



COVENANT & CONVERSATION

THOUGHTS ON THE WEEKLY PARSHA

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"l
FORMER CHIEF RABBI OF THE UNITED HEBREW
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May the learning of these Divrei Torah be לעילוי נשמת
HaRav Ya'akov Zvi ben David Ariele zt"l

לעילוי נשמות

פנחס בן יעקב אשר וגולדה בת ישראל דוד אייזע"ה ועזריאל בן אריה לייב ומעניה בת יצחק שטרטער ע"ה

A Celebration of Creation

One aspect of the service on Rosh Hashana never ceases to fill me with wonder.

Rosh Hashana is the anniversary of creation. *Hayom harat olam*, we say in our prayers: "Today the world was born." What then – if we knew nothing of the prayers – would we expect to find as the biblical readings for the day?

My vote would be simple. From the Torah, the opening of Bereishit. "In the beginning God created..." And for the *haftarah*? What better than the last two chapters of Isaiah, "Behold I will create new heavens and a new earth"?

Opening the machzor, I would find that my answer was logical but wrong. What, in fact, do we read on the first day of the New Year? From the Torah, the story of the birth of Isaac. For the *haftarah*, the birth of Samuel. Two stories of great women – Sarah and Hannah – who longed to have children, but could not, and were then blessed by God.

Why these two stories? Beautiful, certainly. But what is their connection with Rosh Hashana? The answer tells us much about the extraordinary, humane, counter-intuitive

vision at the heart of Jewish life.

The famous Mishnah in Sanhedrin states (Steven Spielberg used it in his film *Schindler's List*) that a single life is like a universe. "One who destroys a life is as if he destroyed a universe. One who saves a life is as if he saved a universe." *The birth of a human life is like the birth of the universe*. Rosh Hashana is the festival of creation – and if you want to understand the ethical implications of creation, don't study astro-physics. Think of the birth of a child.

Throughout the centuries, Judaism has been the most child-centered civilization in history. Only once does the Torah tell us why Abraham was chosen: "So that he will instruct

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his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord.” Abraham was chosen for the sake of his children.

On the brink of the exodus, Moses gathers the people and addresses them (Exodus 12-13). He speaks about none of the things we would expect – freedom, the journey, the land of milk and honey. Instead he speaks three times about children: “And you shall tell your child on that day.”

Children have been the casualties of our age. In the West they have suffered from the breakdown of marriage and the exploitations of a consumer culture. In the Middle East they have been used by the proponents of terror as cover for gunfire and, worse, used as suicide bombers. Where have been the voices of protest? Sadly there have been too few.

There are cultures that live in the present. Eventually, inevitably, they lose their way. There are cultures that live in the past. Nursing grievances, they seek revenge. Judaism is the greatest example in history of a culture that, while celebrating the present and remembering the past, lives for the future – and for its children.

If I were to choose one Jewish message for the world in these tense times, I would say: forget power, pride, violence, revenge, wealth, prestige, honour, acclaim – and instead ask one question: will our next act make the world a little better for our children? That is the message of Rosh Hashana – the day on which, to understand the universe, we think about the birth of a child. ■

These weekly teachings from **Rabbi Sacks** zt”l are part of his ‘Covenant & Conversation’ series on the weekly Torah teaching. With thanks to the Schimmel Family for their generous sponsorship, dedicated in loving memory of Harry (Chaim) Schimmel. Visit www.RabbiSacks.org for more.

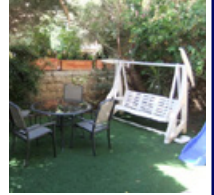


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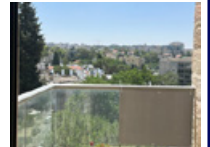
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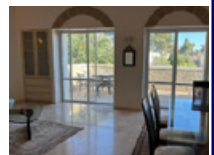
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