



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 Arie'el zt"l

לעילוי נשמות

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

The Challenge of Jewish Leadership

I used to say, only half in jest, that the proof that Moses was the greatest of the prophets was that when God asked him to lead the Jewish people, he refused four times: Who am I to lead? They will not believe in me. I am not a man of words. Please send someone else.

It is as if Moses knew with uncanny precision what he would be letting himself in for. Somehow he sensed in advance that it may be hard to be a Jew, but to be a leader of Jews is almost impossible.

How did Moses know this? The answer lies many years back, in his youth. It was then when, having grown up, he went out to see his people for the first time. He saw them enslaved, being forced into heavy labour.

He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his people. He intervened and saved his life. The very next day he saw two Hebrews fighting, and again he intervened. This time, one of the men he had stopped aggressively

responded with a question; "Who appointed you as our leader and judge?"

Note that Moses had not yet even thought of being a leader, and already his leadership was being challenged. And these are the first recorded words spoken to Moses by a fellow Jew. That was his reward for saving the life of an Israelite the day before.

And though God persuaded Moses, or ordered him, to lead, it never ceased to be difficult, and often demoralising. Moses was faced with over forty years spent leading a group of people who were prone to criticise their situations, sin and rebel, and argue among themselves.

In an appalling show of ingratitude, the Israelites complain several times in the book of Shemot, after witnessing miraculous acts from God and his appointed leader. At Marah they complain that the water is bitter. Then, in more aggressive terms, they protest at the lack of food ('If only we had died by the Lord's hand in Egypt! There we sat round pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death'). Later, at Refidim, they grumble at the absence of water, prompting Moses to say

to God, 'What am I to do with these people? They are almost ready to stone me!'

In Devarim, Moses recalls the time when he said to God: "How can I myself bear Your problems, Your burdens and Your disputes all by myself" (Deut. 1:12). And then in Beha'alotecha, Moses suffers what I have often called an emotional breakdown:

He asked the Lord, "Why have You brought this trouble on Your servant? What have I done to displease You that You put the burden of all these people on me? Did I conceive all these people? Did I give them birth? Why do You tell me to carry them in my arms, as a nurse carries an infant, to the land You promised on oath to their ancestors? . . . I cannot carry all these people by myself; the burden is too heavy for me. If this is how You are going to treat me, please go ahead and kill me - if I have found favour in Your eyes - and do not let me face my own ruin." (*Num. 11:11-15*)

And this was said, don't forget, by the greatest Jewish leader of all time. Why are Jews almost impossible to lead?

The answer was given by the greatest rebel against Moses' leadership: Korach. Listen carefully to what he and his associates say:

They came as a group to oppose Moses and Aaron, and said to them, "You have gone too far! The whole community is holy, every one of them, and the Lord is with them. Why then do you set yourselves above the Lord assembly?" (*Num. 16:3*)

Korach's motives were wrong. He spoke like a democrat but what he wanted was to be an autocrat. He wanted to be a leader himself. But there is a hint in his words of what is at stake. Jews are a nation of strong individuals. "The whole community is holy,



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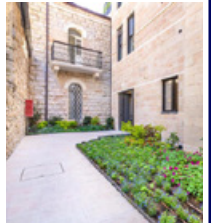
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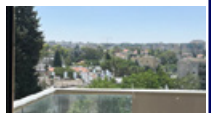
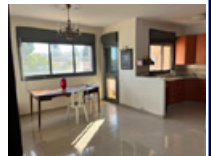
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every one of them.” They always were. They still are. That is their strength and their weakness. There were times when they found it difficult to serve God. But they certainly would not serve anyone less. They were the “stiff-necked” people, and people with stiff necks find it hard to bow down.

The prophets would not bow down to kings. Mordechai would not bow down to Haman. The Maccabees would not bow down to the Greeks. Their successors would not bow down to the Romans. Jews are fiercely individualistic. At times this makes them unconquerable. It also makes them almost ungovernable, almost impossible to lead.

That is what Moses discovered in his youth when, trying to help his people, their first response was to say, “Who appointed you as our leader and judge?” That is why he was so hesitant to take on the challenge of leadership, and why he refused four times.

There has been much debate in British and American Jewry recently¹ about whether there should be an agreed collective stance of unconditional support for the state and government of Israel, or whether our public position should reflect the deep differences that exist among Jews today, within Israel or outside.

My view is that Israel needs our support at this critical time. But the debate that has taken place is superfluous. Jews are a nation of strong individuals who, with rare historic exceptions, never agreed about anything. That makes them unleadable; it also makes them unconquerable. The good news and the bad go hand in hand. And if, as we believe, God loved and still loves this people despite all its faults, may we do less? ■

1. It should be noted for context that this essay was written by Rabbi Sacks in November 2010.

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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*A personal request from Moshe Schmerler
to men over 27 and women over 40*

Shalom, For many years I have been coping with a genetic disease which has affected my kidneys' functioning. Unfortunately, the disease has now reached such an advanced stage that I am in need of a kidney transplant. If you or one of your family members have ever thought about doing this enormous act of chessed of donating a kidney, I would be very happy to hear from you to see if you can help me.

Tizku le mitzvoth

Moshe Schmerler

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