

Fill Your Own Cup 5786 – Summer Series*Power and Powerlessness in Jewish Texts – Session One***1) Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, Not in God's Name: Confronting Religious Violence, pp. 4**

Not all at once but ultimately it [Judaism] made extraordinary claims. It said that every human being, regardless of colour, culture, class or creed, was in the image and likeness of God. The supreme Power intervened in history to liberate the supremely powerless. A society is judged by the way it treats its weakest and most vulnerable members. Life is sacred. Murder is both a crime and a sin. Between people there should be a covenantal bond of righteousness and justice, mercy and compassion, forgiveness and love. Though in its early books the Hebrew Bible commanded war, within centuries its prophets, Isaiah and Micah, became the first voices to speak of peace as an ideal. A day would come, they said, when the peoples of the earth would turn their swords into ploughshares, their spears into pruning hooks, and wage war no more. According to the Hebrew Bible, Abrahamic monotheism entered the world as a rejection of imperialism and the use of force to make some men masters and others slaves. Abraham himself, the man revered by 2.4 billion Christians, 1.6 billion Muslims and 13 million Jews, ruled no empire, commanded no army, conquered no territory, performed no miracles and delivered no prophecies.

2) Rabbi Shlomo Riskin: Necessary Power: A Rejoinder to Jonathan Sacks, Jewish Review of Books, Fall 2016

<https://jewishreviewofbooks.com/articles/2291/necessary-power-a-rejoinder-to-jonathan-sacks/>

And when Rabbi Sacks writes, "It is not our task" (and it was not Abraham's task) "to conquer or convert the world or to enforce uniformity of belief. It is our task to be a blessing to the world. The use of religion for political ends is not righteousness but idolatry," it seems to me that he oversimplifies matters. Yes, the task of Abraham and his progeny is to be a blessing to the world but that blessing is defined as commanding the future generations to embody and teach compassionate righteousness and moral justice. This is the necessary corollary to the biblical dictum that God created the human being in His image, and the major moral principle of the Bible, "You shall love your neighbor as you love yourself," because he is like yourself (Lev. 19:18). As both Rashi and Maimonides describe him, Abraham was the consummate missionary preaching ethical monotheism wherever he went. As such, he became the model for the Jewish mission to the world. Even before the Revelation at Sinai, Israel was charged with being a kingdom of priest-teachers and a holy nation, and Isaiah, Micah, Zechariah, and Zephaniah all speak of the world accepting at least ethical monotheism at the end of days and our function as a light unto the nations. Note well, however, that none of them speak of uniformity of belief. In the words of Micah, "Though all the people walk / Each in the ways of its gods, / We will walk / In the name of God our God / Forever and ever." (4:5).

Finally, in his response, Rabbi Sacks writes "Judaism never advocated powerlessness, but it did protest attributing religious significance to power." I would argue, on the contrary, that power is religiously significant if and only if it is used to religiously significant ends. This is why we have the concept of a milchemet mitzva, an obligatory, defensive war. It is also why our sages added the al ha-nissim prayer to commemorate the victories of the Maccabees on Hanukkah, and it is why we recite Hallel now on Yom Yerushalayim. The American founding fathers, who gave us the separation of church and state, understood this. They saw the revolution against England as an expression of Divine Service. Indeed, Benjamin Franklin's initial draft for the Great Seal of the United States pictured the Egyptians drowning in the Reed Sea while the triumphant Hebrews rose above the turbulent waves, with the caption reading "Rebellion to tyrants is obedience to God."

Power often corrupts and absolute power often corrupts absolutely, but the greatest corruption of all comes with the withholding of power, which grants victory to tyrants.

I. Avraham as Test Case

3) Genesis 12:1-9

- 1) God said to Abram, "Go forth from your native land and from your father's house to the land that I will show you.
- 2) I will make of you a great nation, And I will bless you; I will make your name great, And you shall be a blessing.
- 3) I will bless those who bless you And curse him that curses you; And all the families of the earth Shall bless themselves by you."
- 4) Abram went forth as God had commanded him, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he left Haran.
- 5) Abram took his wife Sarai and his brother's son Lot, and all the wealth that they had amassed, and the persons that they had acquired in Haran; and they set out for the land of Canaan. When they arrived in the land of Canaan,
- 6) Abram passed through the land as far as the site of Shechem, at the terebinth of Moreh. The Canaanites were then in the land.
- 7) God appeared to Abram and said, "I will assign this land to your offspring." And he built an altar there to God who had appeared to him.
- 8) From there he moved on to the hill country east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east; and he built there an altar to God and invoked God by name.
- 9) Then Abram journeyed by stages toward the Negeb

בראשית יב-א-ט

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל-אַבְרָם לְךָ-לֵךְ מֵאֶרֶץ
וּמִמִּלְדָּתְךָ וּמִבֵּית אָבִיךָ אֶל-הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אֲרָאָךְ:
ב וְאָעֲשֶׂיךָ לְגוֹי גָּדוֹל וְאֲבָרְכְךָ וְאֲגַדְלֶה שְׁמִי וְהָיָה
בְרָכָה:
ג וְאֲבָרְכָה מְבָרְכֶיךָ וּמְקַלְלֶיךָ אֵאָר וְנִבְרַכְוּ בְךָ כָּל
מִשְׁפְּחֹת הָאָדָמָה:
ד וְיִלְדְךָ אֲבָרְכֶם כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר אֱלֹהֵי יְהוָה וְיִלְדְךָ אִתּוֹ
לֹט וְאַבְרָם בְּן-חַמֶּשׁ שָׁנִים וְשִׁבְעִים שָׁנָה
בְּצֵאתוֹ מִחָרָן:
ה וַיִּקַּח אֲבָרָם אֶת-שָׂרַי אִשְׁתּוֹ וְאֶת-לֹט בְּנֵ-
אָחִיו וְאֶת-כָּל-רִכְוֹשׁ אֲשֶׁר רָכְשׁוּ וְאֶת-הַנֶּגְפִשׁ
אֲשֶׁר-עָשׂוּ בְּחָרָן וַיֵּצְאוּ לְלֶכֶת אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן וַיָּבֹאוּ
אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן:
ו וַיַּעֲבֹר אֲבָרָם בְּאֶרֶץ עַד מְקוֹם שְׁכֵם עַד אֵלּוּן
מוֹרֶה וַהֲכַנְעֵנִי אֵץ בְּאֶרֶץ:
ז וַיֵּרָא יְהוָה אֶל-אַבְרָם וַיֹּאמֶר לִזְרַעְךָ אֶתְּנוּ אֶת-
הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת נִיבְרָ שֵׁם מִזְבֵּחַ לַיהוָה הַנִּרְאָה
אֵלָיו:
ח וַיַּעֲתֶק מִשֵּׁם הַהָרָה מִקְדָּם לְבֵית-אֵל נִיט
אֶהְיֶה בֵית-אֵל מִיָּמִים וְהָיָה מִקְדָּם נִיבְרָ-שֵׁם מִזְבֵּחַ
לַיהוָה וַיִּקְרָא בְשֵׁם יְהוָה:
ט וַיִּסַּע אֲבָרָם הַלֹּדֶף וַיִּסְוַע הַנֶּגְבָה:

4) Genesis 18:16-33

- 16) The men set out from there and looked down toward Sodom, Abraham walking with them to see them off.
- 17) Now God had said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do,
- 18) since Abraham is to become a great and populous nation and all the nations of the earth are to bless themselves by him?
- 19) For I have singled him out, that he may instruct his children and his posterity to keep the way of God by doing what is just and right, in order that God may bring about for Abraham what He has promised him."
- 20) Then God said, "The outrage of Sodom and Gomorrah is so great, and their sin so grave!
- 21) I will go down to see whether they have acted altogether according to the outcry that has reached Me; if not, I will take note."
- 22) The men went on from there to Sodom, while Abraham remained standing before God.
- 23) Abraham came forward and said, "Will You sweep away the innocent along with the guilty?"

בראשית יח-טו-לג

וַיִּקְמוּ מִשֵּׁם הָאֲנָשִׁים וַיִּשְׁקֹפוּ עַל-פְּנֵי סְדֹם
וְאֲבָרָהָם הֵלֵךְ עִמָּם לִשְׁלָחָם:
יז וַיְהִינָה אָמַר הַמַּכְסָּה אֵלַי מֵאַבְרָהָם אֲשֶׁר אָנֹכִי
עֹשֶׂה:
יח וְאַבְרָהָם הָיָה יְהִינָה לְגוֹי גָּדוֹל וְעַצְיוֹם וְנִבְרַכְוּ
בְּךָ כָּל גּוֹיֵי הָאָרֶץ:
יט כִּי יִדְעֹתַי לַמַּעַן אֲשֶׁר יִצְוֶה אֶת-בְּנָיו וְאֶת-
בֵּיתוֹ אַחֲרָיו וְשָׁמְרוּ דְרָכַי יְהוָה לַעֲשׂוֹת צְדָקָה
וּמִשְׁפָּט לַמַּעַן הִבְרִיא יְהוָה עַל-אַבְרָהָם אֶת
אֲשֶׁר-דִּבֶּר עָלָיו:
כ וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה וַעֲקַת סְדֹם וְעֹמֶרָה כִּי-גִבָּה
וְחַטָּאתָם כִּי כָבְדָה מְאֹד:
כא אֲרַדְהָ-נָּא וְאַרְאֶה הַכְּצַעֲקוֹתָהּ הַנִּבְאָה אֵלַי
עָשׂוּ וְאִם-לֹא אֲדַעָה:
כב וַיִּפְּנוּ מִשֵּׁם הָאֲנָשִׁים וַיֵּלְכוּ סְדֹמָה וְאַבְרָהָם
עֹדְנָו עֹמֵד לִפְנֵי יְהוָה:
כג וַיִּגַּשׁ אֲבָרָהָם וַיֹּאמֶר הֲאֵף תִּסְפָּה צְדִיק עִם-
רָשָׁע:

24) What if there should be fifty innocent within the city; will You then wipe out the place and not forgive it for the sake of the innocent fifty who are in it?
 25) Far be it from You to do such a thing, to bring death upon the innocent as well as the guilty, so that innocent and guilty fare alike. Far be it from You! Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?"
 26) And God answered, "If I find within the city of Sodom fifty innocent ones, I will forgive the whole place for their sake."
 27) Abraham spoke up, saying, "Here I venture to speak to my Lord, I who am but dust and ashes:
 28) What if the fifty innocent should lack five? Will You destroy the whole city for want of the five?" And He answered, "I will not destroy if I find forty-five there."
 29) But he spoke to Him again, and said, "What if forty should be found there?" And He answered, "I will not do it, for the sake of the forty."
 30) And he said, "Let not my Lord be angry if I go on: What if thirty should be found there?" And He answered, "I will not do it if I find thirty there."
 31) And he said, "I venture again to speak to my Lord: What if twenty should be found there?" And He answered, "I will not destroy, for the sake of the twenty."
 32) And he said, "Let not my Lord be angry if I speak but this last time: What if ten should be found there?" And He answered, "I will not destroy, for the sake of the ten."
 33) When God had finished speaking to Abraham, He departed; and Abraham returned to his place.

כד אולי יש חמשים צדיקים בתוך העיר האף תספה ולא תשא למקום למען חמשים הצדיקים אשר בקרבה:
 כה חללה לך מעשת | בדבר הזה להמית צדיק עם-רשע והנה כצדיק פרשע חללה לך השפט פל-הארץ לא יעשה משפט:
 כו ויאמר יהוה אם-אמצא בסדם חמשים צדיקים בתוך העיר ונשאתי לכל-המקום בעבורם:
 כז ויען אברהם ויאמר הנה-נא הואלת לי לדבר אל-אדני ואנכי עפר ואפר:
 כח אולי יחסרון חמשים הצדיקים חמשה המשחית בחמשה את-פל-העיר ויאמר לא אשחית אם-אמצא שם ארבעים וחמשה:
 כט ויסף עוד לדבר אליו ויאמר אולי ימצאון שם ארבעים ויאמר לא אעשה בעבור הארבעים:
 ל ויאמר אל-נא יחר לאדני ואדברה אולי ימצאון שם שלשים ויאמר לא אעשה אם-אמצא שם שלשים:
 לא ויאמר הנה-נא הואלת לי לדבר אל-אדני אולי ימצאון שם עשרים ויאמר לא אשחית בעבור העשרים:
 לב ויאמר אל-נא יחר לאדני ואדברה אד-הפעם אולי ימצאון שם עשרה ויאמר לא אשחית בעבור העשרה:
 לג ויגדף יהוה כאשר פלה לדבר אל-אברהם ואברהם שב למקומו:

5) Sfat Emet Lech Lecha 5632, Rabbi Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter (19th C Poland)
 According to the holy Zohar, this itself is [Abraham's] praise that he heard the statement "Go you," uttered by God to all people at all times. As it is written: "Woe to those who sleep in their caves." Yet Avraham Avinu, (Abraham, our father) may he rest in peace, heard and obeyed. And because of this [God's] utterance is called after him alone, for nobody else but him heard it. This itself is certainly [his] praise, that he was ready to hear [God's] utterance.

שפת אמת לך לך
 ובזוהר הקדוש נראה כי זה עצמו השבח ששמע זה המאמר לך לך שנאמר מהשם יתברך לכל האנשים תמיד כמו שכתוב וי לאינון דשינתא בחוריהון ואברהם אבינו עליו השלום שמע וקיבל. וממילא נקרא רק הדיבור אליו כי הלא לא נמצא מיוחד לשמוע. רק הוא אבל בודאי זה השבח בעצמו שהיה מוכן לקבל המאמר

II. Sinai as Test Case

6) Exodus 19:1-9, 16 - 20
 1) On the third new moon after the Israelites had gone forth from the land of Egypt, on that very day, they entered the wilderness of Sinai. 2) Having journeyed from Rephidim, they entered the wilderness of Sinai and encamped in the wilderness. Israel encamped there in front of the mountain, 3) and Moses went up to God. God called to him from the mountain, saying, "Thus shall you

שמות פרק יט:א-כה
 א בחדש, השלישי, לצאת בני-ישראל, מארץ מצרים--ביום הזה, באו מדבר סיני. ב ויסעו מרפידים, ויבאו מדבר סיני, ויחנו, במדבר; ויחן-שם ישראל, נגד ההר. ג ומשה עלה, אל-האלהים; ויקרא אליו יהוה, מן-ההר לאמר, פה תאמר לבית יעקב, ויגיד לבני

say to the house of Jacob and declare to the children of Israel: 4) 'You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to Me. 5) Now then, if you will obey Me faithfully and keep My covenant, you shall be My treasured possession among all the peoples. Indeed, all the earth is Mine, 6) but you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words that you shall speak to the children of Israel."

7) Moses came and summoned the elders of the people and put before them all that God had commanded him. 8) All the people answered as one, saying, "**All that God has spoken we will do!**" And Moses brought back the people's words to the Lord. 9) And God said to Moses, "I will come to you in a thick cloud, in order that the people may hear when I speak with you and so trust you ever after." Then Moses reported the people's words to the Lord...

16) On the third day, as morning dawned, there was thunder, and lightning, and a dense cloud upon the mountain, and a very loud blast of the horn; and all the people who were in the camp trembled. 17) Moses led the people out of the camp toward God, and they took their places at the bottom of the mountain. 18) **Now Mount Sinai was all in smoke, for God had come down upon it in fire; the smoke rose like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled violently.** 19) The blare of the horn grew louder and louder. **As Moses spoke, God answered him in thunder (lit. a voice).** 20) God came down upon Mount Sinai, on the top of the mountain, and God called Moses to the top of the mountain and Moses went up.

ישראל. ד. אתם ראיתם, אשר עשיתי למצרים; ואשא אתכם על-כנפי נשרים, ואבא אתכם אלי. ה. ועתה, אם-שמועתשמעו בקלי, ושמרתם, את-בריתי--והייתם לי סגולה מכל-העמים, כי-לי כל-הארץ. ו. ואתם תהיו-לי ממלכת כהנים, וגוי קדוש: אלה, הדברים, אשר תדבר, אל-בני ישראל. ז. ויבא משה, ויקרא לזקני העם; וישם לפניהם, את כל-הדברים האלה, אשר צוהו, יהוה. ח. ויענו כל-העם וחדו ויאמרו, כל אשר-דבר יהוה נעשה; וישב משה את-דברי העם, אל-יהוה. ט. ויאמר יהוה אל-משה, הנה אנכי בא אליך בעב הענן, בעבור לשמע העם בדברי עמך, וגם-בך באמינו לעולם; ונגד משה את-דברי העם, אל-יהוה ...

טו ויאמר, אל-העם, הויו נכנים, לשלישת ימים: אל-תגשו, אל-אשה. טז ויהי ביום השלישי בהית הבקר, ויהי קולת וברקים וענן כבד על-ההר, וקל שפר, תזק מאד; ויחרד כל-העם, אשר במחנה. יז. ויוצא משה את-העם לקראת האלהים, מן-המחנה; ויחיצבו, במחמתת ההר. יח. ויהו סיני, עשן בלו, מפני אשר ירד עליו יהוה, באש; ויעל עשנו כעשן הכבשן, ויחרד כל-ההר מאד. יט. ויהי קול השפר, הולך וזקק מאד; משה ידבר, והאלהים יענו בקול. כ. ויחד יהוה על-הר סיני, אל-ראש ההר; ויקרא יהוה למשה אל-ראש ההר, ויעל משה.

7) Babylonian Talmud Tractate Shabbat 88a

And they stood at the bottom of the Mountain – Rav Avdimi the son of Hama the son of Hasa: This teaches us that God hung the mountain over their heads and said to them: If you accept the Torah –that is good, however if you do not – you will be buried here on this spot.

Rav Aha the son of Yaakov said: This is a great claim against the Torah! (i.e. The entire covenant is now in question, as the people did not accept willingly)

Rava says – even so, the people accepted the Torah in the days of Achashverosh. As is says: *The Jews undertook and irrevocably obligated themselves, they obligated themselves in the Torah that they had already accepted.*

תלמוד בבלי מסכת שבת דף פח.

+שמות יט+ ויתיצבו בתחתית ההר, אמר רב אבדימי בר חמא בר חסא: מלמד שכפה הקדוש ברוך הוא עליהם את ההר כגיגית, ואמר להם: אם אתם מקבלים התורה - מוטב, ואם לאו - שם תהא קבורתכם. אמר רב אחא בר יעקב: מכאן מודעא רבה לאורייתא.

אמר רבא: אף על פי כן, הדור קבלוה בימי אחשוורוש. דכתיב +אסתר ט+ קימו וקבלו היהודים, קיימו מה שקיבלו כבר