

KOL MEVASSER

“We the People”

By Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

In Bechukotai, in the midst of one of the most searing curses ever to have been uttered to a nation by way of warning, the sages found a fleck of pure gold.

Moses is describing a nation in flight from its enemies:

I will bring despair into the hearts of those of you who survive in enemy territory. Just the sound of a windblown leaf will put them to running, and they will run scared as if running from a sword! They will fall even when no one is chasing them! They will stumble over each other as they would before a sword, even though no one is chasing them! You will have no power to stand before your enemies. (Lev. 26: 36-37)

There is on the face of it nothing positive in this nightmare scenario. But the sages said: “They will stumble over each other” – read this as “stumble because of one another”: this teaches that all Israelites are sureties [i.e. responsible] for one another.”[1]

This is an exceedingly strange passage. Why locate this principle here? Surely the whole Torah testifies to it. When Moses speaks about the reward for keeping the covenant he does so collectively. There will be rain in its due season. You will have good harvests. And so on. The principle that Jews have collective responsibility, that

their fate and destiny are interlinked: this could have been found in the Torah’s blessings. Why search...among its curses?

The answer is that there is nothing unique to Judaism in the idea that we are all implicated in one another’s fate. That is true of the citizens of any nation. If the economy is booming, most people benefit. If there is a recession many people suffer. If a neighbourhood is scarred by crime, people are scared to walk the streets. If there is law and order, if people are polite to one another and come to one another’s aid, there is a general sense of well-being. We are social animals, and our horizons of possibility are shaped by the society and culture within which we live.

All of this applied to the Israelites so long as they were a nation in their own land. But what when they suffered defeat and exile and were eventually scattered across the earth? They no longer had any of the conventional lineaments of a nation. They were not living in the same place. They did not share the same language of everyday life. While Rashi and his family were living in Christian northern Europe and speaking French, Maimonides was living in Muslim Egypt, speaking and writing Arabic.

Nor did Jews share a fate. While those in northern Europe were suffering persecution and massacres during the Crusades, the Jews of Spain were enjoying their golden age. While the Jews of Spain were being expelled and

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KJ Schedule Parashat Behukotai

Erev Shabbat Friday, May 16th

Shaharit/Morning Prayer	6:30 am
Shir Hashirim.....	6:45 pm
Minhah/Arbith	7:00 pm
Shabbat Candlelighting	7:30 pm

Shabbat Behukotai Saturday, May 17th

Shaharit/Morning Prayer	8:30 am
Minha, Seudah Shlisheet, Arvit.....	7:00 pm
Motzei Shabbat / Havdallah	8:34 pm

Lag Ba’Omer Sunday, May 18th

Shaharit	7:30 am
Talmud Torah @ Rancho Park	
Walk for Israel	9:45 am

Weekdays Monday to Friday, May 19 to 23

Shaharit	6:30 am
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Erev Shabbat / Friday, May 23rd

Shaharit/Morning Prayer	6:30 am
Shir Hashirim.....	6:45 pm
Minhah/Arbith	7:00 pm
Shabbat Candlelighting	7:35 pm

Lag Ba’Omer
Sunday, May 18th
at Rancho Park

Cheviot Hills Rec Center
Motor Avenue & Pico Blvd

Israel Walk 10:00 am
Celebrate Israel Festival 11:00 am





Iraqi Jewish Archive to Stay in US

15 May 2014, from World Jewish Congress

An agreement has been reached between the US and Iraqi governments under which the Iraqi Jewish Archive will remain in the United States for an unspecified period. The archive contains around 2,700 restored Jewish books and thousands of documents. The US spent more than US\$ 3 million to restore the texts.

The IJA was due to return to Iraq after the 'Discovery and Recovery' exhibit at the Museum of Jewish Heritage in New York closes this week. However, Iraq's ambassador to Washington on Wednesday announced that a deal has been reached with the US government. Lukman Faily stated, according to the State Department: "The Government of Iraq notes with satisfaction the remarkable success of the 'Discovery and Recovery' exhibit of the Iraqi Jewish Archive.

"This exhibit has led to an increase of understanding between Iraq and United States and a greater recognition of the diverse heritage of Iraq. I am therefore pleased to announce that, in order to continue this important work and to allow the exhibit to be displayed in other cities

in the United States, the Government of Iraq has authorized me to extend the period which the exhibit may remain in the United States." The ambassador added: "We consider the history of Jewish communities in Iraq to be an integral part of the history of our country — one that we honor and cherish — and nothing can erase this history, nor change our commitment to preserving its memory. For us as Iraqis, it is important to recover this precious piece of our cultural heritage that documents an era of our country's history."

The agreement comes after a controversy in the US and Canada. A resolution calling for the original agreement to return the archive to be re-negotiated was approved by the US Senate and a second resolution is awaiting a vote in the House of Representatives.

Democratic Senator Chuck Schumer told the British newspaper 'The Daily Telegraph' that the issue was one of human rights. "This is a group of people that have had so much of their history taken away or destroyed over the years, and under no circumstances should these artifacts be handed back to Iraq," he declared.

Refuah Shlemah

Rahel bat Marcel

Mordechai Cohen / Mordecai ben Avraham
Moselle Amron/Mazal Tov bat Salha Matana

Tilda Levy / Tilda bat Miriam

Joseph Sharaf / Yossef ben Jamila

Maurice Ovadia / Moshe ben Noosha

Pnina Herzbrun / Pnina bat Esther

Michael Herzbrun / Michael Baruch ben Sarah

Torah & Haftarah Readings

Vayikra / Leviticus: Behukotai 542 to 550

Haftara Yirmiyahu / Jeremiah 551 to 553

Seudah Shlisheet

is sponsored in memory of
Iran bat Monavar, z"l

by

Sholeh & Moussa Shaaya
and Hilda & Touraj Rojhani

In Memoriam

We remember these yahrzeit anniversaries for May 17 to 24, 2014. It is customary to light a memorial candle, donate tzedaka, & attend services the preceding Shabbat.

18 Iyar / Sunday, May 18th

Rachel Judah *Rahel bat Tifaha*
Seemah Sofaer bat Hanna

19 Iyar / Monday, May 19th

Helen Ezra Shemtob *Habiba bat Lulu*
Sulman Haroun Zanki

21 Iyar / Wednesday, May 21st

Lulu Ezra Azoory *Lulu Katoon bat Masooda*
Michael David Adrian Meyer *Michael David ben*
Yoseph Meir

Murad Saddick *Mordechai ben Sasson*
Maisie Solomon

22 Iyar / Thursday, May 22nd

Rachel Bar *Rahel bat Miriam*
Ezekiel Joseph *Yehezkel ben Itzhak Yosef*
Grace Mussry *Grace bat Toba*
Iran Rojhani *Iran bat Monavar*

23 Iyar / Friday, May 23rd

Moshe Bensabat *Moshe bat Clara*
Sally Saul *Salha bat Simcha*

24 Iyar / Shabbat, May 24th

Judah Freddy Bekhore *Yehuda Faraj ben Yosef*
Bekhore

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compelled to wander round the world as refugees, the Jews of Poland were enjoying a rare sunlit moment of tolerance. In what sense therefore were they responsible for one another? What constituted them as a nation? How – as the author of Psalm 137 put it – could they sing God’s song in a strange land?

There are only two texts in the Torah that speak to this situation, namely the two sections of curses, one in our parsha, and the other in Deuteronomy in the parsha of Ki Tavo. Only these speak about a time when Israel is exiled and dispersed, scattered, as Moses later put it, “to the most distant lands under heaven.” There are three major differences between the two curses, however. The passage in Leviticus is in the plural, that in Deuteronomy in the singular. The curses in Leviticus are the words of God; in Deuteronomy they are the words of Moses. And the curses in Deuteronomy do not end in hope. They conclude in a vision of unrelieved bleakness:

You will try to sell yourselves as slaves—both male and female—but no one will want to buy you. (Deut. 28: 68)

Those in Leviticus end with momentous hope: *But despite all that, when they are in enemy territory, I will not reject them or despise them to the point of totally destroying them, breaking my covenant with them by doing so, because I am the Lord their God. But for their sake I will remember the covenant with the first generation, the ones I brought out of Egypt’s land in the sight of all the nations, in order to be their God; I am the Lord. (Lev. 26: 44-45)*

Even in their worst hours, according to Leviticus, the Jewish people would never be destroyed. Nor would God reject them. The covenant would still

be in force and its terms still operative. That meant that Jews would still be linked to one another by the same ties of mutual responsibility that they had in the land – for it was the covenant that formed them as a nation and bound them to one another even as it bound them to God. Therefore, even when falling over one another in flight from their enemies they would still be bound by mutual responsibility. They would still be a nation with a shared fate and destiny.

This is a rare and special idea, and it is the distinctive feature of the politics of covenant. Covenant became a major element in the politics of the West following the Reformation. It shaped political discourse in Switzerland, Holland, Scotland and England in the seventeenth century as the invention of printing and the spread of literacy made people familiar for the first time with the Hebrew Bible (the “Old Testament” as they called it). There they learned that tyrants are to be resisted, that immoral orders should not be obeyed, and that kings did not rule by divine right but only by the consent of the governed.

The same convictions were held by the Pilgrim Fathers as they set sail for America, but with this difference, that they did not disappear over time as they did in Europe. The result is that the United States is the only country today whose political discourse is framed by the idea of covenant.

Two textbook examples of this are Lyndon Baines Johnson’s Inaugural of 1965, and Barack Obama’s Second Inaugural of 2013. Both use the biblical device of significant repetition (always an odd number, three or five or seven). Johnson invokes the idea of covenant five times. Obama five times begins paragraphs with a key phrase of covenant politics – words never used by British politicians – namely, “We the people.”

In covenant societies it is the people as a whole who are responsible, under God, for the fate of the nation. As Johnson put it, “Our fate as a nation and our future as a people rest not upon one citizen but upon all citizens.” In Obama’s words, “You and I, as citizens, have the power to set this country’s course.” That is the essence of covenant: we are all in this together. There is no division of the nation into rulers and ruled. We are conjointly responsible, under the sovereignty of God, for one another.

This is not open-ended responsibility. There is nothing in Judaism like the tendentious and ultimately meaningless idea set out by Jean-Paul Sartre in *Being and Nothingness* of ‘absolute responsibility’:

The essential consequence of our earlier remarks is that man, being condemned to be free, carries the weight of the whole world on his shoulders, he is responsible for the world and for himself as a way of being.

In Judaism we are responsible only for what we could have prevented but did not. This is how the Talmud puts it:

Whoever can forbid his household [to commit a sin] but does not, is seized for [the sins of] his household. [If he can forbid] his fellow citizens [but does not] he is seized for [the sins of] his fellow citizens. [If he can forbid] the whole world [but does not] he is seized for [the sins of] the whole world.

This remains however a powerful idea and an unusual one. What made it unique to Judaism is that it applied to a people scattered throughout the world united only by the terms of a covenant our ancestors made with God at Mount Sinai. But it continues, as I have argued, to drive

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American political discourse likewise even today. It tells us that we are all equal citizens in the republic of faith and that responsibility cannot be delegated away to governments or presidents but belongs inalienably to each of us. We are our brothers' and sisters' keeper.

That is what I mean by the strange, seemingly self-contradictory idea I have argued throughout these essays: that *we are all called on to be leaders*. Surely this cannot be so: if everyone is a leader, then no one is. If everyone leads, who is left to follow?

The concept that resolves the contradiction is covenant. Leadership is, I have argued, the acceptance of responsibility. Therefore if we are all responsible for one another, we are all called on to be leaders, each within our sphere of influence, be it within the family, the community, the organisation or a larger grouping still.

This can sometimes make an enormous difference. In late summer of 1999 I was in Pristina making a BBC television programme about the aftermath of the Kosovo campaign. I interviewed General Sir Michael Jackson, then head of the NATO forces. To my surprise, he thanked me for what "my people" had done. The Jewish community had taken charge of the city's twenty-three primary schools. It was, he said, the most valuable contribution to the city's welfare. When 800,000 people have become refugees and then return home, the most reassuring sign that life has returned to normal is that the schools open on time. That, he said, we owe to the Jewish people.

Meeting the head of the Jewish community later that day, I asked him how many Jews were there currently in Pristina. His answer? Eleven.

The story, as I later uncovered it, was this. In the early days of the conflict, Israel had along with other international aid agencies sent a field medical team to work with the Kosovan Albanian refugees. They noticed that while other agencies were concentrating on the adults, there was no one working with the children. Traumatized by the conflict and far from home, they were running wild.

The team phoned back to Israel and asked for young volunteers. Every youth movement in Israel, from the most secular to the most religious, sent out teams of youth leaders at two-week intervals. They worked with the children, organizing summer camps, sports competitions, drama and music events and whatever else they could think of to make their temporary exile less traumatic. The Kosovan Albanians were Muslims, and for many of the Israeli youth workers it was their first contact and friendship with children of another faith.

Their effort won high praise from UNICEF, the United Nations children's organisation. It was in the wake of this that "the Jewish people" – Israel, the American-based "Joint" and other Jewish agencies – were asked to supervise the return to normality of the school system in Pristina.

That episode taught me the power of *hessed*, acts of kindness when extended across the borders of faith. It also showed the practical difference collective responsibility makes to the scope of the Jewish deed. World Jewry is small, but the invisible strands of mutual responsibility mean that even the smallest Jewish community can turn to the Jewish people worldwide for help and achieve things that would be exceptional for a nation many times its size. When the Jewish people join hands in collective responsibility they become a formidable force for good.

Shabbat Shalom



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