

I BELIEVE
A WEEKLY READING OF THE JEWISH BIBLE



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Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

I BELIEVE

A Weekly Reading of the Jewish Bible

The Goldberg-Hoschander
Family Edition

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In loving memory of

Marc Hoschander ז"ל

מלך בן אפרים ז"ל

a beloved husband, father, son, brother, and uncle

Melech exemplified the title of this work, "I Believe", by living his life as a true believer. His passion for Yiddishkeit and commitment to family and community as well as his unbridled zest for life inspired us all. May his neshama be repeatedly elevated by those who read and gain insight from Rabbi Sacks' Torah.

Marc, you remain in our hearts forever,

Ilana and Stuart Goldberg

Ethan, Jason, Aliza, Isabel, and Lea



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Foreword

Faith, Leadership, and Legacy

Isaac Herzog
President of the State of Israel

In 1991, prior to his installation as chief rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth, Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks *zt"l* and his family spent several months in Israel, preparing for the distinguished role which he would soon assume.

During their stay, in January 1991, the Gulf War with Iraq broke out. Rather than escaping the Scud missiles and immediately returning to the United Kingdom with his wife, Lady Elaine, and their three young children, Rabbi Sacks opted to demonstrate solidarity by staying where he felt he was needed the most – in Israel.

Remaining in Israel during the war was a display of courage and unity during a time of great distress. In my eyes, this was an act of true leadership – one of countless examples provided by Rabbi Sacks throughout his lifetime.

“Influence helps change people – into people who can change the world,” Rabbi Sacks once wrote. “Not all of us have power, but we all have influence. That is why we can each be a leader.”

Foreword

Rabbi Sacks' spiritual genius and passionate intellect influenced and inspired entire generations. His innate, God-given power of expression gave voice to the contribution of Judaism and the State of Israel to humanity at large, while lovingly representing Judaism's history and moral code. Over the years, he became a master articulator of the Jewish foundation of universal values, unapologetically verbalising a proud, dignified Jewish identity. He reached across the aisle and across different religions; he brought the Torah down from the heavens – to the smartphone generation. He succeeded in reaching the *neshama* – soul – of every individual open to, or in search of, meaning.

But perhaps even more striking is the fact that Rabbi Sacks' massive sphere of influence has grown continuously since his devastating passing in November 2020. Audiences previously unfamiliar with this prolific thinker were suddenly introduced to a transformative figure, who proudly practiced what he preached, and exemplified engaged, proactive, and positive Jewish living.

In *I Believe*, we are presented with stunning insight into the leader we had, and into the core of his theology and values. Each of Rabbi Sacks' intricate commentaries on the weekly Torah portion, followed by his succinct, deeply personal declarations about his most basic, fundamental truths, prompts the reader to seek out his or her own truths. Each concluding statement in *I Believe* challenges us to explore our own belief system. It draws us into a conversation with an individual who has passed on, but whose beloved voice and unique influence are stronger than ever.

This is leadership. It stimulates the mind and stirs the heart. The next stage – eliciting action – is entirely up to us.

Concluding his interpretation of *Parashat Bo*, Rabbi Sacks wrote the following:

I believe that I am a character in our people's story, with my own chapter to write, and so are we all. To be a Jew is to see yourself as part of that story, to make it live in our time, and to do your best to hand it on to those who will come after us.

May we all fully play our role in our people's story, fulfilling Rabbi Sacks' outstanding legacy, and influencing others to create their own.

Introduction

Finding Faith

When I was chief rabbi, I had wonderful friendships with other religious leaders, not least the two archbishops of Canterbury during my time. This was part of a profound healing that has taken place between Jews and Christians in the post-Holocaust era, after many centuries of estrangement and worse. We respected our differences, but we worked together on the things that mattered to all of us, from climate change to the alleviation of poverty.

On one occasion the then archbishop of Canterbury, George Carey, made a curious request. “We are embarking on a year of Reading the Bible. Do you think you might do something similar within the Jewish community?” “Of course,” I replied. “We do it every year. There’s only one word we might find problematic.” “Which word is that?” he asked. “The word ‘reading,’” I said. “We never simply read the Bible. We study it, interpret it, interpret other interpretations, argue, question, debate. The verb ‘reading’ does not quite do justice to the way we interact with the Torah. It is usually more active than that.”

I might have added that even the phrase *keriat haTorah*, which is usually taken to mean reading the Torah, probably does not mean that at all. *Keriat haTorah*, properly understood, is a performative act. It is a weekly recreation of the revelation at Mount Sinai. It is a covenant

Introduction

ratification ceremony like the one Moses performed at Sinai, “Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it to the people. They responded, ‘We will do and hear everything the Lord has said’” (Ex. 24:7), and like the covenant renewal ceremony celebrated by Ezra after the return from Babylon, as described in Nehemiah 8–9. *Keria* in this sense does not mean reading in the modern sense of sitting in an armchair with a book. It means declaring, proclaiming, establishing, and making known the law. It is like what happens in the British Parliament when the bill gets its final “reading,” that is, its ratification.

So the Torah isn’t something we merely read. It involves total engagement. And what has made that engagement possible is the rabbinic concept of Midrash. Midrash as I understand it (there are, of course, other ways) was the rabbinic response to the end of prophecy. So long as there were prophets – until the time of Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi – they brought the word of God to their generation. They heard it; they declared it; the divine word lived within the currents and tides of history.

But there came a time when there were no more prophets. How then could Jews bridge the gap between the world then, and the historical situation now? It was an immense crisis, and different groups of Jews responded in different ways. The Sadducees, as far as we can tell, confined themselves to the literal text. For them Torah did not renew itself generation after generation. It had been given once and that was enough.

Other groups, including those we know from the Dead Sea Scrolls, developed a kind of biblical exegesis known as *peshet*. There is a surface meaning of the text but there is also a hidden meaning, that often has to do with events or people in the present, or the end of days, that were assumed to be coming soon.

The Rabbis, however, developed the technique of Midrash which by close reading could give us insight into specifics of Jewish law (Midrash Halakha) or details of biblical narrative that are missing from the text (Midrash Aggada). So powerful was this form of engagement that the single greatest institution of rabbinic Judaism is named after it: the *beit midrash*, the “house” or “home” of Midrash.

Essentially, Midrash is the bridge across the abyss of time between the world of the original text, thirty to forty centuries ago, and our world

in the present time and place. Midrash asks not “What did the text mean then?” but rather, “What does the text mean to me in the me-here-now?” Behind Midrash are three fundamental principles of faith.

First, the Torah is God’s word, and just as God transcends time so does His word. It would be absurd, for instance, to suppose some human being more than three thousand years ago could have foreseen smartphones, social media, and being online, on-call, 24/7. Yet Shabbat speaks precisely to that phenomenon and to our need for a digital detox once a week. God speaks to us today in the unsuspected inflections of words He spoke thirty-three centuries ago.

Second, the covenant between God and our ancestors at Mount Sinai still holds today. It has survived the Babylonian exile, the Roman destruction, centuries of dispersion, and the Holocaust. The Torah is the text of that covenant, and it binds us still.

Third, the principles underlying the Torah have changed very little in the intervening centuries. To be sure, we no longer have a Temple or sacrifices. We no longer practice capital punishment. But the values that underlie the Torah are strikingly relevant to contemporary society and to our individual lives in the twenty-first-century secular time.

So, we don’t merely read the Torah. We bring to it our time, our lives, our most attentive listening, and our deepest existential commitments. My own beliefs have been formed in that ongoing conversation with the biblical text that is part of the Jewish mind and the Jewish week. Which is why, to emphasise this personal engagement, I’ve decided to call this year’s series of *Covenant & Conversation* “I Believe,” as a way of saying, this is how I have come to see the world, having listened as attentively as I can to the Torah and its message for me-here-now.

The Torah is not a systematic treatise about beliefs, but it is a unique way of seeing the world and responding to it. And in an age of moral darkness, its message still shines. So, at any rate, I believe. May it be a year of learning and growing for us all.



Editor's Note

The *I Believe* essays on the weekly *parasha* reading were the last written by Rabbi Sacks *zt"l* before his untimely passing on the twentieth of Heshvan, 5781. In the year in which they were written (5780), there were several double-*parashot* for which Rabbi Sacks wrote only one essay, and we are greatly saddened that he did not have the opportunity to complete the cycle for the publication of this volume. In order to publish a complete cycle here, we have chosen earlier essays for the missing *parashot*, which we believe are compatible with the theme of belief that runs throughout the volume. These are:

- *Tazria*: Othello, Twitter, and Mildewed Walls (5771)
- *Aḥarei Mot*: Holy People, Holy Land (5771)
- *Behar*: Real Responsibilities (5768)
- *Matot*: Keeping Our Word (5771)
- *Nitzavim*: Why Be Jewish? (5772)
- *Vezot Haberakha*: The Inheritance That Belongs to All (5779)

May his memory and Torah be a blessing for future generations.



Genesis
בראשית



Bereshit

The Genesis of Love

In *The Lonely Man of Faith*, Rabbi Soloveitchik drew our attention to the fact that there are two accounts of creation. The first is in Genesis 1, the second in Genesis 2–3, and they are significantly different.

In the first, God is called *Elokim*, in the second, *Hashem Elokim*. In the first, man and woman are created simultaneously: “Male and female He created them.” In the second, they are created sequentially: first man, then woman. In the first, humans are commanded to “fill the earth and subdue it.” In the second, the first human is placed in the garden “to serve it and preserve it.” In the first, humans are described as “in the image and likeness” of God. In the second, man is created from “the dust of the earth.”

The explanation, says Rabbi Soloveitchik, is that the Torah is describing two aspects of our humanity that he calls respectively, Majestic Man and Covenantal Man. We are majestic masters of creation: that is the message of Genesis 1. But we also experience existential loneliness, we seek covenant and connection: that is the message of Genesis 2.

There is, though, another strange duality – a story told in two quite different ways – that has to do not with creation but with human relationships. There are two different accounts of the way the first man gives a name to the first woman. This is the first:

Genesis

This time – bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
she shall be called “woman” (*isha*)
for she was taken from man (*ish*).

And this, many verses later, is the second:

And the man called his wife Eve (*Hava*)
because she was the mother of all life.

The differences between these two accounts are highly consequential.

1. In the first, the man names, not a person, but a class, a category. He uses not a name but a noun. The other person is, for him, simply “woman,” a type, not an individual. In the second, he gives his wife a proper name. She has become, for him, a person in her own right.
2. In the first, he emphasises their similarities – she is “bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh.” In the second, he emphasises the difference. She can give birth, he cannot. We can hear this in the very sound of the names. *Ish* and *isha* sound similar because they are similar. *Adam* and *Hava* do not sound similar at all.
3. In the first, it is the woman who is portrayed as dependent: “She was taken from man.” In the second, it is the other way around. *Adam*, from *adama*, represents mortality: “By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground (*haadama*) since from it you were taken.” It is *Hava* who redeems man from mortality by bringing new life into the world.
4. The consequences of the two acts of naming are completely different. After the first comes the sin of eating the forbidden fruit, and the punishment: exile from Eden. After the second, however, we read that God made for the couple “garments of skin” (“*or*” is spelled here with the letter *ayin*) and clothed them. This is a gesture of protection and love. In the school of R. Meir, they read this phrase as “garments of light” (“*or*” with an *alef*) (Genesis Rabba 20:21). God robed them with radiance.

Only *after* the man has given his wife a proper name do we find the Torah referring to God Himself by His proper name alone, namely *Hashem* (in Genesis 4). Until then He has been described as either *Elokim* or *Hashem Elokim* – *Elokim* being the impersonal aspect of God: God as law, God as power, God as justice. In other words, *our relationship to God parallels our relationship to one another. Only when we respect and recognise the uniqueness of another person are we capable of respecting and recognising the uniqueness of God Himself.*

Now let us return to the two creation accounts, this time not looking at what they tell us about humanity (as in *The Lonely Man of Faith*), but simply at what they tell us about creation.

In Genesis 1, God creates *things* – chemical elements, stars, planets, life forms, biological species. In Genesis 2–3, He creates *people*. In the first chapter, He creates systems, in the second chapter He creates relationships. It is fundamental to the Torah's view of reality that these things belong to different worlds, distinct narratives, separate stories, alternative ways of seeing reality.

There are differences in tone as well. In the first, creation involves no effort on the part of God. He simply speaks. He says, “Let there be,” and there was. In the second, He is actively engaged. When it comes to the creation of the first human, He does not merely say, “Let us make man in our image according to our likeness.” He performs the creation Himself, like a sculptor fashioning an image out of clay: “Then the Lord God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.”

In Genesis 1, God effortlessly summons the universe into being. In Genesis 2, He becomes a gardener: “Now the Lord God planted a garden...” We wonder why on earth God, who has just created the entire universe, should become a gardener. The Torah gives us the answer, and it is very moving: “The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.” God wanted to give man the dignity of work, of being a creator, not just a creation. And in case the man should view such labour as undignified, God became a gardener Himself to show that this work too is divine, and in performing it, man becomes God's partner in the work of creation.

Then comes the extraordinarily poignant verse, “The Lord God said, ‘It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.’” God feels for the existential isolation of the first man. There was no such moment in the previous chapter. There, God simply creates. Here, God empathises. He enters into the human mind. He feels what we feel. There is no such moment in any other ancient religious literature. What is radical about biblical monotheism is not just that there is only one God, not just that He is the source of all that exists, but that *God is closer to us than we are to ourselves*. God knew the loneliness of the first man before the first man knew it of himself.

That is what the second creation account is telling us. Creation of things is relatively easy, creation of relationships is hard. Look at the tender concern God shows for the first human beings in Genesis 2–3. He wants man to have the dignity of work. He wants man to know that work itself is divine. He gives man the capacity to name the animals. He cares when He senses the onset of loneliness. He creates the first woman. He watches, in exasperation, as the first human couple commit this first sin. Finally, when the man gives his wife a proper name, recognising for the first time that she is different from him and that she can do something he will never do, He clothes them both so that they will not go naked into the world. That is the God, not of creation (*Elokim*) but of love (*Hashem*).

That is what makes the dual account of the naming of the first woman so significant a parallel to the dual account of God’s creation of the universe. We have to create relationships before we encounter the God of relationship. We have to make space for the otherness of the human other to be able to make space for the otherness of the Divine Other. We have to give love before we can receive love.

In Genesis 1, God creates the universe. Nothing vaster can be imagined, and we keep discovering that the universe is bigger than we thought. In 2016, a study based on three-dimensional modelling of images produced by the Hubble space telescope concluded that there were between ten and twenty times as many galaxies as astronomers had previously thought. There are more than a hundred stars for every grain of sand on earth.

Bereshit: The Genesis of Love

And yet, almost in the same breath as it speaks of the panoply of creation, the Torah tells us that God took time to breathe the breath of life into the first human, give him dignified work, enter his loneliness, make him a wife, and robe them both with garments of light when the time came for them to leave Eden and make their way in the world.

The Torah is telling us something very powerful. Never think of people as things. Never think of people as types: they are individuals. Never be content with creating systems: care also about relationships.

I believe that relationships are where our humanity is born and grows, flowers and flourishes. It is by loving people that we learn to love God and feel the fullness of His love for us.