

# COVENANT AND CONVERSATION

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office of the  
CHIEF RABBI

THOUGHTS ON THE WEEKLY PARSHA FROM THE CHIEF RABBI

July 31<sup>st</sup> 2010

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## Greatness and Humility

**The Power of powers  
cares for the powerless.**

**The infinitely great shows  
concern for the small.**

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concern for the small. The Being at the heart of being listens to those at the margins: the orphan, the widow, the stranger, the poor, the outcast, the neglected. On this idea, the third century teacher Rabbi Yochanan built the following homily (Babylonian Talmud, Megillah 31a):

A sequence of verses in this week's sedra gave rise to a beautiful Talmudic passage – one that has found a place in the siddur. It is among the readings we say after the Evening Service on Saturday night as Shabbat comes to an end. Here is the text on which it is based:

“For the Lord your G-d is G-d of gods and Lord of lords, the great, mighty and awe-inspiring G-d, who shows no favoritism and accepts no bribe. He upholds the cause of the orphan and widow, and loves the stranger, giving him food and clothing. (Deut. 10: 17-18)”

The juxtaposition of the two verses – the first about G-d's supremacy, the second about His care for the low and lonely – could not be more striking. The Power of powers cares for the powerless. The infinitely great shows

Rabbi Yochanan said, Wherever you find the greatness of the Holy One, blessed be He, there you find His humility. This is written in the Torah, repeated in the Prophets, and stated a third time in the Writings. It is written in the Torah: “For the Lord your G-d is G-d of gods and Lord of lords, the great, mighty and awe-inspiring G-d, who shows no favoritism and accepts no bribe.” Immediately afterwards it is written, “He upholds the cause of the orphan and widow, and loves the stranger, giving him food and clothing.” It is repeated in the Prophets, as it says: “So says the High and Exalted One, who lives for ever and whose name is Holy: I live in a high and holy place, but also with the contrite and lowly in spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly, and to revive the heart of the contrite.” It is stated a third time in the Writings: “Sing to G-d, make music for His name, extol Him who rides the clouds – G-d is His name – and exult before Him.” Immediately afterwards it is written: “Father of the fatherless and judge of widows, is G-d in His holy habitation.”

## To care only for ourselves and those immediately dependent on us is not “the way of G-d”.

It is this passage that found its way into the (Ashkenazi) service at the end of Shabbat. Its presence there is to remind that that, as the day of rest ends and we return to our weekday concerns, we should not be so caught up in our own interests that we forget others less favourably situated. To care only for ourselves and those immediately dependant on us is not “the way of G-d”.

One of the more unusual aspects of being a Chief Rabbi is that one comes to know people one otherwise might not. These were three moments that made a deep impression on me.

From time to time Elaine and I give dinner parties for people within, and also outside, the Jewish community. Usually, at the end, the guests thank the hosts. Only once, though, did a guest not only thank us but also asked to be allowed to go into the kitchen to thank those who had made and served the meal. It was a fine act of sensitivity. No less interesting was who it was who did so. It was John Major, a British Prime Minister. Greatness is humility.

The oldest synagogue in Britain is Bevis Marks, in the heart of the City of London. Built in 1701, it was the first purpose-built synagogue in London, created by the Spanish and Portuguese Jews who were the first to return to England (or practice their Judaism in public: some had been marranos) after Oliver Cromwell gave permission in 1656 for Jews to return after their expulsion by Edward I in 1290.

Modelled on the Great Synagogue in Amsterdam, it has stayed almost unchanged ever since. Only the addition of electric lights has marked the passing of time – and even so, on special occasions, services are candle-lit as they were in those early days.

For the tercentenary service in 2001, Prince Charles came to the synagogue. There he met members of the community as well as leaders of Anglo-Jewry. What was impressive is that he spent as much time talking to the young men and women who were doing security duty as he did to the great and good of British Jewry. For security reasons, people volunteer to stand guard at communal events – part of the work of one of our finest organizations, the Community Security Trust. Often, people walk past them, hardly noticing their presence. But Prince Charles did notice them, and made them feel as important as anyone else on that glittering occasion. Greatness is humility.

Sarah Levene (not her real name) died tragically young. She and her husband had been blessed by G-d with great success. They were wealthy; but they did not spend their money on themselves. They gave tzedakah on a massive scale – within and beyond the Jewish community, in Britain, Israel and elsewhere. They were among the greatest philanthropists of our time.

When she died, among those who felt most bereaved were the waiters and waitresses of a well-known hotel in Israel where they often stayed. It transpired that she had come to know all of them – where they came from, what their family situation was, the difficulties they were going through, the problems they faced. She remembered not only their names but also the names of their spouses and children. Whenever any of them needed help, she made sure it came, quietly, unobtrusively. It was a habit she had wherever she went.

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**whose greatness lay not just in the fact that He was Creator of the universe and shaper of history,**

**but that “He upholds the cause of the orphan and widow, and loves the stranger, giving him food and clothing.”**

After her death I discovered how she and her husband came to be married. He was older than she was, a friend of her parents. She had some weeks free in the summer before the start of the academic year, and Mr Levene (not his real name) gave her a holiday job. One evening after work they were about to join her parents for a meal. In the street they passed a beggar. Mr Levene, punctilious about the mitzvah of tzedakah, reached into his pocket and gave the man a coin. As they were walking on, Sarah asked him to lend her some money – a fairly large sum, which she promised she would repay at the end of the week when he paid her wages.

He did so. She then ran back to the beggar and gave him the money. “Why did you do that?” he asked, “I had already given him some money”. “What you gave him”, she said, “was enough to help him for today but not enough to make a difference to his life.”

At the end of the week, Mr Levene gave her her wages. She handed him back most of the money, to repay him for the sum he had lent her. “I will accept the money,” he told her, “because I do not want to rob you of your mitzvah.” But – as he himself told me after her death, “It was then that I decided to ask her to marry me – because her heart was bigger than mine.”

Throughout their marriage they spent as much time and energy on giving their money to charitable causes as they did on earning it. They were responsible for many of the most outstanding educational, medical and environmental projects of our time. I have had the privilege of knowing other philanthropists – but none who knew the names of the children of the waiters at the hotel where they stayed; none who cared more for those others hardly noticed or who gave help more quietly, more effectively, more humanly. Greatness is humility.

This idea – counter-intuitive, unexpected, life-changing – is one of the great contributions of the Torah to Western civilization and it is set out in the words of our sedra, when Moses told the people about the “G-d of gods and Lord of lords, the great, mighty and awe-inspiring G-d” whose greatness lay not just in the fact that He was Creator of the universe and shaper of history, but that “He upholds the cause of the orphan and widow, and loves the stranger, giving him food and clothing.” Those who do this are the true men and women of G-d.

## **Religions tell us who we are and what we need to be**

**The Times - Credo - 2009**

Atheists tend to think that religion is about God. Of course it is. But if that is all it is, it would hardly explain religion's tenacity and power, its hold on the human imagination, and its strange capacity both to unite and divide.

Religion is also about identity. It is an answer to a set of questions science cannot answer, perhaps cannot even understand. Who am I? Why am I here? Where do I belong? Of what story am I a part? How am I connected to those who came before me? How then shall I live?

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## You don't have to be French to love Flaubert, Russian to admire Tolstoy, or Japanese to enjoy a Haiku.

The great religions answer these questions against the broadest possible background and in the richest possible way. They celebrate identity in stories, rituals, celebrations, prayers and holy days. They speak of the universe, creation, revelation and redemption. They show us role models of sages and saints, heroes and heroines, exemplary lives. They tell us who we are and what we are called on to be.

Religions are not the only source of identity. Some find theirs in nationhood, others in their work, especially if they see it as a calling. Some find it in a cause. Yet others find it in ethnicity. Some even find it in the football team they support (remember Bill Shankly's "Some people believe football is a matter of life and death, but I can assure you it's much, much more important than that"?).

Should we even have identities? There have been people who said No. There were universalists like Socrates who said, "I am not an Athenian or a Greek, but a citizen of the world". There are cosmopolitans whose identity, like my grandmother's recipe for chicken soup, is "a little bit of this, a little bit of that." There are people who change lifestyles the way other people change their clothes. There are even postmodernists who deny identity altogether. Life for them, like advertising on television, is simply a series of episodes with no connecting thread.

One thing is clear: identity has become problematic in the modern world. The sociologist Peter Berger once defined modernity as a state of permanent identity crisis. Many of the secular alternatives to religious identity proved terrifying in their consequences. National identity led to nationalism and two world wars. Ethnicity led to racism and the Holocaust. The "cause" led, among other things, to communism and Stalinist Russia. Even football, though more harmless than most, can lead to violence. As for those who deny identity, it's quite hard to be everyone in general without being anyone in particular. Even cosmopolitans tend to be comfortable in the company of other cosmopolitans, and feel threatened in the presence of other identities.

Identity can, of course, be a prison. It can lead to people who divide the world into two, Us and Them, the children of light against the children of darkness, seeing reality like a John Wayne Western. Identity is especially dangerous when it's a way of defining yourself as a victim. That leads to anger, aggression, self-pity and revenge.

But for most of us, identity is a way of being at home in the world. It helps to be able to say, this is who I am, this is my story, this is what I am called on to do and this is who I aspire to be. The best identities speak to the better angels of our nature, especially when they include saintly role models, high ideals, and the imperative to love the stranger. The highest identity of all is set out in the first chapter of Genesis when it describes the human person as the image and likeness of God. That is the counterbalance to all narrow tribalisms that deny the humanity and dignity of those not like us.

The paradox of identity is that it is precisely when we speak from within our particularity that we strike a chord with others of different particularity. You don't have to be French to love Flaubert, Russian to admire Tolstoy, or Japanese to enjoy a Haiku. It's within our particular identities that we learn to live, love, create communities, cultivate responsibilities, feel pride without arrogance, and respect others whose identity is as precious to them as ours is to us. If that's what being a Jew, or Christian, or Muslim is then we should feel grateful that we each have our way of being at home in the glorious diversity of humankind.

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*Jonathan Sacks*

