

COVENANT & CONVERSATION



ESSAYS ON ETHICS

WITH RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS דצ"ל

ORIGINALLY WRITTEN AND DISTRIBUTED IN 5775 / 2015



With thanks to **Wohl Legacy** for their generous sponsorship of *Covenant & Conversation*. Maurice was a visionary philanthropist. Vivienne was a woman of the deepest humility. Together, they were a unique partnership of dedication and grace, for whom living was giving.

Time for Love, Time for Justice

Vayetse

Judaism is supremely a religion of love: three loves. “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might.” (Deut. 6:5); “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.” (Lev. 19:18); And “You shall love the stranger, for you were once strangers in a strange land.” (Deut. 10:19)¹

Not only is Judaism a religion of love. It was also the first civilisation to place love at the centre of the moral life. C. S. Lewis and others pointed out that all great civilisations contain something like the golden rule - Act toward others as you would wish them to act toward you,² or, in Hillel’s negative formulation: Don’t do to others what you would hate them to do to you. (Shabbat 31a) This is what Game Theorists call reciprocal altruism or tit-for-tat. Some form of this altruism, (especially the variant devised by Martin Nowak of Harvard called “generous”) has been proven by computer simulation to be the best strategy for the survival of any group.³

Judaism is also about justice. Albert Einstein spoke about the “almost fanatical love of justice” that made him thank his lucky stars that he was born a Jew.⁴ The only place in the Torah to explain why Abraham was chosen to be the founder of a new faith states, “For I have chosen him so that he will instruct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing

¹ See also Leviticus 19:33-34.

² C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, New York, 1947.

³ See for example Martin Nowak and Roger Highfield, *Super Cooperators: Altruism, Evolution and Mathematics* (or, *Why We Need Each Other to Succeed*). Melbourne: Text, 2011.

⁴ Albert Einstein, *The World As I See It*, New York: Philosophical Library, 1949.

what is right and just.” (Gen. 18:19) So why this combination of justice and love? Why is love alone not enough?

Our parsha contains a gripping passage of only a few words that gives us the answer. Recall the background: Jacob, fleeing home, is taking refuge with his uncle Laban. He falls in love with Rachel, Laban’s younger daughter, and works for seven years so that he can marry her. A deception is practised on him, and when he wakes up the morning after their wedding night, he discovers that he has married Rachel’s elder sister Leah. Livid, he confronts Laban. Laban replies: “It is not done in our place to marry the younger before the elder.” (Gen. 29:26) He tells Jacob he can marry Rachel as well, in return for another seven years of work.

We then read, or rather hear, a series of very poignant words. To understand their impact, we have to recall that in ancient times until the invention of printing there were few books. Until then most people (other than those standing at the *bimah*) *heard* the Torah in the synagogue. They did not *see* it in print. The phrase *Keriat ha-Torah* really means, not *reading* the Torah but *proclaiming* it, making it a public declaration.⁵

There is a fundamental difference between reading and hearing in the way we process information. Reading, we can see the entire text – the sentence, the paragraph – at one time. Hearing, we cannot. We hear only one word at a time, and we do not know in advance how a sentence or paragraph will end. Some of the most powerful literary effects in an oral culture occur when the opening words of a sentence lead us to expect one ending and instead we encounter another.

These are the poignant words we hear: “And he [Jacob] loved also Rachel.” (Gen. 29:30) This is what we expected and hoped for. Jacob now has two wives, sisters, something that will be forbidden in later Jewish law. It is a situation fraught with tension. But our first impression is that all will be well. He loves them both.

That expectation is dashed by the next word, *mi-Leah*, “more than Leah.” This is not merely unexpected. It is also grammatically impossible. You cannot have a sentence that says, “X *also* loved Y *more than* Z.” The “also” and the “more than” contradict one another. This is one of those rare and powerful instances in which the Torah deliberately uses fractured syntax to indicate a fractured relationship.⁶

“The Torah deliberately uses fractured syntax to indicate a fractured relationship.”

Then comes the next phrase and it is shocking. “The Lord saw that Leah was hated.” (Gen. 29:31) Was Leah hated? No. The previous sentence has just told us she was loved. What then does the Torah mean by “hated”? It means, that is how Leah felt. Yes she was loved, but less than her sister. Leah knew, and had known for seven years, that Jacob was passionately in love with her younger sister Rachel, for whom the Torah says that he worked for seven years “but they seemed to him like a few days because he was so in love with her.” (Gen. 29:20)

⁵ This has halachic implications. *Keriat ha-Torah* is, according to most Rishonim, a *chovat ha-tsibbur*, a communal rather than an individual obligation (unlike the reading of the Megillah on Purim).

⁶ The classic example is the untranslatable verse in Gen. 4:8, in which Cain kills Abel. The breakdown of words expresses the breakdown of relationship, which leads to the breakdown of morality and the first murder.

Leah was not hated. She was less loved. But someone in that situation cannot help but feel rejected. The Torah forces us to hear Leah's pain in the names she gives her children. Her first she calls Reuben, saying "It is *because the Lord has seen my misery*. Surely my husband will love me now." The second she calls Shimon, "Because *the Lord heard that I am not loved*." The third she called Levi, saying, "Now *at last my husband will become attached to me*." (Gen. 29:32-35) There is sustained anguish in these words.

We hear the same tone later when Reuben, Leah's firstborn, finds mandrakes in the field. Mandrakes were thought to have aphrodisiac properties, so he gives them to his mother hoping that this will draw his father to her. Rachel, who has been experiencing a different kind of pain, childlessness, sees the mandrakes and asks Leah for them. Leah then says: "Wasn't it enough that you took away my husband? Will you take my son's mandrakes too?" (Gen. 30:15) The misery is palpable.

Note what has happened. It began with love. It has been about love throughout. Jacob loved Rachel. He loved her at first sight. There is no other love story quite like it in the Torah. Abraham and Sarah are already married by the time we first meet them. Isaac had his wife chosen for him by his father's servant. But Jacob loves. He is more emotional than the other patriarchs; that is the problem. Love unites but it also divides. It leaves the unloved, even the less-loved, feeling rejected, abandoned, forsaken, alone. That is why you cannot build a society, a community or even a family on love alone. There must be justice-as-fairness also.

If we look at the fifteen times the word "love," *ahavah*, is mentioned in the book of Genesis, we make an extraordinary discovery. Every time love is mentioned, it generates conflict. Isaac loved Esau but Rebecca loved Jacob. Jacob loved Joseph, Rachel's firstborn, more than his other sons. From these came two of the most fateful sibling rivalries in Jewish history.

Yet even these pale into insignificance when we reflect on the first time the word love appears in the Torah, in the opening words of the trial of the Binding of Isaac: "Take now your son, your only one, the one you love..." (Gen. 22:2) Rashi, following Midrash (itself inspired by the obvious comparison between the Binding of Isaac and the book of Job), says that Satan, the accusing angel, said to God when Abraham made a feast to celebrate the weaning of his son: "You see, he loves his child more than You." (Rashi to Genesis 22:1) That, according to the Midrash, was the reason for the trial, to show that Satan's accusation was untrue.

Judaism is a religion of love. It is so for profound theological reasons. In the world of myth, the gods were at worst hostile, at best indifferent to humankind. In contemporary atheism the universe and life exist for no reason whatsoever. We are accidents of matter, the result of blind chance and natural selection. Judaism's approach is the most beautiful I know. We are here because God created us in love and forgiveness, asking us to love and forgive others. Love, God's love, is implicit in our very being.

So many of our texts express that love: the paragraph before the Shema with its talk of "great" and "eternal love"; the Shema itself with its command of love; the priestly blessings to be uttered in love; *Shir ha-Shirim*, the Song of Songs, the great poem of love; Shlomo Albaketz's *Lecha*

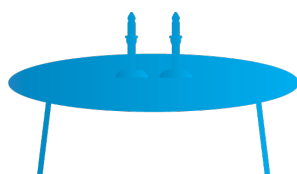
"Judaism's approach is the most beautiful I know. Love, God's love, is implicit in our very being."

Dodi, “Come, my Beloved,” Eliezer Azikri’s *Yedid Nefesh*, “Beloved of the Soul.” If you want to live well, love. If you seek to be close to God, love. If you want your home to be filled with the light of the Divine Presence, love. Love is where God lives.

But love is not enough. You cannot build a family, let alone a society, on love alone. For that you need justice also. Love is partial, justice is impartial. Love is particular, justice is universal. Love is for this person not that, but justice is for all. Much of the moral life is generated by this tension between love and justice. It is no accident that this is the theme of many of the narratives of Genesis. Genesis is about people and their relationships, while the rest of the Torah is predominantly about society.

Justice without love is harsh. Love without justice is unfair, or so it will seem to the less-loved. Yet to experience both at the same time is virtually impossible. Niels Bohr, the Nobel prize winning physicist, once discovered that his son had stolen an object from a local shop. He realised that he could have two separate reactions to the situation: he could view his son from the perspective of a judge (justice) or through his perspective as a father (love), but he could not do both simultaneously.⁷

At the heart of the moral life is a conflict with no simple resolution. There is no general rule to tell us when love is the right reaction and when justice is. In the 1960s the Beatles sang “All you need is love.” Would that it were so, but it is not. Love is not enough. Let us love, but let us never forget those who feel unloved. They too are people. They too have feelings. They too are in the image of God.



AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. Is it wrong to love some people more than others?
2. How is justice universal?
3. What statement are we making in the prayer *Avinu Malkeinu* (“Our Father, Our King”), said on the High Holy and fast days?



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The Rabbi Sacks Legacy Trust, PO Box 72007, London, NW6 6RW • +44 (0)20 7286 6391 • info@rabbisacks.org

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⁷ Jerome Bruner, *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), p. 51.