



COVENANT & CONVERSATION

THOUGHTS ON THE WEEKLY PARSHA

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"l

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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 אייז ע"ה ועזריאל בן אריה לייב ומעניה בת יצחק שטרט ע"ה

The Rejection of Rejection

There is one aspect of Christianity that Jews, if we are to be honest, must reject, and that Christians, most notably Pope John XXIII, have also begun to reject. It is the concept of rejection itself, the idea that Christianity represents God's rejection of the Jewish People, the "old Israel".

This is known technically as Supersession or Replacement Theology, and it is enshrined in such phrases as the Christian name for the Hebrew Bible, "The Old Testament." The Old Testament means the testament - or covenant - once in force but no longer. On this view, God no longer wants us to serve Him the Jewish way, through the 613 commandments, but a new way, through a New Testament. His old chosen people were the physical descendants of Abraham. His new chosen people are the spiritual descendants of Abraham, in other words, not Jews but Christians.

The results of this doctrine were devastating. They were chronicled after the Holocaust by the French historian and Holocaust survivor Jules Isaac. More recently, they have

been set out in works like Rosemary Ruether's *Faith and Fratricide*, and James Carroll's *Constantine's Sword*. They led to centuries of persecution and to Jews being treated as a pariah people. Reading Jules Isaac's work led to a profound metanoia or change of heart on the part of Pope John XXIII, and ultimately to the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) and the declaration *Nostra Aetate*, which transformed relations between the Catholic Church and the Jews.

I don't want to explore the tragic consequences of this belief here, but rather its untenability in the light of the sources themselves. To our surprise, the key statement occurs in perhaps the darkest passage of the entire Torah, the curses of *Bechukotai*. Here, in the starkest possible terms, Moses sets out the consequences of the choices the we Israel make. If we stay faithful to God we will be blessed. But if we are faithless the results will be defeat, devastation, destruction, and despair. The rhetoric is relentless, the warning unmistakable, the vision terrifying. Yet at the very end come these utterly unexpected lines:

And yet for all that, when they be in the land of their enemies, I will not cast them away, neither will I abhor them, to destroy

them utterly, and to break My covenant with them: for I am the Lord their God. But I will for their sakes remember the covenant of their ancestors, whom I brought forth out of the land of Egypt in the sight of the heathen, that I might be their God: I am the Lord. (*Lev. 26:44-45*)

The people may be faithless to God but God will never be faithless to the people. He may punish them but He will not abandon them. He may judge them harshly but He will not forget their ancestors, who followed Him, nor will He break the covenant He made with them. God does not break His promises, even if we break ours.

The point is fundamental. The Talmud describes a conversation between the Jewish exiles in Babylon and a Prophet:

Samuel said: Ten men came and sat down before the prophet. He told them, "Return and repent." They answered, "If a master sells his slave, or a husband divorces his wife, has one a claim upon the other?" Then the Holy One, blessed be He, said to the prophet, "Go and say to them, "Thus says the Lord: Where is your mother's certificate of divorce with which I sent her away? Or to which of My creditors did I sell you? Because of your sins you were sold; because of your transgressions your mother was sent away." (*Isaiah 50:1; Sanhedrin 105a*)

The Talmud places in the mouths of the exiles an argument later repeated by Spinoza, the suggestion that the very fact of exile terminated the covenant between God and the Jewish people. God had rescued them from Egypt and thereby become, in a strong sense, their only Sovereign, their King. But now, having allowed them to suffer exile, He has abandoned them and they are now under the



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rule of another king, the ruler of Babylon. It is as if He has sold them to another master, or as if Israel were a wife God had divorced. Having sold or divorced them, God could have no further claim on them.

It is precisely this that the verse in Isaiah – “Where is your mother’s certificate of divorce with which I sent her away? Or to which of my creditors did I sell you?” – denies. God has not divorced, sold, or abandoned His people. That too is the meaning of the promise at the end of the curses of Bechukotai: “And yet for all that, when they be in the land of their enemies, I will not cast them away . . . and break My covenant with them: for I am the Lord their God.” God may send His people into exile but they remain His people, and He will bring them back.

This, too, is the meaning of the great prophecy in Jeremiah:

This is what the Lord says, He who appoints the sun to shine by day, who decrees the moon and stars to shine by night, who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar - the Lord Almighty is His name:

“Only if these decrees vanish from My sight,” declares the Lord, “Will Israel ever cease being a nation before me?”

This is what the Lord says: “Only if the heavens above can be measured, and the foundations of the earth below be searched

out, will I reject all the descendants of Israel because of all they have done!” *Jeremiah 31:35-37*

A central theme of the Torah, and of Tanach as a whole, is the rejection of rejection. God rejects humanity, saving only Noah, when He sees the world full of violence. Yet after the Flood He vows: “Never again will I curse the ground because of humans, even though every inclination of the human heart is evil from childhood. And never again will I destroy all living creatures, as I have done” (Gen. 8:21). That is the first rejection of rejection.

Then comes the series of sibling rivalries. The covenant passes through Isaac not Ishmael, Jacob not Esau. But God hears Hagar’s and Ishmael’s cries. Implicitly He hears Esau’s also, for He later commands, “Do not hate an Edomite [i.e. a descendant of Esau] because he is your brother” (Deut. 23:7). Finally God brings it about that Levi, one of the children Jacob curses on his deathbed, “Cursed be their anger, so fierce, and their fury, so cruel” (Gen. 49:6), becomes the father of Israel’s spiritual leaders, Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. From now on all Israel are chosen. That is the second rejection of rejection.

Even when Israel suffer exile and find themselves “in the land of their enemies” they are still the children of God’s covenant, which He will not break because God does not abandon His people. They may be faithless to Him. He will not be faithless to them. That is the third rejection of rejection, stated in our *parsha*, reiterated by Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, axiomatic to our faith in a God who keeps His promises.

Thus the claim on which Replacement or Supersession theology is based – that God rejects His people because they rejected



Him – is unthinkable in terms of Abrahamic monotheism. God keeps His word even if others break theirs. God does not, will not, abandon His people. The covenant with Abraham, given content at Mount Sinai, and renewed at every critical juncture in Israel's history since, is still in force, undiminished, unqualified, unbreakable.

The Old Testament is not old. God's covenant with the Jewish people is still alive, still strong. Acknowledgement of this fact has transformed the relationship between Christians and Jews and helped wipe away many centuries of tears. ■

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