



# COVENANT & CONVERSATION

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

FINDING FAITH IN THE PARSHA WITH RABBI SACKS

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בס"ד

האזינו תשפ"א  
Ha'azinu 5781

**The Arc of  
the Moral  
Universe**

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

**Our struggles and setbacks can be a great opportunity to look at what we can do better**



### PARSHAT HA'AZINU IN A NUTSHELL

The majority of Ha'azinu is 70 lines of a song that Moses sings to the Israelites. He then blesses them and climbs Mount Nebo so that he can view the Israel before he dies.

The song of Ha'azinu is one long, beautiful poem describing the relationship between the God who is always just, and His often-rebellious people. A key idea within the song is that the covenant should be kept by both God and us, but if one side fails to fulfil their covenantal duties, the other party can bring a case against them. This kind of lawsuit (in biblical Hebrew, a *riv*) is often referred to by the later Prophets, usually as an accusation by God against the Israelites but occasionally the opposite.

We see the same idea in the High Holy Days of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. This is the time when God sits on the throne of justice and passes judgement on our behaviour. In our parsha, though, rather than using legal language of the contract, Moses uses high poetry, speaking not just to the minds of his listeners but also to their emotions and imaginations. Yet the theme remains simple: God is just. It is we humans who are the source of injustice in the world and who must work to heal the fractures.

#### QUESTION TO PONDER:

Why do you think people tend to blame God for whatever goes wrong?



### THE CORE IDEA

In poetic language, Moses breaks into song, putting both power and passion into his final speech to the Israelites. The main message of this final, musical speech is the idea known as *tzidduk ha-din*, defending God's justice. The way Moses puts it is this:

*He is the Rock,  
His works are perfect,  
And all His ways are just.  
A faithful God who does no wrong,  
Upright and just is He. (Devarim 32:4)*

This belief is fundamental to Judaism and it is key to the way we understand evil and suffering in the world – a difficult but necessary belief. It teaches us that bad things happen, but God is just.

*Is He corrupt? No – the defect is in His children,  
A crooked and stubborn generation. (Devarim 32:5)*

God rewards good with good, evil with evil. When bad things happen to us, it is usually because we have been guilty of doing bad things ourselves. The fault lies not in our stars but within ourselves.

This is a very challenging idea to accept, but it leads us to not look for others to blame, but rather work hard to make our lives and the world better.

#### QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. Why is it sometimes hard to defend God's justice in the world? Can you think of any examples from our times?
2. Why is it important not to look for someone to blame, but rather to look towards ourselves to act?



## IT ONCE HAPPENED...

*Ariella was five when her one-year-old cousin was diagnosed with cancer. He was a brave little boy who fought the disease and survived. He inspired his whole family to find ways to show their gratitude to the hospital where he was treated, and so they began raising money and awareness for the hospital. Ariella's grandmother set up a special charity to fundraise, and her father ran a marathon to raise money for the cause.*

*As Ariella grew up, she wanted to help other children with cancer. She, too, raised money for the hospital that had treated her cousin by running in a race that was a mile long. But she wanted to do even more for children with cancer. So she grew her beautiful hair long, and then cut it and donated it to a charity that makes wigs for children who had lost their own hair through cancer treatments. Ariella loved her long blonde hair,*

*but she didn't think twice about donating it to this very important cause.*

*When Ariella turned ten, she also became ill with cancer, and she became a patient in the very same hospital that had treated her cousin. She also beat the disease and became an inspiration to many. Her experience only made her want to give more and more to the children she saw fighting alongside her, and she continues to do so to this day.*

### QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. What was so inspiring about the way Ariella responded to her cousin's illness and her own?
2. How does her response connect to the message from the parsha?



## THINKING MORE DEEPLY

After delivering his philosophical message to the Israelites, Moses moved into the prophetic mode, predicting the pitfalls the people will encounter once they cross the Jordan and enter the land. Throughout the book of Devarim, Moses has delivered similar warnings, knowing that once the hardships of the desert and the struggles of battle have been forgotten, the people will become comfortable and complacent. They will attribute their achievements to themselves and they will drift from their faith. When this happens, they will bring disaster on themselves:

*Yeshurun grew fat and kicked –  
You became fat, thick, gross –  
They abandoned the God who made them  
And scorned the Rock their Saviour . . .  
You deserted the Rock, who fathered you;  
And you forgot the God who gave you life. (Devarim 32:15-18)*

This, the first use of the word Yeshurun in the Torah – from the root *Yashar*, upright – is deliberately ironic. Israel once knew what it was to be upright, but it will be led astray by a combination of affluence, security and assimilation to the ways of its neighbours. It will betray the terms of the covenant, and when that happens it will find that God is no longer with it. It will discover that history is a vicious wolf. Separated from the source of its strength, it will be overpowered by its enemies. All that the nation once enjoyed will be lost. This is a stark and terrifying message.

Yet Moses is bringing the Torah to a close with a theme that has been present from the beginning. God, Creator of the universe, made a world that is fundamentally good: the word

that echoes seven times in the first chapter of Bereishit. It is humans, granted freewill as God's image and likeness, who introduce evil into the world, and then suffer its consequences. Hence Moses' insistence that when trouble and tragedy appear, we should search for the cause within ourselves, and not blame God. God is upright and just. The shortcomings are ours, His children's, shortcomings.

This is perhaps the most difficult idea in the whole of Judaism. It is open to the simplest of objections, one that has sounded in almost every generation. If God is just, why do bad things happen to good people?

This is the question asked not by sceptics, doubters, but by the very heroes of faith. We hear it in Abraham's plea, "Shall the Judge of all the earth not do justice?" We hear it in Moses' challenge, "Why have You done evil to this people?" It sounds again in Jeremiah: "Lord, You are always right when I dispute with You. Yet I must plead my case before You: Why are the wicked so prosperous? Why are evil people so happy?" (Jeremiah 12:1).

It is an argument that never ceased. It continued through the rabbinic literature. It was heard again in the *kinot*, the laments, prompted by the persecution of Jews in the Middle Ages. It sounds in the literature produced in the wake of the Spanish expulsion, and its echoes continue to reverberate in memories of the Holocaust.

The Talmud says that of all the questions Moses asked God, this was the only one to which God did not give an answer. The simplest, deepest interpretation is given in Psalm 92, "The song

of the Sabbath day.” Though “the wicked spring up like grass”, they will eventually be destroyed. The righteous, by contrast, “flourish like a palm tree and grow tall like a cedar in Lebanon.” Evil wins in the short term but never in the long. The wicked are like grass, whereas the righteous are more like trees. Grass grows overnight but it takes years for a tree to reach its full height. In the long run, tyrannies are defeated. Empires decline and fall. Goodness and rightness win the final battle. As Martin Luther King said in the spirit of the Psalm: “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”

It is a difficult belief, this commitment to seeing justice in history under the sovereignty of God. Yet consider the alternatives. There are three: The first is to say that there is no meaning in history whatsoever. History is a Darwinian struggle to survive, and justice is no more than the name given to the will of the stronger party.

The second, about which I write in *Not In God's Name*, is dualism, the idea that evil comes not from God but from an independent force: Satan, the Devil, the Antichrist, Lucifer, the Prince of Darkness, and the many other names given to the force that is not God but is opposed to Him and those who worship Him. This idea, which has surfaced in sectarian forms in each of the Abrahamic monotheisms, as well as in modern, secular totalitarianisms, is one of the most dangerous in all of history. It divides humanity into the unshakeably good and the irredeemably evil, giving rise to a long history of bloodshed and barbarism of the kind we see being enacted today in many parts of the world in the name of holy war against the greater and lesser Satan. This is dualism, not monotheism, and the Sages, who called it *shtei reshuyot*, “two powers or domains”, were right to reject it utterly.

The third alternative, debated extensively in the rabbinic literature, is to say that justice ultimately exists in the World to Come, in life after death. Although this is an essential element of Judaism, it is striking how relatively little Judaism had recourse to it, recognising that the central thrust of Tanach is on this world, and life before death. For it is here that we must work for justice, fairness, compassion, decency, the alleviation of poverty, and the perfection, as far as lies within our power, of society and our individual lives. Tanach almost never takes this option. God does not say to Jeremiah or Job that the answer to their question exists in heaven and they will see it as soon as they end their stay on earth. The passion for justice, so characteristic of Judaism, would dissipate entirely were this the only answer.

Difficult though Jewish faith is, it has had the effect through history of leading us to say: if bad things have happened, let us blame no one but ourselves, and let us labour to make them better. I believe it was this that led Jews, time and again, to emerge from tragedy, shaken, scarred, limping like Jacob after his encounter with the angel, yet resolved to begin again, to rededicate ourselves to our mission and faith, to ascribe our achievements to God and our defeats to ourselves.

**I believe that out of such humility, a momentous strength is born.**

#### QUESTION TO PONDER:

How does this approach to suffering in the world lead to humility and strength?



#### FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

*If you were to ask what our response to the Holocaust should be, I would say this: Marry and have children, bring new Jewish life into the world, build schools, make communities, have faith in God who had faith in man and make sure that His voice is heard wherever evil threatens. Pursue justice, defend the defenceless, have the courage to be different and fight for the dignity of difference. Recognise the image of God in others and defeat hate with love.*

**Radical Then, Radical Now, p. 184**



#### AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. What extra dimension does poetry give this week's parsha?
2. What right do the heroes of our faith, such as Moses, Jeremiah, and Job, have to ask God why there is injustice in the world? Did they receive answers?
3. Does this approach to suffering blame the victim? Or are we asking for something else from the victims (and from us all)?



## QUESTION TIME

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## EDUCATIONAL COMPANION TO THE QUESTIONS

### IN A NUTSHELL

1. It is a bad habit of many of us to look to place blame. And it is comforting to believe in a God that does not allow evil and suffering in the world. So it is a natural instinct to blame God (who is in charge of the universe after all), for all our problems and all the problems of the world. But the reality is more complex. We believe God has the power to stop suffering, but that He chooses to give humankind freewill, and human actions can often lead to suffering. It takes maturity to take responsibility as a human race, and to try to help remedy the problems rather than looking to place blame.

### THE CORE IDEA

1. Often there are examples of suffering that make us falter in our faith that God is just and powerful and cares for His creations. The philosophical challenges of suffering in the world, especially when good, innocent people are the ones who suffer, has challenged Jewish and non-Jewish philosophers from time immemorial. The last few months have given us multiple reasons to ask these questions, as many good people are losing their lives, health, or financial stability. We must find ways to maintain our faith, and to find meaning in the suffering that currently faces humanity.
2. Looking for a 'scapegoat', someone to blame for the suffering and troubles in the world, only causes us to cast ourselves as victims, and as grudge-bearers, rather than proactive agents who can improve the situation for ourselves and the wider world. We must focus on making things better and learn to see our role as people who will step up, to fight the injustices and help those in suffering.

### IT ONCE HAPPENED...

1. It would have been understandable if Ariella had struggled to come to terms with her cousin's illness, and her own. Or if she had found the experience challenging to her faith, or frustrating, or if she had slipped into a state of victimhood. But instead, she focused on how she could best respond. She looked for ways to improve the world for others who were suffering in similar ways.
2. The parsha encourages us to have faith that God is just and created a just world. When there is suffering, the blame lies not with God but rather in humankind, and we must turn inwards and look to ourselves to be part of the solution rather than perpetuate the problem. It is important to note that in this case (and many other examples, including the current global pandemic), the suffering is from natural causes, and not directly from humankind. However, it is the responsibility of humankind to find solutions and work hard to alleviate the suffering of their fellows. This was Ariella doing her part.

### THINKING MORE DEEPLY

1. Blaming God for suffering encourages passivity and hubris. Understanding that the responsibility lies with humanity encourages humility and the taking of joint responsibility. This leads to growth.

### 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. Poetry and song are often more powerful media for expressing powerful ideas that touch our hearts and souls. The themes in Moses' words are frightening, powerful, and emotional, and sometimes they are difficult to hear. Poetry is a deeply elegant and human way to express real and raw ideas.
2. The message in the parsha is not that we cannot ask questions, or even challenge God when we feel there is injustice in the world. These biblical characters model for us that we can. And God made space for them to challenge Him. He received their questions. However, there were no easy answers then, and there are no easy answers now. Abraham was not given an answer. The message from the parsha is not to avoid the question, but to have faith that there are answers even if we cannot fathom them. To have faith that God is just, but to focus on the role we must play in redeeming the world.
3. It is important to state this is not blaming the victim. Rabbi Sacks is not suggesting that the fault lies in those who suffer themselves. But rather the responsibility to fight suffering in the world lies with humanity and humanity alone. And that is why the Torah asks us to look inward when there is suffering and not look for someone to blame, including God, but rather step up and respond to fix the suffering in the world.