



COVENANT & CONVERSATION

Thoughts on the Weekly Parsha from
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 נשמות
HaRav Ya'akov Zvi ben David Ariele zt"l

לעילוי נשמות

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



Dedicated by
Dr. Robert Sreter DDS., M.S.

Law as Love

One of the most amusing scenes in Anglo-Jewish history occurred on 14 October 1663. A mere seven years had passed since Oliver Cromwell had found no legal bar to Jews living in England (hence the so-called “return” of 1656). A small synagogue was opened in Creechurch Lane in the City of London, forerunner of Bevis Marks (1701), the oldest still-extant place of Jewish worship in Britain.

The famous diarist Samuel Pepys decided to pay a visit to this new curiosity, to see how Jews conducted themselves at prayer. What he saw amazed and scandalised him. As chance or providence had it, the day of his visit turned out to be Simchat Torah. This is how he described what he saw:

And anon their Laws that they take out of the press [i.e., the Ark] are carried by several men, four or five several burthens in all, and they do relieve one another; and

whether it is that everyone desires to have the carrying of it, I cannot tell, thus they carried it round about the room while such a service is singing ... But, Lord! to see the disorder, laughing, sporting, and no attention, but confusion in all their service, more like brutes than people knowing the true God, would make a man forswear ever seeing them more and indeed I never did see so much, or could have imagined there had been any religion in the whole world so absurdly performed as this.

The Diary of Samuel Pepys, entry for 14 October 1663, ed. Richard Le Gallienne (New York: Modern Library Classics, 2003), p. 106.

This was not the kind of behaviour that Pepys was used to in a house of worship.

There is something unique about the relationship of Jews to the Torah, the way we stand in its presence as if it were a king, dance with it as if it were a bride, listen to it telling our story, and study it, as we say in our prayers, as “our life and the length of our days.” There are few more poignant lines of prayer than the one contained in a



poem said at *Neilah*, at the end of Yom Kippur: *Ein shiyur rak haTorah hazot* - "Nothing remains," after the destruction of the Temple and the loss of the land, "but this Torah." A book, a scroll, was all that stood between Jews and despair.

What non-Jews (and sometimes Jews) fail to appreciate is how, in Judaism, Torah represents law as love, and love as law. Torah is not just "revealed legislation".¹ It represents God's faith in our ancestors that He entrusted them with the creation of a society that would become a home for His Presence and an example to the world.

One of the keys as to how this worked is contained in the parsha of Bamidbar, always read before Shavuot, the commemoration of the Giving of the Torah. This reminds us how central is the idea of wilderness – the desert, no man's land – is to Judaism. It is *midbar*, wilderness, that gives our parsha and the book as a whole its name. It was in the desert that the Israelites made a covenant with God and received the Torah, their constitution as a nation under the sovereignty of God. It is the desert that provides the setting for four of the five books of the Torah, and it was there that the Israelites experienced their most intimate contact with God, who sent them water from a rock, manna from heaven and surrounded them with Clouds of Glory.

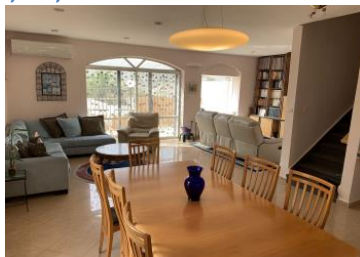
What story is being told here? The Torah is telling us three fundamentals to Jewish

1 As Moses Mendelssohn described it in *Jerusalem, or, On Religious Power and Judaism*, trans. Allan Arkush (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1983), pp. 89–90, pp. 126–28.

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identity. First is the unique phenomenon that, in Judaism, the law preceded the land. For every other nation in history the reverse was the case. First came the land, then human settlements, first in small groups, then in villages, towns and cities. Then came forms of order and governance and a legal system: first the land, then the law.

The fact that in Judaism the Torah was given *bemidbar*, in the desert, before they had even entered the land, meant that uniquely Jews and Judaism were able to survive, their identity intact, even in exile. *Because the law came before the land, even when Jews lost the land they still had the law.* This meant that, even in exile, Jews were still a nation. God remained their sovereign. The covenant was still in place. Even without a geography, they had an ongoing history. Even before they entered the land, Jews had been given the ability to survive outside the land.

Second, there is a tantalising connection between *midbar*, ‘wilderness,’ and *davar*, ‘word.’ Where other nations found the gods in nature – the rain, the earth, fertility, and the seasons of the agricultural year – Jews discovered God in transcendence, beyond nature, a God who could not be *seen* but rather *heard*. In the desert, there is no nature. Instead there is emptiness and silence, a silence in which one can hear the unearthly voice of the One-beyond-the-world. As Edmond Jabès put it: “The word

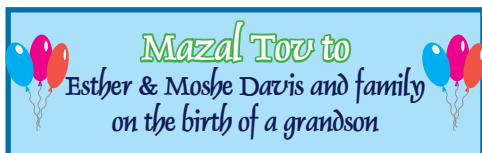
cannot dwell except in the silence of other words. To speak is, accordingly, to lean on a metaphor of the desert.”²

The German-American political scientist Eric Voegelin saw this as fundamental to the completely new form of spirituality born in the experience of the Israelites:

When we undertake the exodus and wander into the world, in order to found a new society elsewhere, we discover the world as the Desert. The flight leads nowhere, until we stop in order to find our bearings beyond the world. When the world has become Desert, man is at last in the solitude in which he can hear thunderingly the voice of the spirit that with its urgent whispering has already driven and rescued him from Sheol [the domain of death]. In the Desert God spoke to the leader and his tribes; in the desert, by listening to the voice, by accepting its offer, and by submitting to its command, they had at last reached life and became the people chosen by God.³

In the silence of the desert Israel became the people for whom the primary religious experience was not seeing but listening and hearing: *Shema Yisrael*. The God of Israel revealed Himself in speech. Judaism is a religion of holy words, in which the most sacred object is a book, a scroll, a text.

Third, and most remarkable, is the interpretation the prophets gave to those formative years in which the Israelites, having left Egypt and not yet entered the land, were alone with God. Hosea, predicting a



2 Edmond Jabès, *Du Desert au Libre*, Paris, Pierre Belford, 1980, p. 101.

3 Eric Voegelin, *Israel and Revelation*, Louisiana State University Press, 1956, p. 153.

second exodus, says in God's name regarding the Israelites:

I will lead her into the wilderness and speak tenderly to her . . .

There she will respond as in the days of her youth,

As in the day she came out of Egypt.

Hos. 2:14-15

Jeremiah says in God's name:

"I remember the devotion of your youth, how as a bride you loved Me and followed Me through the wilderness, through a land not sown."

Jer. 2:2

Shir HaShirim, The Song of Songs, contains the line, "Who is this coming up from the wilderness leaning on her beloved?" (*Shir HaShirim* 8:5)

Common to each of these texts is the idea of the desert as a honeymoon in which God and the people, imagined as bridegroom and bride, were alone together, consummating their union in love. To be sure, in the Torah itself we see the Israelites as a recalcitrant, obstinate people complaining and rebelling against God. Yet the Prophets in retrospect saw things differently. The wilderness was a kind of *yichud*, an alone-togetherness, in which the people and God bonded in love.

Most instructive in this context is the work of anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep who focused attention on the importance of *rites of passage*.⁴ Societies develop rituals to mark the transition from one state to the next – from childhood to adulthood, for example, or from being single to being

4 Arnold Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (Chicago: University of Chicago) 1960.



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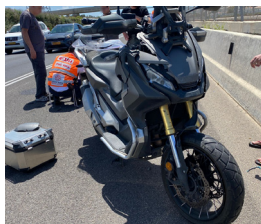
United Hatzalah Volunteer EMT Moshe Erlich was riding his ambucycle on highway 20 near Herzliya when he got caught in traffic. 200 yards up the road, Moshe saw a motorcycle lying on its side and a car with heavy damage to its rear. As he hadn't received an alert about the accident – Moshe called United Hatzalah's dispatch and alerted them to the incident while requesting backup.

Moshe flicked on his lights and sirens to alert other drivers that he was on his way to assist. He then sped to the scene on the shoulder of the highway. When he arrived, a few seconds later, he saw other motorists had exited their vehicles and had gathered around the rider of the motorcycle, who was lying on the ground in significant pain. Moshe asked them to move aside and began treating the patient. He asked the driver what hurt and took out bandages from his medical kit. Moments later, three more volunteer EMTs arrived, also on ambucycles to assist.

The motorcyclist had suffered serious injuries to his lower limbs and was bleeding from facial wounds. According to witnesses, the car in front of the motorcyclist made an emergency stop and applied the brakes very suddenly, leaving the unfortunate motorcyclist with no chance of stopping in time. He crashed into the rear of the vehicle at high speed and the force of the collision sent him flying onto and over the front of the car.

The patient had his wounds dressed and a neck brace applied to prevent any possible further spinal cord or neck injury. Ten minutes later, a local ambulance arrived to transport the motorcyclist to the hospital for further care.

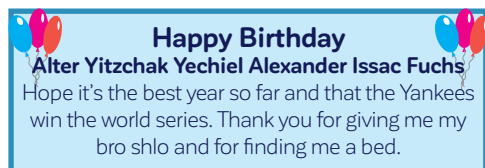
"I'm very happy that I was able to assist the motorcyclist as quickly as I did to prevent further blood loss or aggravated injury," said Moshe. "This is another example of United Hatzalah's network of volunteers working by having EMS personnel spread throughout the country so that the fastest medical response and expert care can be given to those suffering from a medical emergency."



married – and they involve three stages. The first is *separation*, a symbolic break with the past. The last is *incorporation*, re-entering society with a new identity. Between the two comes the crucial stage of *transition* when, having cast off one identity but not yet donned another, you are remade, reborn, refashioned.

Van Gennep used the term *liminal*, from the Latin word for “threshold,” to describe this transitional state when you are in a kind of no-man’s-land between the old and the new. That is what the *wilderness* signifies for Israel: liminal space between slavery and freedom, past and future, exile and return, Egypt and the Promised Land. The desert was the space that made transition and transformation possible. There, in no-man’s-land, the Israelites, alone with God and with one another, could cast off one identity and assume another. There they could be reborn, no longer slaves to Pharaoh, instead servants of God, summoned to become “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” (Ex. 19:6)

Seeing the wilderness as the space-between helps us to see the connection between the Israelites in the days of Moses and the ancestor whose name they bore. For it was Jacob among the patriarchs who had his most intense experiences of God in liminal space, between the place he was leaving and the one he was travelling to, alone and at night. It was there, fleeing from his brother Esau but not yet arrived at the house of Laban, that he saw a vision of a ladder



stretching from earth to heaven with angels ascending and descending, and there on his return that he fought with a stranger from night until dawn and was given the name Israel.

These episodes can now be seen to be pre-figurations of what would later happen to his descendants (*ma'aseh avot siman levanim*, “the acts of the fathers are a sign of what would later happen to the children”).⁵

The desert thus became the birthplace of a wholly new relationship between God and humankind, a relationship built on covenant, speech, and love as concretised in the Torah. Distant from the great centres of civilisation, a people found themselves alone with God and there consummated a bond that neither exile nor tragedy could break. That is the moral truth at the beating heart of our faith: that it is not power or politics that link us to God, but love.

Joy in the celebration of that love led King David to “leap and dance” when the Ark was brought into Jerusalem, earning the disapproval of King Saul’s daughter Michal (2 Sam. 6:16), and many centuries later led the Anglo-Jews of Creechurch Lane to dance on Simchat Torah, to the disapproval of Samuel Pepys. When love defeats dignity, faith is alive and well. ■

5 See Ramban’s commentary on Gen. 12:6.

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