



# COVENANT & CONVERSATION

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

FINDING FAITH IN THE PARSHA WITH RABBI SACKS



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בס"ד

ראה תש"ף  
Re'eh 5780

**The Good Society**

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

**Freedom is sustained only when a nation becomes a moral community.**



### PARSHAT RE'EH IN A NUTSHELL

In parshat Re'eh, Moses focuses on specific details of the covenant. He begins with presenting the choice that lies before the Jews: blessings and rewards if they keep God's laws, and curses and punishments if they do not. Once they finally enter the land of Israel, these will also be read out to the nation in a ceremony on two mountains in the Shomron - Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal.

Moses continues by commanding the people to destroy all signs of idolatry in the land when they enter, such as temples and altars, and then establish a central site that God will choose where they will worship, offer sacrifices, and eat holy food. This will later be the site of the Beit Hamikdash (the Temple).

Next, Moses gives more warnings about idolatry, and false prophets, teaches about clean and unclean animals, tithes, and the Sabbatical year (when debts are to be cancelled and slaves set free). The parsha ends with the laws of the three foot festivals (Pesach, Shavuot, and Succot) when every year the nation is to celebrate, in Jerusalem, together.

#### QUESTION TO PONDER:

When do find yourself facing the choice of reward or punishment? Do you always make the right choice?



### THE CORE IDEA

Having set out the prologue and preamble to the covenant and its general guiding principles, Moses turns to the details, which will form most of the book of Devarim, from chapter 12 to chapter 26. But before he begins with the specifics, he states a proposal that is the most fundamental one in the book, and one that will be repeated over and over by Israel's Prophets:

"See, this day I set before you blessing and curse: blessing, if you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I command you this day; and curse, if you do not obey the commandments of the Lord your God, but turn away from the path that I command you this day and follow other gods, whom you have not experienced."  
(Devarim 11:26-28)

Simply put, if you behave well, things will go well. If you act badly, things will turn out badly. Behaving well means honouring our covenant with God, being faithful to Him,

listening to His words and following His commands. That was the foundation of the nation. Uniquely it had God as its liberator and lawgiver, its sovereign, judge and defender. Other nations had their gods, but none had a covenant with any of them, let alone with the Creator of heaven and earth.

There are things Israel must do in order to survive. Therefore, warns Moses, beware of any temptation to act like the nations around you, copying their gods, their worship or their practices. Their way is not yours. If you behave like them, you will perish like them. To survive and thrive, stay true to your faith, history and destiny, your mission, calling and task as "a Kingdom of Priests and a holy nation."

*As you act, so shall you fare.* A free society is a moral achievement. A society is strong when it cares for the weak, rich when it cares for the poor, and invulnerable when it takes care of the vulnerable. Historically, the only ultimate

guarantor of this is a belief in Someone greater than this time and place, greater than all time and place, who guides us in the path of righteousness, seeing all we do, urging us to see the world as His work, and humans as His image, and therefore to care for both. *Bein adam le-Makom* and *bein adam le-chavero* – the duties we have to God and those we owe our fellow humans – are inseparable. Without a belief in God we would pursue our own interests, and eventually those at the social margins, with little power and less wealth, would lose. That is not the kind of society Jews are supposed to build.

The good society does not just happen. Nor is it created by the market (how we spend our money) or the state (the

government). It is made from the moral choices of each of us. That is the basic message of Devarim: will we choose the blessing or the curse? As Moses says at the end of the book: “This day I call the heavens and the earth as witnesses that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live.” (30:15, 19)

#### QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. If it is a choice, why would anyone ever “choose” the curse and punishment option?
2. Isn't true freedom the ability to act entirely for your own sake, without worrying about other people?



#### IT ONCE HAPPENED...

*A positive aspect of the coronavirus pandemic has been the increase in volunteering and acts of kindness from strangers. In Israel, this was most clearly demonstrated by the many volunteers of the National Civil Service, young people aged 18-20 from all sectors of Israeli society – Jews, Arabs, Druze, religious and secular - who were exempted from the army but chose to devote one or two years of their lives to contribute to the country instead. These volunteers have made a decisive contribution to Israel's civilian resilience in the face of the virus and risked their own health to help out in hospitals and with Magen David Adom. They have cared for the elderly and served as an additional and essential force in the fields of health and welfare. There were also those volunteers originally assigned to educational institutions who were sent home because schools were closed during the lockdown period, who chose to volunteer instead in essential areas where extra help was needed.*

*This group of people is just one example of the spirit of volunteerism in Israeli society, especially during these trying times. Other age-groups such as teenagers and retired people have also given of their time and energy to look after the most vulnerable in society. This is a very positive sign of the moral health of Israeli society, proving the values of chessed and volunteerism are important national values.*

#### QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. Which is a better indicator of the morality of a society, the spirit of volunteerism or how well a government protects the needs of a country?
2. Would you describe your society as a moral one?



#### THINKING MORE DEEPLY

*The test of a society is not military, political, economic or demographic. It is moral and spiritual. That is what is revolutionary about the biblical message. But is this really so? Did not ancient Egypt have the concept of *ma'at*, order, balance, harmony with the universe, social stability, justice and truth? Did not the Greeks and Romans, Aristotle especially, give a central place to virtue? Did not the Stoics create an influential moral system, set out in the writings of Seneca and Marcus Aurelius? What is different about the Torah's message?*

*Those ancient systems were essentially ways of worshipping the state, which was given cosmic significance in Pharaonic Egypt and heroic significance in Greece and Rome. In Judaism we do not serve the state; we serve God alone. The unique ethic of the covenant, whose key text is the book of Devarim, places on each of us an immense dual responsibility, both individual and collective.*

*I am responsible for what I do. But I am also responsible for what you do. That is one meaning of the command in *Kedoshim*: “You shall surely remonstrate with your neighbour and not bear sin because of them.” As Rambam wrote in his *Sefer ha-Mitzvot*, “It is not right for any of us to say, ‘I will not sin, and if someone else sins, that is a matter between them and their God’. This is the opposite of the Torah.” In other words, it is not the state, the government, the army or the police that is the primary guardian of the law, though these may be necessary (as indicated at the beginning of next week's parsha: “You shall appoint magistrates and officials for your tribes”). It is each of us as well as all of us together. That is what makes the ethic of the covenant unique.*

*We see this in a phrase that is central to American politics and does not exist at all in British politics: “We, the people.” These are the opening words of the preamble to the American constitution. Britain is not ruled by “We, the people.” It is ruled by Her Majesty the Queen, whose loyal subjects we are. The*

difference is that Britain is not a covenant society whereas America is: its earliest key texts, the Mayflower Compact of 1620 and John Winthrop's address on board the Arbella in 1630, were both covenants, built on the Devarim model. Covenant means we cannot delegate moral responsibility away to either the market or the state. We – each of us, separately and together – make or break society.

Stoicism is an ethic of endurance, and it has some kinship with Judaism's wisdom literature. Aristotle's ethic is about virtue, and much of what he has to say is of permanent value. Rambam had enormous respect for it. But embedded in his outlook was a hierarchical mindset. His portrait of the "great-souled man" is of a person of aristocratic bearing, independent wealth and high social status. Aristotle would not have understood Abraham Lincoln's statement about a new nation, "dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal."

The Greeks were fascinated by structures. Virtually all the terms we use today – democracy, aristocracy, oligarchy, tyranny – are Greek in origin. The message of Sefer Devarim is, yes, create structures – courts, judges, officers, priests, kings – but what really matters is how each of you behaves. Are you faithful to our collective mission in such a way that "All the peoples on earth will see that you are called by the name of the Lord, and they will be in awe of you" (Devarim 28:10)? A free society is made less by structures than by personal responsibility for the moral-spiritual order.

This was once fully understood by the key figures associated with the emergence (in their different ways) of the free societies of England and America. In England, Locke distinguished between liberty, the freedom to do what you may, and licence, the freedom to do what you want. Alexis de Tocqueville, in *Democracy in America*, wrote that "Liberty cannot be established without morality, nor morality without faith." In his *Farewell Address*, George Washington wrote, "Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports."

Why so? What is the connection between morality and freedom? The answer was given by Edmund Burke:

"Men are qualified for civil liberty in exact proportion to their disposition to put moral chains upon their own appetites... Society cannot exist, unless a controlling power upon will and appetite be placed somewhere; and the less of it there is within, the more there must be without. It is ordained in the eternal constitution of things, that men of intemperate minds cannot be free. Their passions forge their fetters."

In other words, the less law enforcement depends on surveillance or the police, and the more on internalised habits of law abidingness, the freer the society. That is why Moses, and later Ezra, and later still the rabbis, put so much emphasis on learning the law so that it became natural to keep the law.

It is sad to realise that this entire constellation of beliefs – the biblical foundations of a free society – has been almost completely lost to the liberal democracies of the West. Today it is assumed that morality is a private affair. It has nothing to do with the fate of the nation. Even the concept of a nation has become questionable in a global age. National cultures are now multi-cultures. Elites no longer belong "somewhere"; they are at home "anywhere." A nation's strength is now measured by the size and growth of its economy. The West has reverted to the Hellenistic idea that freedom has to do with structures – nowadays, democratically-elected governments – rather than the internalised morality of "We, the people."

**I believe Moses was right when he taught us otherwise: that the great choice is between the blessing and the curse, between following the voice of God or the seductive call of instinct and desire. Freedom is sustained only when a nation becomes a moral community. And any moral community achieves a greatness far beyond its numbers, as we lift others and they lift us.**

#### QUESTION TO PONDER:

How is "following the voice of God" the opposite of following "instinct and desire"?



#### FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

*A free society is a moral achievement, and it is made by us and our habits of thought, speech and deed. Morality cannot be outsourced because it depends on each of us. Without self-restraint, without the capacity to defer the gratification of instinct, and without the habits of heart and deed that we call virtues, we will eventually lose our freedom.*

*Morality, p. 16-17*



#### AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. What is the blessing and what is the curse?
2. Why do the market and the state not create a good society? What *can* do this?
3. How do you think the strength of a society can be measured?



## QUESTION TIME

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## EDUCATIONAL COMPANION TO THE QUESTIONS

### IN A NUTSHELL

1. Every child encounters this choice regularly, often at home and at school. Their choices are often couched in these terms, as adults use a system of reward and punishment as motivation for action and correct behaviour. This question tries to help the child relate to the mechanism described in the Torah by drawing a parallel between the reward and punishment they experience in their lives.

### THE CORE IDEA

1. Sometimes it is tempting to choose the curse/punishment option. There are choices that provide immediate satisfaction and enjoyment, but in the longer-term these often result in undesirable outcomes (the curse/punishment referred to in the parsha). But it is often hard for humans to see the long-term implications of such behaviour and choices, and to understand the implications of today's behaviour. Humans often make the wrong choice, especially when we only think of the short-term result and not the long-term consequences.
2. This absolute freedom results in anarchy where the weak in society are unprotected and therefore lose their freedom. For a society to be based on true freedom, the rights of everyone must be somewhat limited by law, which has to protect the weak in society. This prevents a lawless society where in the end anarchy will reign and only the very powerful will have liberty.

### IT ONCE HAPPENED...

1. While the government legislates laws to protect the weak in society, a truer indicator of a society's morality is in the voluntary sector, where citizens on their own initiative act morally and organise groups who can care for the vulnerable in society.
2. There are moral people and programmes of volunteering in every society. But obviously these are more common and more developed in some societies than others. A moral state that sees this as an important value will encourage and find ways to support these grassroot initiatives.

### THINKING MORE DEEPLY

1. God asks us to delay our personal instant and selfish gratification in order to act and live with the good of society in mind rather than our own individual needs and concerns. Animals, who do not have freedom of choice granted to humankind by God, act on their "instincts and desires". God asks us to be better than the animal world, to strive to be higher spiritual beings, by putting aside our instinctual drives, and living a life of higher moral and spiritual values.

### 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 blessing referred to in the Torah is the good life that will ensue if we follow the word of God. This will be both material and spiritual reward, but also a blessed life, because a life based on Torah values and practice is a blessed one. Conversely, one who chooses the curse will not receive these rewards, and will live an empty life devoid of meaning and value.
2. Rabbi Sacks has written on this at length in several of his books, most recently in *Morality*. The market and the state are about competition, with winners and losers. The market is amoral, concerned not with morality but economic forces. The state can only go so far in enforcing a morality on society. Only the moral choices of the individuals that constitute society can create the *Good Society*.
2. The strength of a society is not its military or political power, or its economic health or demographic strength. Rather the strength of a society is its moral and spiritual dimension. A society is only as strong as its most weak and vulnerable, and how much they are cared for is an indicator of its strength. Only moral and spiritual acts and values motivate this.