Exodus narrative, and passed on with the transmission of the Exodus story.