

Judaism: A Religion or a Nation?

Studying the thought of Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks זצ"ל

Three Exiles

Exile 1: Egypt



1. Bereishis 37:4

ד וַיֵּרְאוּ אָחָיו, כִּי-אֶהֱבֶה אֲבִיהֶם מִכָּל-
אָחָיו--וַיִּשְׁנְאוּ, אֹתוֹ; וְלֹא יָכְלוּ, דַּבְּרוּ לְשָׁלֵם.

4 And when his brethren saw that their father loved him more than all his brethren, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably unto him.

Exile 2: Babylon



2. II Melachim 12:16-19

<p>טז וַיֵּרָא כָּל-יִשְׂרָאֵל, כִּי לֹא-שָׁמַע הַמֶּלֶךְ אֲלֵהֶם, וַיָּשָׁבוּ הָעָם אֶת-הַמֶּלֶךְ דֹּבֵר לֵאמֹר מִה-לָּנוּ חֶלֶק בְּדוֹד וְלֹא-נַחֲלָה בְּבֶן-יִשִׁי לְאֹהֲלֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, עֲתָה רְאֵה בֵיתְךָ דָּוִד; וַיֵּלֶךְ יִשְׂרָאֵל, לְאֹהֲלָיו.</p>	<p>16 And when all Israel saw that the king hearkened not unto them, the people answered the king, saying: 'What portion have we in David? neither have we inheritance in the son of Jesse; to your tents, O Israel; now see to thine own house, David.' So Israel departed unto their tents.</p>
<p>יז וּבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, הַיֹּשְׁבִים בְּעָרֵי יְהוּדָה--וַיִּמְלֹךְ עֲלֵיהֶם, רְחֹבָעַם. {פ}</p>	<p>17 But as for the children of Israel that dwelt in the cities of Judah, Rehoboam reigned over them. {P}</p>
<p>יח וַיִּשְׁלַח הַמֶּלֶךְ רְחֹבָעַם, אֶת-אֲדֹרָם אֲשֶׁר עַל-הַמַּס, וַיִּרְגְּמוּ כָל-יִשְׂרָאֵל בּוֹ אֲבָן, וַיָּמָת; וְהַמֶּלֶךְ רְחֹבָעַם, הִתְאַמֵּץ לָעֹלֹת בַּמֶּרְכָּבָה, לָנוֹס, יְרוּשָׁלַם.</p>	<p>18 Then king Rehoboam sent Adoram, who was over the levy; and all Israel stoned him with stones, so that he died. And king Rehoboam made speed to get him up to his chariot, to flee to Jerusalem.</p>
<p>יט וַיִּפְשְׁעוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּבֵית דָּוִד, עַד הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה. {ס}</p>	<p>19 So Israel rebelled against the house of David, unto this day. {S}</p>



3. The Jewish War, Josephus 5:24-26

24To whatever part of the City John turned, he never failed to set fire to the houses that were stocked with corn and all kinds of supplies; and when he withdrew, Simon advanced and did the same. It was as if to oblige the Romans that they were destroying all that the City had laid up against a siege and severing the sinews of their own strength. **25**The result at any rate was that all the buildings round the Temple were reduced to ashes, the City became a desolate no-man's-land for their domestic warfare, and almost all the grain—enough to support them through many years of siege—went up in flames. **26**It was famine that defeated them, a thing that could never have happened if they had not brought it upon themselves.

4. Mishna, Avos 3:2

רבי חנינא סגן הכהנים אומר, הוי מתפלל בשלומה של מלכות, שאלמלא מוראה, איש את רעהו חיים בלעו.

Rabbi Hanina, the vice-high priest said: pray for the welfare of the government, for were it not for the fear it inspires, every man would swallow his neighbor alive.

The Paradox

5. Future Tense, Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, page 35



Haman said so in the book of Esther: "There is one people, scattered and divided among the peoples, *whose laws are different from all others*' (Esth. 3:8). So, millennia later, did Jean-Jacques Rousseau, in an unpublished note discovered among his papers after his death:

But an astonishing and truly unique spectacle is to see an expatriated people, who have had neither place nor land for nearly two thousand years, a people mingled with foreigners, no longer perhaps having a single descendant of the early races, a scattered people, dispersed over the world, enslaved, persecuted, scorned by all nations, nonetheless preserving its characteristics, its laws, its customs, its patriotic love of the early social union, when all ties with it seem broken . . . They mingle with all the nations and never merge with them; they no longer have leaders, and are still a nation; they no longer have a homeland, and are always citizens of it.¹⁰

That is the paradox. In their own land, the place where every other nation is to some degree united, Jews were split beyond repair. In dispersion, where every other nation has assimilated and disappeared, they remained distinctive and, in essentials at least, united. There is something surpassingly strange about Jewish peoplehood.

Two Covenants

6. Ruth 1:16

טז ותאמר רות אל-תפגע-בי, לעזבך לשוב מאחריך: כי אל-אשר תלכי אלך, ובאשר תליני אליו--עמך עמי, ואלהיך אלהי.

16 And Ruth said: 'Entreat me not to leave thee, and to return from following after thee; for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge; thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God;

7. BT Yavamos 47a

תנו רבנן גר ששבא להתגייר בזמן הזה אומרים לו מה ראית שפאת להתגייר אי אתה יודע שישאל בן זמן הזה דוויים דחופים סחופים ומטורפין ויסורין באין עליהם אם אומר יודע אני ואיני כדאי מקבלין אותו מיד

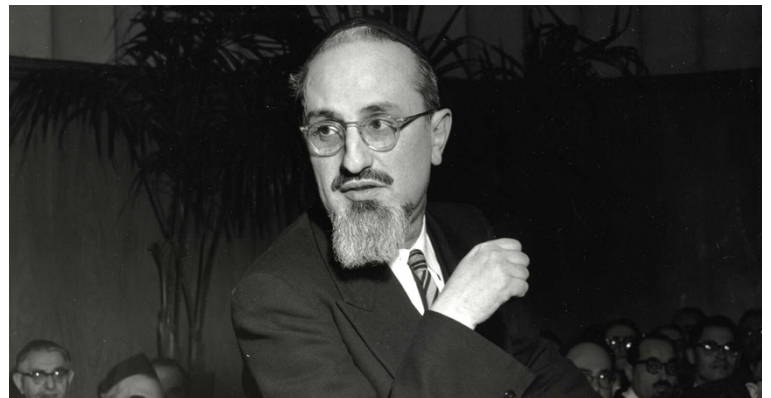
§ **The Sages taught** in a *baraita*: With regard to a potential **convert who comes** to a court in order to **convert, at the present time**, when the Jews are in exile, the judges of the court **say to him: What did you see that motivated you to come to convert? Don't you know that the Jewish people at the present time are anguished, suppressed, despised, and harassed, and hardships are frequently visited upon them? If he says: I know, and although I am unworthy of joining the Jewish people and sharing in their sorrow, I nevertheless desire to do so, then the court accepts him immediately** to begin the conversion process.

ומודיעין אותו מקצת מצות קלות ומקצת מצות חמורות ומודיעין אותו עון לקט שכחה ופאה ומעשר עני ומודיעין אותו עונשן של מצות אומרים לו הוי יודע שעד שלא באת למדה זו אכלת חלב אי אתה ענוש פרת חללת שבת אי אתה ענוש סקילה ועכשיו אכלת חלב ענוש פרת חללת שבת ענוש סקילה

And the judges of the court inform him of some of the lenient mitzvot and some of the stringent mitzvot, and they inform him of the sin of neglecting the mitzva to allow the poor to take gleanings, forgotten sheaves, and produce in the corner of one's field, and about the poor man's tithe. And they inform him of the punishment for transgressing the mitzvot, as follows: They say to him: Be aware that before you came to this status and converted, had you eaten forbidden fat, you would not be punished by *karet*, and had you profaned Shabbat, you would not be punished by stoning, since these prohibitions do not apply to gentiles. But now, once converted, if you have eaten forbidden fat you are punished by *karet*, and if you have profaned Shabbat, you are punished by stoning.

8. Kol Dodi Dofek, Covenant of Destiny

When we delve into our historical existence we come to an important realization regarding our *Weltanschauung*. The Torah relates that the Holy One concluded two Covenants with Israel. One Covenant was made in Egypt. "And I shall take you unto Me for a people, and I will be to you a God" ([Exodus 6:7](#)). The second Covenant was at Mount Sinai. "And he [Moses] took the book of the covenant ... and he said: 'Behold the blood of the covenant which the Lord made with you in agreement with all these words'" ([Exodus 24:7-8](#)). (The third Covenant, in the Book of Deuteronomy (28:69), is identical in content and purpose to the Covenant of Sinai.)⁹ What is the essence of these two Covenants? It appears to me that this question was already answered at the beginning of our essay. Just as Judaism distinguished fate from destiny in the realm of personal individuality, so it also differentiated between these two concepts in the sphere of our national-historical existence. The individual is tethered to his nation with bonds of fate and chains of destiny. In accordance with this postulate, one can say that the Covenant of Egypt was a Covenant of Fate, and the Covenant of Sinai was one of destiny.



What is the Covenant of Fate? Fate signifies in the life of the nation, as it does in the life of the individual, an existence of compulsion. A strange force merges all individuals into one unit. The individual is subject and subjugated against his will to the national fate/existence, and it is impossible for him to avoid it and be absorbed into a different reality. The environment expels the Jew who flees from the presence of God, so that he is awakened from his slumber, like Jonah the prophet, who awoke to the voice of the ship's captain demanding to know his personal national- religious identity.

What is the Covenant of Destiny? In the life of a people (as in the life of an individual), destiny signifies an existence that it has chosen of its own free will and in which it finds the full realization

of its historical existence. Instead of a passive, inexorable existence into which a nation is thrust, an Existence of Destiny manifests itself as an active experience full of purposeful, movement, ascension, aspirations, and fulfillment. The nation is enmeshed in its destiny because of its longing for an enhanced state of being, an existence replete with substance and direction. Destiny is the font out of which flow the unique self-elevation of the nation and the unending stream of Divine inspiration that will not run dry so long as the path of the People is demarcated by the laws of God. The life of destiny is a directed life, the result of conscious direction and free will.

Interdependence

9. Future Tense, page 38

Holocaust, the covenant of fate had been renewed even if the covenant of faith had not. Jews were united in grief and consciousness of danger. They were united too (he was writing in 1956) in their attachment to Israel. Soloveitchik was clear that fate was only half of Judaism, and faith the more significant half. I want, though, to put it more strongly than he did.

*Without the covenant of faith, there is no covenant of fate. Without religion, there is no global nation.*¹³ The story of Jewish survival-through-catastrophe turned on two critical moments in history, one that led to an institution, the other to an idea. It is not too much to say that between them they saved Jewish peoplehood, and thus the Jewish people. Both were achievements of the spirit, for Jews are a people of the spirit and without that they are not a people at all.

The Synagogue



10. Yechezkel 11:16

טז לְכֹן אָמַר, כֹּה-אָמַר אֲדֹנָי יְהוִה, כִּי הִרְחַקְתִּים בְּגוֹיִם, וְכִי הִפִּיצוּתִים בְּאַרְצוֹת; וְאֵיךְ לָהֶם לְמִקְדָּשׁ מֵעַט, בְּאַרְצוֹת אֲשֶׁר-בָּאוּ שָׁם. {ס}

16 therefore say: Thus saith the Lord GOD: Although I have removed them far off among the nations, and although I have scattered them among the countries, yet have I been to them as a little sanctuary in the countries where they are come; {S}

11. Vayikra 4:6

תְּנִי חֲזִקָה (ירמיה ג. יז): (שֶׁהַ פְּזוּרָה יִשְׂרָאֵל, נִמְשְׁלוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל לְשָׂה, מֵהַ שֶׁהַ הִנָּה לֹקֵה עַל רֹאשׁוֹ אוֹ בְּאֶחָד מֵאֲבָרָיו וְכָל אֲבָרָיו מְרָגִישִׁין, כִּי הֵן יִשְׂרָאֵל, אֶחָד מֵהֶן חוֹטֵא וְכָלֵן מְרָגִישִׁין), במדבר טז. כב: (הָאִישׁ אֶחָד יִחַטָּא, תְּנִי רַבִּי שְׁמֵעוֹן בַּר יוֹחָאי, מִשָּׁל לְבָנֵי אָדָם שֶׁהֵיוּ יוֹשְׁבֵין בְּסַפִּינָה נֹטֵל אֶחָד מֵהֶן מִקְדָּם וְהִתְחִיל קוֹדֵם תַּחְתִּיו, אָמְרוּ לוֹ תְּבָרִיו מֵהַ אֲתָהּ יוֹשֵׁב וְעוֹשֶׂה, אָמַר לָהֶם מָה אֲכַפֵּת לָכֶם לֹא תַחְתִּי אֲנִי קוֹדֵם, אָמְרוּ לוֹ שֶׁהֵמִים עוֹלִין וּמְצִיפִין עָלֵינוּ אֵת הַסַּפִּינָה.

Hezkiya taught ([Jeremiah 50:17](#)): "Israel are scattered sheep" - why are Israel likened to a sheep? Just as a sheep, when hurt on its head or some other body part, all of its body parts feel it. So it is with Israel when one of them sins and everyone feels it. ([Numbers 16:22](#)): "When one man sins [will You be wrathful with the whole community]." Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai taught a parable: Men were on a ship. One of them took a drill and started drilling underneath him. The others said to him: What are sitting and doing?! He replied: What do you care. Is this not underneath my area that I am drilling?! They said to him: But the water will rise and flood us all on this ship.

12. Future Tense page 39

The synagogue was a unique institution. Its origins are lost in the vagaries of time, but it was the first place in history made holy not because it was built on a holy site, or because sacrifices were offered there, but merely because people gathered there to study and pray. Where and when the synagogue as an institution was born is debated by scholars, but it was one of the most revolutionary of all Jewish innovations. It could be built anywhere that Jews gathered to study and pray. It was a reminder of the Temple, a fragment of Jerusalem, a Jewish-home-in-exile. It was, in the language of the Internet, a virtual Jerusalem, a city in cyberspace. Jews no longer physically had a land, but they had one in the mind.¹⁴

Communal Responsibility



13. Vayikra 26:36-37

לו והנשארים בכם--והבאתי מִרְרָה בלבבכם, בארצת איביהם; ורדף אתם, קול עלה נדף, ונסו מנסת-חרב ונפלו, ואין רדף.

36 And as for them that are left of you, I will send a faintness into their heart in the lands of their enemies; and the sound of a driven leaf shall chase them; and they shall flee, as one fleeth from the sword; and they shall fall when none pursueth.

לז וכשלו איש-באחיו כמפני-חרב, ורדף אין; ולא-תהיה לכם תקומה, לפני איביכם.

37 And they shall stumble one upon another, as it were before the sword, when none pursueth; and ye shall have no power to stand before your enemies.

14. Sifra, Bechukosai 2:5

וכשלו איש באחיו אינו אומר איש באחיו אלא איש בעון אחיו, מלמד שכל ישראל ערבים זה בזה

Adversity:

15. Spinoza, Theologico-Political Treatise V:2

But with regard to the ceremonial observances which were ordained in the Old Testament for the Hebrews only, and were so adapted to their state that they could for the most part only be observed by the society as a whole and not by each individual, it is evident that they formed no part of the Divine law, and had nothing to do with blessedness and virtue, but had reference only to the election of the Hebrews, that is (as I have shown in Chap. II.), to their temporal bodily happiness and the tranquillity of their kingdom, and that therefore they were only valid while that kingdom lasted.



16. Yechezkel 20:32

לב והעלה, על-רויחכם--היו, לא תהיה: אשר אתם אמרים, נהיה כגוים כמשפחות הארצות--לשרת, עץ וסֶבֶן.

32 and that which cometh into your mind shall not be at all; in that ye say: We will be as the nations, as the families of the countries, to serve wood and stone.

17. TB Sanhedrin 105a

[שמואל](#) אמר באו עשרה בני אדם וישבו לפניו אמר להן חזרו בתשובה אמרו לו עבד שמכרו רבו ואשה שגרשה בעלה כלום יש לזה על זה כלום אמר לו הקב"ה לנביא לך אמור להן) [ישעיהו נ. א](#) (איזה ספר כריתות אמכם אשר שלחתיה או מי מנושי אשר מכרתי אתכם לו הן בעוונותיכם נמכרתם ובפשעכם שלחה אמכם

[Shmuel](#) says that this was the convincing answer: **Ten people came and sat before** the prophet Ezekiel. **He said to them: Repent. They said to** Ezekiel: In the case of **a slave sold by his owner to another master, or a woman divorced by her husband, does this person have any claim upon that person?** Since God gave the Jewish people to other masters, the ties that existed between Him and us were severed. **The Holy One, Blessed be He, said to the prophet: Go say to them: "Where is your mother's scroll of severance, with which I sent her away? Or to which of My creditors have I sold you? For your iniquities you sold yourselves and for your transgressions was your mother sent away" (Isaiah 50:1).** Learn from this that God did not sever His ties to the Jewish people.

18. Future Tense page 45

The covenant of fate existed only because Jews were bound by a covenant of faith. That is the essential point. In Israel, Jews were a nation in the normal sense, bound together because they lived in the same land, under the same government. Shared fate, under such circumstances, requires no special faith, no theology, no leap of the imagination. Outside Israel, however, only the covenant of faith sustained a covenant of fate. And only such faith will, in the long run, keep Jews together in a bond of mutual responsibility. Only this will sustain the attachment of Diaspora Jews to Israel.

In Halacha

19. TB Rosh Hashana 29a

תְּנִי אֶהְבֶּה בְּרִיָּה דְרַבִּי זִירָא: כָּל הַבְּרָכוֹת כּוּלָּן, אִף עַל פִּי שְׂיֻצָא — מוֹצִיא. חוּץ מִבְּרַכַּת הַלֶּחֶם וּבְרַכַּת הַיַּיִן, שְׂאֵם לֹא יֻצָּא — מוֹצִיא, וְאֵם יֻצָּא — אֵינוֹ מוֹצִיא .

Continuing the discussion of performing an obligation on behalf of others, **Ahava, son of Rabbi Zeira, taught** the following *ba-raita*: With regard to **all the blessings, even if one** already recited a blessing for himself and has consequently **fulfilled** his own obligation, **he can** still recite a blessing for others and thereby **discharge** their obligation, as all Jews are responsible for one another. This is true with regard to all blessings **except for the blessing** recited **over bread and the blessing** recited **over wine**, both before and after their consumption. With regard to these blessings, **if he has not** yet **fulfilled** his own obligation, **he can discharge** the obligation of others as well, **but if he** already **fulfilled** his own obligation, **he cannot discharge** the obligation of others, as these blessings are recited in appreciation of physical enjoyment, and can only be recited by one who is actually deriving pleasure at the time.

20. Rashi, ad loc.

אע"פ שיצא מוציא - שהרי כל ישראל ערבין זה בזה למצות:
חוץ מברכת הלחם והיין - ושאר ברכת פירות וריחני שאינן חובה אלא שאסור ליהנות מן העולם הזה בלא ברכה
ובזו אין כאן ערבות שאינו חובה על האדם לא ליתנה ולא ליבריד:

21. Ritva, ad loc.

תני אהבה בריה דר' זירא וכו'. פ"י כל ברכות המצות אע"פ שיצא מוציא שאע"פ שהמצות מוטלות על כל א' הרי כל ישראל ערבין זה לזה וכולם כגוף א' וכערב הפורע חוב חבירו ובכלל זה גם ברכות דק"ש שש"צ מוציא י"ח מהם אפילו את הבקי ובלבד בצבור כדמוכח בפ' מי שמתו אבל בק"ש ותפלה אינו מוציא את הבקי כדאמר טעמא בירושלמי בדין הוא שיהא כל א' וא' משנן בפיו ושיהא כל א' מבקש רחמים על עצמו וכן בכל ברכות של שבה אע"פ שיצא מוציא:

In Spirituality

22. Tanya 32: The basis of the whole Torah is ve'ahavta lerei'acha komocha.

כי יסוד ושורש כל התורה הוא להגביה ולהעלות הנפש על הגוף מעלה מעלה עד עיקרא ושרשא דכל עלמין, וגם להמשיך אור אין סוף ברוך הוא בכנסת ישראל כמ"ש לקמן דהיינו במקור נשמות כל ישראל למהוי אחד באחד דווקא, ולא כשיש פירוד חס ושלום בנשמות, דקודשא בריך הוא לא שריא באתר פגים. וכמו שנאמר: (תפילת עמידה - הודאה): "ברכנו אבינו כלנו כאחד באור פניך"



23. To Heal a Fractured World, pages 93-94

The Torah survived as the law of the Jewish nation because Jews continued to see themselves as a nation, even though they had lost all visible

bases of nationhood. They did so because of the essentially mystical vision that even without sovereignty, outside the land of Israel and dispersed throughout the world, they remained 'a single body and a single soul', moved by one another's pain, sharing responsibility for their collective fate. More than any other factor, that belief preserved the Jewish nation through one of the deepest crises of its history, and sustains us today.