



COVENANT & CONVERSATION

THOUGHTS ON THE WEEKLY PARSHA

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"L

FORMER CHIEF RABBI OF THE UNITED HEBREW
CONGREGATIONS OF THE COMMONWEALTH

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 איצ'ע"ה ועזריאל בן אריה לייב ומעניה בת יצחק שרטר ע"ה

The God of Creation and the Land of Israel

There are times when an ancient text seems to speak more directly to where we are now than to the time when it was first written. Rarely has that been truer than in the case of the famous first comment of Rashi to the Torah, to the words: "In the beginning, God created..."¹ Let us listen to it in its entirety:

Rabbi Isaac said: The Torah should have begun with the verse, "This month shall be to you the first of months" (Exodus 12:2) which was the first commandment given to all of Israel. Why then did it begin with, "In the beginning"? It began thus because it wished to convey the idea contained in the verse (Psalm 111:6), "The power of His acts He told to His people, in order to give

them the estate of the nations." So that if the nations of the world will say to Israel, "You are robbers because you took by force the land of the seven nations," Israel might reply to them, "The whole earth belongs to the Holy One, blessed be He. He created it and gave it to them, and by His will He took it from them and gave it to us." (Rashi Bereishit 1:1)

Rashi might have been speaking directly to us today, in our age of anti-Zionism, boycotts, sanctions, and divestments against Israel (BDS), and even a growing questioning of the State's right to exist.

Rashi (1040-1105) lived in Troyes, Northern France, at a time when the position of Jews under Christian rule was beginning to worsen severely. He lived through the most traumatic event of that period, the massacre of Jewish communities in the Lorraine at the beginning of the First Crusade in 1096. Jews in his day were persecuted and powerless. They had no realistic hope of imminent return to the land.

1. This essay was originally written by Rabbi Sacks in September 2010. Years later when he began his translation of the entire Torah, he offered a radical new translation of the first phrase of the Torah: *Bereishit bara Elokim...* – "When God began creating...". The full translation by Rabbi Sacks is available in the Koren Tanakh: Magerman edition.

As to the logic of Rabbi Isaac's interpretation, it seems strained. Why did the Torah begin with Creation? Because that is a fundamental of Jewish faith. Rabbi Isaac seems to be arguing that since the Torah is primarily a book of commandments, it should begin with the first command – at least the first given to the Israelites as a collective entity. But clearly not everything in the Torah is command. Much of it is narrative. So Rabbi Isaac's question is odd.

So too is his answer. Why relate creation to a challenge to the Israelites' right to the Land? Why, if Rabbi Isaac's interest is solely in commandments, not give the obvious halachic answer: the story of Creation is told to explain the command to keep Shabbat. Considered thus, it is all highly perplexing.

In fact, however, Rabbi Isaac is making a very cogent point indeed. Some years ago a secular scholar, David Clines, wrote a book entitled *The Theme of the Pentateuch*. His conclusion was that the single overarching theme of the Five Books of Moses is the promise of the land. That is surely the case. There are sub-themes, but this dominates all others.

Seven times in Bereishit God promises the land to Abraham, once to Isaac, and three times to Jacob. The rest of the Mosaic books, from the beginning of Exodus when Moses hears about "the land flowing with milk and honey," to the end of Deuteronomy, when he sees it from afar, is about Israel, the destination of the Jewish journey.

There is a fundamental rule of literary form. Chekhov said: if there is a gun on stage in the first act of a play, it must be part of the plot or it should not be there at all. If the central theme of the Mosaic

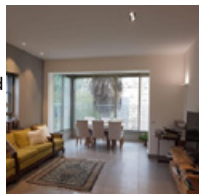


Jerusalem Real Estate is My Business

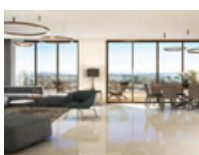
Eta: 054-723-3863 Rachel: 052-546-6425

Amazing stand alone homes in
OLD KATAMON, TALBIYA, BAKA, GERMAN COLONY

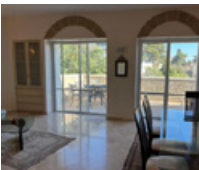
OLD KATAMON 80 sqm with 2 bedrooms and 2 bathrooms, one flight up with elevator. Completely renovated with terrace that opens into a sukkah. Full of light & surrounded by greenery. Very quiet Price **4,200,000 NIS**



Fantastic opportunity to buy 170 sqm on one floor, with sukkah terrace, Shabbat elevator, brand new apt ready in 2 years. Only **6,500,000 NIS**.



In **GERMAN COLONY**, 140 sqm on one floor, 2nd floor walk up, completely renovated with 4 bedrooms and 2 full bathrooms. Large sukkah terrace. **7,100,000 NIS**



In **BAKA**, most sought out location. New apartment duplex of 236 sqm plus 81 sqm of outdoor space. Plus parking. For more info call Eta: **0547233863**

Fantastic garden apartment for sale on Lupo Street. **ARNONA**

175 sqm 6 rooms 4 bedrooms and 3.5 bathrooms. 60 sqm garden. Security room / pantry. Central air / underfloor heating. Extra office downstairs. One large parking spot. Storage room

8,900,000 NIS



Eta Morris Realty, Ltd.

etamorrisrealestate@gmail.com

Eta: 054-723-3863 • Rachel: 052-546-6425

etamorrisrealty.co.il

books is the promise of the Land, the beginning must in some way be related to it. Hence Rabbi Isaac's point: the Creation narrative must have to do with the Land of Israel. What could this be if not to signal that the promise in virtue of which the Jewish people holds title to the land comes from the highest conceivable source, the sovereign of the universe, the Author of all.

No sooner have we said this than an obvious question arises. Why should a religion be tied to a land? It sounds absurd, especially in the context of monotheism. Surely the God of everywhere can be served anywhere.

Here too Rabbi Isaac steers us in the right direction. He reminds us of the first commandment given to the Israelites as a people, as they were about to leave Egypt.

"This month shall be to you the beginning of months; the opening of the year, this month will be for you." (Exodus 12:2)

Judaism is not primarily about personal salvation, the relationship between the individual and God in the inner recesses of the soul. It is about collective redemption, about what it is to create a society that is the opposite of Egypt, where the strong enslave the weak. The Torah is the architectonic of a society in which my freedom is not purchased at the cost of yours, in which justice rules, and each individual is recognised as bearing the image of God. It is about the truths Thomas Jefferson called self-evident, "that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights." It is about what John F Kennedy meant when he spoke of "the belief that the rights of man come not from the generosity of the state, but from the hand of God."

We are social animals. Therefore we find God in society. That is what we discover when we reflect on the basic structure of the Torah's many commands. They include laws about the administration of justice, the conduct of war, ownership of land, employer-employee relationships, the welfare of the poor, the periodic cancellation of debts, in short, an entire legislative structure for the creation of what Rav Aaron Lichtenstein called 'societal beatitude'.

Laws shape a society, and a society needs space. A sacred society needs sacred space, a holy land. Hence Jews and Judaism need their own land.

In four thousand years, for much of which Jews lived in exile, the people of the covenant were scattered over the face of the earth. There is no land in which Jews have never lived. Yet in all those centuries, there was only one land where they were able to do what almost every other nation takes for granted: create their own society in accordance with their own beliefs.

The premise of the Torah is that God must be found somewhere in particular if He is to be found everywhere in general. Just as, in the Creation narrative, Shabbat is holy time, so in the Torah as a whole, Israel is holy space. That is why, in Judaism, religion is tied to a land, and a land is linked to a religion.

But now we come to the most perplexing part of Rabbi Isaac's comment. Recall what he said:

Should anyone call into question the Jewish people's right to the land of Israel, the Jewish people can reply, "God created the universe. He divided earth into many lands, languages, and landscapes. But one

small land He gave to the Jewish people. That is our title to the Land.”

How on earth could Rabbi Isaac think of this as a compelling answer? Almost inevitably, someone who challenges the Jewish people's right to the Land of Israel will not believe in the God of Israel. So how will a reference to Israel's God make Israel's case?

Ironically, we know the answer to that question. Today the overwhelming majority of those who challenge Israel's right to exist believe in Israel's God, that is to say, the God of Abraham. They belong to the large family of faith known as the Abrahamic monotheisms.

To them, we must humbly say: when it comes to political conflict, let us search for a political solution. Let us work together in pursuit of peace. But when it comes to religion, let us not forget that without Judaism, there would be no Christianity and no Islam. Unlike Christianity and Islam, Judaism never sought to convert the world and never created an empire. All it sought was one tiny land, promised to the Children of Israel by the Creator of the universe, in whom Jews, Christians, and Muslims all believe.

Sadly, Rabbi Isaac was right, and Rashi was right to quote him at the beginning of his Torah commentary. The Jewish people would be challenged on their right to the land, by people who claimed to worship the same God. That same God summons us today to the dignity of the human person, the sanctity of human life, and the imperative of peace. And that same God tells us that in a world of 82 Christian nations and 56 Muslim ones, there is room for one small Jewish state.

Questions for Around the Shabbat Table:

1. What can we learn from knowing how God created the world?

2. Do you think there is a difference between Judaism practised in the diaspora compared to Judaism kept by those living in the Land of Israel?

3. Do you think the State of Israel today is “a society that is the opposite of ancient Egypt”? ■

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.

Jonathan Rosenblum, DPM

050-595-5161

Pediatric and Geriatric Foot Care, Bunions,
Hammertoes, and Diabetic Wound Care

Dr. Harry Weisman

Former Assist. Clinical
Professor of Medicine,
UCLA School of Medicine;
Div. of Endocrinology & Metabolism

Author of
The 18% Solution –
Lose 18% of Your
weight in 18 Weeks



Weight loss Consultation

+972 53 472 2159