

# Writings of Rabbi Sacks z"l. Torah, Prayer, Shavuot

## Will We Have Jewish Grandchildren? (1994) 35-46

Mark's Twain's question ... remains: "All things are mortal but the Jew ... What is the secret of his immortality?" The answer, I believe is straightforward. *The secret of Jewish continuity is that no people has ever devoted more of its energies to continuity.*

Descartes said: 'I think, therefore I am.' A Jew would have said: 'I learn, therefore I am.' If there is one leitmotif, one dominant theme linking the various periods of Jewish history it is enthronement of education as the sovereign Jewish value.

In one of the most famous verses in the Torah, Moses commands: You shall teach these things diligently to your children, speaking of them when you stay at home or when you travel on a journey, when you lie down and when you rise up.' The first Psalm describes the happy human being as one who 'studies Torah day and night'. In an astonishing commentary on rabbinic priorities, the fourth-century sage Rava, seeing another scholar prolonging his prayers when he might have been studying, said: 'Such people forsake eternal life and occupy themselves instead with temporal life.' The rabbis said: 'Greater is an illegitimate scholar than an ignorant high priest.'

The central, burning, incandescent passion of Jews was study. Their citadels were schools. Their religious leaders were sages: the word rabbi does not mean priest or holy man but teacher. Even when they were racked by poverty, they ensured that their children were educated. In twelfth-century France a Christian scholar noted:

A Jew, however poor, if he has ten sons, will put them all to letters, not for gain as the Christians do, but for the understanding of God's law-and not only his sons but his daughters too.'

The result was that Jews knew. They knew who they were and why. They knew their history. They knew their traditions. They knew where they came from and where their hearts belonged. They had a sense of identity and pride. They knew Abraham and Moses and Isaiah and Hillel and Akiva and Rashi and Maimonides, for they had studied their words and argued over their meaning. The Torah was the portable homeland of the Jew, and they knew its landscape, its mountains and valleys, better than they knew the local scenery outside their windows. Jerusalem lay in ruins, but they were familiar with its streets from the prophets and the Talmud and they walked in the golden city of the mind.

## DEFYING DEATH

The rabbis of the Talmud had a way of communicating deep truths in the most simple language. They told the following story about King David. David, they said, was once overcome by thoughts of his own mortality and prayed to God to know how long he had to live. God replied that no one is allowed to know when he or she will die. Then let me know,' said David, 'on what day of the week I will die.' 'You will die,' said God, 'on Shabbat.' As soon as he heard this, King David resolved to spend every Shabbat in uninterrupted study.

The appointed day eventually came and the angel of death was sent to bring David to heaven. But learning did not cease from the mouth of the king, and the angel was unable to lay hold of him. The angel knew it could not return to heaven empty-handed, so it devised a stratagem. It made a rustling noise in a tree in David's garden. The king went out to investigate, and started climbing a ladder. The

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ladder broke, and as David was falling, he paused for a moment from his learning. At that moment, the angel laid hold of him and King David died.

It is a subtle story. On the surface it is a simple example of midrash aggadah, one of those legends by which the sages fleshed out the bare bones of biblical narrative and made them come vividly alive. It is, however, much more than that. The sages, with their unique combination of simplicity and depth, were talking not just about King David but about themselves and the fate of the Jewish people.

## TESTING THE HYPOTHESIS

The Jewish people has survived. But at significant moments that survival lay in doubt. Catastrophe struck and there was no obvious route to a secure future. The prophets had declared that Israel would be an eternal people. But there ...were moments when it might have been otherwise. These critical junctures repay close attention. What saved the people and faith of Israel from the might-have-been of oblivion? Consider three such turning points.

**The first came in the fifth century BCE.** Several centuries earlier, the northern kingdom of Israel had been destroyed by the Assyrians. Its population was dispersed and rapidly assimilated into the neighbouring cultures. Ten of the twelve Israelite tribes disappeared from history. In 586 BCE the southern kingdom of Judah, comprising the two remaining tribes, was also overcome, this time by the Babylonians. The Temple was destroyed and the elite of the people taken into captivity.

...Under Cyrus, king of Persia, a new and more benign regime took shape and some of the exiles were allowed to return. Eventually, under the leadership of Nehemiah, the statesman-governor, and Ezra, the priestly scribe, a Jewish renaissance began. It faced formidable difficulties. On their arrival in Israel, the two leaders found chaos. Those Jews who had remained had lost their identity. They had intermarried. The Sabbath was publicly desecrated. Religious laws had fallen into disuse.

The book of Nehemiah describes the event which was to prove the turning point. The people gathered in Jerusalem where Ezra, standing on a wooden platform, read to the assembled crowd from the Torah. A group of Levites acted as instructors to the people, 'reading from the A Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that people could understand what was being read'. The population entered into a binding agreement to keep the Torah. The covenant, which had been in danger of being forgotten, was renewed. A new era of Jewish history began....

Ezra represented a new kind of Jew, one who was to shape the character of the Jewish people from that time to this. Not a law-giver or a prophet, a king or a judge, neither a political nor a military leader, Ezra was the prototype of the teacher as hero. Under his influence, the ancient ideal of the people of the Torah became institutionalised. Public readings and explanations of the sacred texts became more widespread. By the second century BCE a system of community funded schools had developed. Mass education, the first of its kind in the world, had begun.

The might-have-been is clear. The two tribes might have gone the way of the other ten... Judaism discovered a fundamental truth, one that has remained its unique characteristic among religious civilisations. *The best, indeed the only, defence of an identity is not military or political but educational.*

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...In the first century CE a **second crisis** struck with devastating force ...the second Temple destroyed ... Bar Kochba rebellion ...The Talmud relates how the sage Johanan ben Zakkai stood out against the Jews of his day. During the siege of Jerusalem, leaders within the city believed that they could prevail against Rome. Johanan knew that they were mistaken and argued unsuccessfully for surrender. Others believed that they would be saved by Divine intervention. The Messiah was about to come. Against them Johanan taught: 'If you have a sapling in your hand, and people say to you, "Behold, there is the Messiah" go on with your planting and only then go out and receive him.' Johanan was a religious realist in an age of dangerous military and apocalyptic dreams.

Johanan, according to the Talmud, had himself smuggled out of Jerusalem and was taken to Vespasian. He made a simple request: 'Give me [the academy at] Yavneh and its sages.' Johanan predicated Jewish survival not on military victory or on the messianic age but on a house of study and a group of teachers...

We know from Josephus and other sources that there were other tendencies in the late Second Commonwealth period. Johanan represented the group known as the Pharisees, who gave rise to the Mishnah and Talmud... **For the Sadducees**, the central dimension of Jewish life was the state and its institutions: the Sanhedrin and the Temple. **For the Essenes** it was the messianic age: they lived in imminent expectation an apocalypse which would shake the foundations of the world. For the Pharisees, as we have seen, it was education. Their key institution was the school. Their figure of authority was the scholar. Their touchstone of Jewish identity was individual learning and observance of the Torah. Neither Sadducees nor Essenes survived. ... Once again, education proved the only route to continuity.

The **third crisis** brings us to the present century and to what, in human terms, is the greatest tragedy ever to have struck the people of the covenant. The Holocaust. At the beginning of the twentieth century, four out of every five Jews lived in Europe. By the end of the Second World War the vast heartlands of European Jewry had been destroyed. The powerhouses of rabbinic learning - Vilna, Volozhyn, Ponevets, Mir were gone.

...What happened next will one day be told as one of the great acts of reconstruction in the religious history of mankind. A handful of Holocaust survivors and refugees set about rebuilding on new soil the world they had seen go up in flames. Rabbis Menahem Mendel Schneerson, Aharon Kotler, Jacob Kamenetzky, Shragai Mendlowitz, Joseph Soloveitchik and others like them refused to yield to despair. While others responded to the Holocaust by building memorials, endowing lectureships, convening conferences and writing books, they built schools and communities and yeshivot. They urged their followers to marry and have children. They said: 'Our world has been shattered but not destroyed.' They said: " Hitler brought death into the world, therefore let us bring life.' Within a generation Mir and Ponevets, Lubavitch and Belz lived again, no longer in Europe, but in Israel and America.

Within a half-century, traditional Jewry has risen from the ashes to become the fastest growing and most influential force in Jewish life... It has demonstrated in our time that the classic Jewish response to crisis remains the most powerful.

*...So long as 'their mouths did not desist from study' the angel of death has no power over the Jewish people.*

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## THE KOREN-SACKS SIDUR (2009). INTRODUCTION

### F. PRIVATE, PUBLIC, PRIVATE

The Amida itself-especially on weekday mornings and afternoons - is constructed on a triadic pattern. First it is said silently by the members of the congregation as individuals. Next it is repeated publicly out loud by the Leader. This is then usually followed by private supplications (Tahanun), also said quietly. As I have suggested above, this is a way of reenacting the two modes of spirituality from which prayer derives. **The silent Amida** recalls the intensely personal prayers of the patriarchs and prophets. **The public repetition** represents the daily sacrifices offered by the priests in the Temple on behalf of all Israel (there is no repetition of the evening Amida because there were no sacrifices at night). Thus the prayers weave priestly and prophetic, individual and collective voices, into a single three-movement sonata of great depth and resonance.

### G. FRACTALS

We owe to the scientist Benoit Mandelbrot the concept of fractals; the discovery that phenomena in nature often display the same pattern at different levels of magnitude. A single rock looks like a mountain. Crystals, snowflakes and ferns are made up of elements that have the same shape as the whole. Fractal geometry is the scientific equivalent of the mystical ability to sense the great in the small: "To see a world in a grain of sand / And a Heaven in a wild flower, / Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand, and Eternity in an hour" (William Blake).

The first of the "request" prayers in the daily Amida is a fractal. It replicates in miniature the structure of the Amida as a whole (Praise-Request-Thanks). It begins with praise: "You favor man with knowledge and teach humanity understanding," moves to request: "Favor us with knowledge, understanding and insight," and ends with thanksgiving: "Blessed are You, O LORD, the gracious Giver of knowledge." You will find many other fractals in the Siddur.

The existence of fractals in the Siddur shows us how profoundly the structures of Jewish spirituality feedback repeatedly into the architectonics of prayer.

### 11. JACOB'S LADDER

Prayer is a journey that has been described in many ways. According to the mystics, it is a journey through the four levels of being - Action, Formation, Creation and Emanation. Rabbi Jacob Emden worked out an elaborate scheme in which the prayers represent a movement from the outer courtyards to the Holy of Holies of the Temple in Jerusalem. According to everyone, the stages of prayer constitute an ascent and descent, reaching their highest level in the middle, in the Shema and Amida.

The metaphor that, to me, captures the spirit of prayer more than any other is Jacob's dream in which, alone at night, fleeing danger and far from home, he saw a ladder stretching from earth to heaven with angels ascending and descending. He woke and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the House of God; this is the gate to heaven" (Gen. 28:10-17).

Our Sages said that "this place" was Jerusalem. That is midrashic truth. But there is another meaning, the plain one, no less transfiguring. The verb the Torah uses, *vayifga*, means "to happen upon, as if by chance." "This place" was any place. Any place, any time, even the dark of a lonely

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night, can be a place and time for prayer. If we have the strength to dream and then, awakening, refuse to let go of the dream, then here, now, where I stand, can be the gate to heaven.

Prayer is a ladder and we are the angels. If there is one theme sounded throughout the prayers, it is ... ascent summit-descent. In the Verses of Praise, we climb from earth to heaven by meditating on creation. Like a Turner or Monet landscape, the psalms let us see the universe bathed in light, but this light is not the light of beauty but of holiness; the light the Sages say God made on the first day and "hid for the righteous in the life to come." Through some of the most magnificent poetry ever written, we see the world as God's masterpiece, suffused with His radiance, until we reach a crescendo in Psalm 150 with its thirteen-fold repetition of "Praise" in a mere thirty-seven words.

By the time we reach Berekhu and the blessings of the Shema we have neared the summit. Now we are in heaven with the angels. We have reached revelation. The Divine Presence is close, almost tangible. We speak of love in one of the most hauntingly beautiful of blessings, "Great love" with its striking phrase: "Our Father, merciful Father, the Merciful, have mercy on us." Now comes the great declaration of faith at the heart of prayer, the Shema with its passionate profession of the unity of God and the highest of all expressions of love...

Then comes the Amida, the supreme height of prayer...and then the Kedusha, prayer as a mystical experience.

From here, prayer begins its descent. First comes Tahanun in which we speak privately and intimately to the King. At this point, with a mixture of anguish and plea, we speak not of God's love for Israel but of Israel's defiant love of God: "Yet despite all this we did not forget You; please do not forget us." There is a direct reference back to the Shema: "Guardian of Israel, guard the remnant of Israel, and let not Israel perish who declare: Shema Yisrael."

Then comes Ashrei and the subsequent passages, similar to the Verses of Praise but this time with redemption, not creation, as their theme. The key verse is "A redeemer will come to Zion." The section closes with a prayer that we may become agents of redemption as we reengage with the world ("May it be Your will... that we keep Your laws in this world"). We are now back on earth, the service complete except for Aleinu, Kaddish and the Psalm of the Day. We are ready to reenter life and its challenges.

What has prayer achieved? If we have truly prayed, we now know that the world did not materialize by chance. A single, guiding will directed its apparent randomness. We know too that this will did not end there, but remains intimately involved with the universe, which He renews daily, and with humanity, over whose destinies He presides. We have climbed the high ladder and have seen, if only dimly, how small some of our worries are. Our emotional landscape has been expanded. We have given voice to a whole range of emotions: thanks, praise, love, awe, guilt, repentance, remembrance, hope. As we leave the synagogue for the world outside, we now know that we are not alone; that God is with us; that we need not fear failure, for God forgives; that our hopes are not vain; that we are here for a purpose and there is work to do. We are not the same after we have stood in the Divine Presence as we were before. We have been transformed... We have become, in Lurianic terminology, vessels for God's blessing. We are changed by prayer.

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## SHAVUOT

### 1. ACCEPTANCE OF THE TORAH

Before the Exodus they were *avadim*. After the Exodus they were *avadim*. The only difference was to whom. Before it was to Pharaoh, thereafter it was to God. On the face of it, this looks less like freedom than a mere change of masters. One may be cruel, the other benign, but *avdut*, service or servitude, is still the opposite of freedom. Where then does liberty enter the human condition?

The Torah's answer consists of three elements. First is the principle of consent. Read the Torah carefully and we see that God binds Himself to make a covenant with the Israelites only if they agree. He tells Moses to make a proposal to the people. God will take them as His *am segula*, favored people, if and only if they willingly assent to become "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Ex. 19:5–6). Both before and after the revelation at Mount Sinai the people give their consent. Note the wording. Before the revelation:

*All the people answered as one and said, "All that God has spoken, we will do." (Ex. 19:8)*

Afterward, we read:

Moses came and told the people all of God's words and all the laws. The people *all responded with a single voice*, "We will keep every word that God has spoken" [...]. He took the book of the covenant and read it aloud to the people. They replied, "We will do and obey all that God has declared." (Ex. 24:3, 7)

Unlike all other covenants in the ancient world this was not made on behalf of the people by their ruler. Moses is not empowered to speak on behalf of the Israelites. They all have to be asked; they all have to give their consent. This, argues political philosopher Michael Walzer, is part of what makes the political structure of the Torah an "almost democracy."<sup>13</sup>

Note also that God insists on asking the people whether they agree to the covenant and its terms, despite the fact that He has rescued them from slavery, and that they have already called themselves, in the Song at the Sea, "the people You acquired" (Ex. 15:16). Implicit in this strong insistence on voluntary agreement is the principle (stated in the American Declaration of Independence<sup>14</sup>) that *there is no government without the consent of the governed, even when the governor is God Himself*. The presence or absence of assent is what makes the difference between freedom and slavery.

### 2. TEN COMMANDMENTS

The other fundamental question is how to divide them. Most depictions of the Ten Commandments divide them into two, because of the "two tablets of stone" ([Deut 4:13](#)) on which they were engraved. Roughly speaking, the first five are about the relationship between humans and God, the second five about the relationship between humans themselves. There is, however, another way of thinking about numerical structures in the Torah.

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The seven days of Creation, for example, are structured as two sets of three, followed by an all-embracing seventh. During the first three days God separated domains: light and dark, upper and lower waters, and sea and dry land. During the second three days He filled each with the appropriate objects and life forms: sun and moon, birds and fish, animals and man. The seventh day was set apart from the others as holy.

Likewise the Ten Plagues consist of three cycles of three followed by a stand-alone tenth. In each cycle of three, the first two were forewarned while the third struck without warning. In the first of each series, Pharaoh was warned in the morning ([Ex. 7:16](#); [Ex. 8:17](#); [Ex. 9:13](#)), in the second Moses was told to “come in before Pharaoh” ([Ex. 7:26](#); [Ex. 9:1](#); [Ex. 10:1](#)) in the palace, and so on. The tenth plague, unlike the rest, was announced at the very outset ([Ex. 4:23](#)). It was less a plague than it was a punishment.

Similarly, it seems to me that the Ten Commandments are structured as three groups of three, with a tenth that is set apart from the rest. Thus understood, we can see how they form the basic structure, the depth grammar, of Israel as a society bound by covenant to God as “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” ([Ex. 19:6](#))

The first three – no other gods, no graven images, and no taking of God’s name in vain – define the Jewish people as “one nation under God.” God is our ultimate Sovereign. Therefore all other earthly rule is subject to the overarching imperatives linking Israel to God. Divine sovereignty transcends all other loyalties (no other gods besides Me). God is a living force, not an abstract power (no graven images). And sovereignty presupposes reverence (Do not take My Name in vain).

The first three commands, through which the people declare their obedience and loyalty to God above all else, establish the single most important principle of a free society, namely *the moral limits of power*. Without this, the danger even in democracy is the tyranny of the majority, against which the best defence is the sovereignty of God.

The second three commands – the Sabbath, honouring parents, and the prohibition of murder – are all about the principle of *the createdness of life*. They establish limits to the idea of autonomy, namely that we are free to do whatever we like so long as it does not harm others. Shabbat is the day dedicated to seeing God as Creator and the universe as His creation. Hence, one day in seven, all human hierarchies are suspended and everyone, master, slave, employer, employee, even domestic animals, are free.

Honouring parents acknowledges our human createdness. It tells us that not everything that matters is the result of our choice, chief of which is the fact that we exist at all. Other people’s choices matter, not just our own. “Thou shall not murder” restates the central principle of the universal Noahide Covenant that murder is not just a crime against man but a sin against God in whose image we are. So commands 4 to 7 form the basic jurisprudential principles of Jewish life. They tell us to remember where we came from if we are to be mindful of how to live.

The third three – against adultery, theft and bearing false witness – establish the basic institutions on which society depends. Marriage is sacred because it is the human bond closest in approximation

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to the covenant between us and God. Not only is marriage the human institution par excellence that depends on loyalty and fidelity. It is also the matrix of a free society. Alexis de Tocqueville put it best:

“As long as family feeling is kept alive, the opponent of oppression is *never alone*.”

The prohibition against theft establishes the integrity of property. Whereas Jefferson defined as inalienable rights those of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” John Locke, closer in spirit to the Hebrew Bible, saw them as “life, liberty or possession.”[5] Tyrants abuse the property rights of the people, and the assault of slavery against human dignity is that it deprives me of the ownership of the wealth I create.

The prohibition of false testimony is the precondition of justice. A just society needs more than a structure of laws, courts and enforcement agencies. As Judge Learned Hand said, “Liberty lies in the hearts of men and women; when it dies there, no constitution, no law, no court can save it; no constitution, no law, no court can even do much to help it.”[6] There is no freedom without justice, but there is no justice without each of us accepting individual and collective responsibility for “telling the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.”

Finally comes the stand-alone prohibition against envying your neighbour’s house, spouse, slave, maid, ox, donkey, or anything else belonging to your neighbour. This seems odd if we think of the “ten words” as commands, but not if we think of them as the basic principles of a free society. The greatest challenge of any society is how to contain the universal, inevitable phenomenon of envy: the desire to have what belongs to someone else. Envy lies at the heart of violence.[7] It was envy that led Cain to murder Abel, made Abraham and Isaac fear for their life because they were married to beautiful women, led Joseph’s brothers to hate him and sell him into slavery. It is envy that leads to adultery, theft and false testimony, and it was envy of their neighbours that led the Israelites time and again to abandon God in favour of the pagan practices of the time.

Envy is the failure to understand the principle of creation as set out in [Genesis 1](#), that everything has its place in the scheme of things. Each of us has our own task and our own blessings, and we are each loved and cherished by God. Live by these truths and there is order. Abandon them and there is chaos. Nothing is more pointless and destructive than to let someone else’s happiness diminish your own, which is what envy is and does. The antidote to envy is, as Ben Zoma famously said, “to rejoice in what we have” (Mishnah [Avot 4:1](#)) and not to worry about what we don’t yet have. Consumer societies are built on the creation and intensification of envy, which is why they lead to people having more and enjoying it less.

Thirty-three centuries after they were first given, the Ten Commandments remain the simplest, shortest guide to the creation and maintenance of a good society. Many alternatives have been tried, and most have ended in tears. The wise aphorism remains true: When all else fails, read the instructions.