

Rabbi Sacks and the State of Israel

1. Rabbi Sacks' positive perspective on Israel. Yom Haatzmaut Drasha 2012. <https://youtu.be/2rVpGSeveIM>

2. Will we have Jewish Grandchildren? Pg.98-99

Israel is now the only place in which a total Jewish experience is possible. It is the one country where Jews constitute a majority of the population. It is the only context in which they exercise political sovereignty. It is the sole place where Judaism belongs to the public domain, where Hebrew is the language of everyday life and where the Sabbath and the festivals form the rhythm of the calendar. It is the land of our origins, the terrain on which Joshua and David fought and Amos and Isaiah delivered their prophecies. It is the birthplace of Jewish memory and the home of Jewish destiny.

It is impossible to overestimate the impact of Israel on the formation of Jewish identity. Jewish existence, which in today's diaspora may appear random, arbitrary and disconnected, in Israel takes on coherence. There the Bible comes alive against the backdrop of its own landscape and its own language, once again a living tongue. There, too, the concept of the Jewish people becomes vivid in the visible drama of a society gathered together as Moses said it would be - 'from the ends of the heavens'. Above all, it is in Jerusalem that the mystery of Israel becomes tangible. Here is the old-new heart of the old-new people, the place from which, said Maimonides, the Divine presence never moved. Jews who spend time in Israel, whether they settle or not, are changed.

...In the modern diaspora ... Judaism has been confined to the private domain of home, school and synagogue. Israel restores to Jewish life what it has lost elsewhere: a public dimension. Within its borders, Jewishness is out there in the street as well as in here, in the soul. That is why spending time in Israel is today essential to a full understanding of what it means to be a Jew anywhere in the world.

3. Future Tense

The first challenge of Zionism, the creation of a Jewish state, has been brilliantly achieved. The second challenge, the creation of a Jewish society has hardly been tackled at all... (pg.158-9)

...Yet there is no single national narrative accompanying the modern state of Israel. Instead, there has been a succession of them. The earliest invoked scenes of heroic resistance, from Massada to the defence of Tel Hai and Yosef Trumpeldor's last words (taken from Roman, not Jewish, sources), 'It is good to die for our country.' Then came Ben Gurion's narrative of a people whose history is recorded in the Bible, read not as sacred scripture, but as national literature. This told the story of a people that once made history as a nation in its land, then disappeared from history, living in suspended animation for two thousand years, before coming to life again in the twentieth century.

In the 1960s, after the Eichmann trial brought the Holocaust into Israeli discourse, came the story of Shoa u-Gevurah, destruction and-rebirth. As Israel began the long peace process of Oslo, yet another voice began to be heard, that of post-Zionism, meaning an Israel without Jewish identity, a liberal democracy with procedures but no traditions. The one voice that might have supplied an enduring narrative, Judaism itself, was more or less ruled out in principle, because Judaism is a religion, and Israel is a secular state. (pg.171)

<https://youtu.be/jjcfUtMWhXQ>

4. A New Zionism (Future Tense 155-157)

On 20 January 2009, a bright crisp winter morning, Barack Obama was sworn in as the forty-fourth President of the United States of America, the first African-American to hold that office. It was a historic moment...

It was a quintessentially twenty-first century speech. But at the same time it followed the protocol - the language, imagery and key ideas - of almost every other presidential inaugural address since Washington's first in 1789. What Barack Obama was doing was something that sets America's political culture apart from all others in the contemporary world. He was renewing the covenant, a form of politics born in the Hebrew Bible."

Covenant had been part of America's self-definition since the beginning. It was present in the Mayflower Compact (1620) whose signatories agreed to 'Covenant and Combine ourselves together into a Civil Body Politic'. It was the theme of John Winthrop's speech to his seven hundred fellow Puritans aboard the Arabella in 1630. 'Thus stands the case between God and us,' he said. "We are entered into a covenant with him for this work.' The people must pledge themselves to follow the counsel of Micah, to 'do justly, to love mercy, to walk humbly with our God'. Then 'we shall find that the God of Israel is among us'...

The biblical story of exodus and redemption, freedom and responsibility, became the American narrative. Americans saw themselves as the new Israel, and America as the promised land, Like the Israelites in the days of Moses, they had escaped from their own Egypt, England, and from a tyrannical pharaoh, George III. They had crossed their Red Sea, the Atlantic, and, like the Israelites, they were about to found a new kind of society, one that would serve as a moral example to the world.

Virtually every American president has explicitly or implicitly rehearsed that story at his inauguration. Jefferson did so in 1805: 'I shall need, too, the favour of that Being in whose hands we are, who led our fathers, as Israel of old, from their native land and planted them in a country flowing with all the necessities and comforts of life.' So did Lyndon Baines Johnson in 1965: 'They came here, the exile and the stranger They made a covenant with this land.' In 1997, Bill Clinton said: 'Guided by the ancient vision of a promised land, let us set our sights upon a land of new promise.'

... other country uses language of this kind, drawn as it is from the books of Exodus, Deuteronomy and the prophets, certainly not Israel, whose political culture is secular and drawn from other sources.

...The supreme irony of contemporary politics is that the United States of America has a Judaic political culture; the state of Israel does not. I believe that the time has come for this to change. Israel has ignored its own finest gift to politics, the concept of covenant and all that goes with it.

... both before and after the revelation when they hear the Ten Commandments. Before: 'The people all responded together, "We will do everything the Lord has said" (Exod. 19:8). After: 'They responded with one voice, "Everything the Lord has said we will do" (Exod. 24:3). This was Israel's great foundational moment, its birth as a body politic, a nation under the sovereignty of God.

What was transacted at Sinai was not a contract. It was a covenant... A contract is a transaction. A covenant is a relationship. A contract is about interests... A contract can be terminated by mutual consent when it is no longer in the interests of the parties to continue. A covenant binds the parties even in, especially in difficult times. That is because a covenant is not about interests, but about loyalty, fidelity, holding together when everything else is driving you apart. That is why contracts benefit, but covenants transform. Covenants are not about power at all. They are about a mutually binding promise, a moral commitment. (163)

... Social contract creates a state. Social covenant creates a society (165)

Jews survived in exile for two thousand years... because they were a society before they were a state. They had laws before they had a land. They had a social covenant before they had a social contract. So, even if the contract failed, the covenant remained. Even if they lost their state, they were still bound together as a covenanted nation. (167)

5. Ben Gurion and *mamlachtiyut*

...it was not accidental that the most powerful effort to create a national culture, that of Israel's first Prime Minister David Ben Gurion, was called *mamlachiyut*, 'statism', placing the state at the heart of identity. Ben Gurion sought to create national cohesion. He saw that Israel had to move beyond what he called the 'Diaspora customs of disintegration, anarchy, lack of national responsibility, and unity'. His focus was on the institutions of the state itself, the Knesset, government-owned or funded bodies, above all the Israel Defence Forces. For Ben Gurion, *mamlachtiyut* was at the heart of the transformation he felt necessary if Jews were to be able to exercise political sovereignty and power, having lacked it for two thousand years.

The essence of *mamlachtiyut* was the primacy of the state over civil society, secular law over tradition and custom, government institutions over voluntary bodies... This involved massive centralization and secularisation.

... *Mamlachtiyut* rode roughshod over the traditions, mainly religious, of Jews from Arab lands, who were forcibly socialised and secularised in immigration camps and the state school system. Ben Gurion said about these oriental, Sephardic Jews that they were 'from a Jewish point of view, dust of man, without language, without tradition, without roots, without an orientation to the life of statehood, without the customs of an independent society'. This left lasting resentments until this group organised itself politically in the form of the Shas party in the mid 1980s.

The result was that, though Israel managed remarkably the transition from powerlessness to power, it did so at the cost of weakening the very institutions that had been the source of Jewish strength in the past: communities, charities, voluntary associations and community-based schools. Even religion became a branch of the state...

6. A people that dwells alone:

"The conversation turned to the forthcoming UN conference against Racism at Durban. Later to become notorious as the launchpad of a new and serious assault against the legitimacy of the State of Israel. ... It was then that the [Israeli] diplomat, a religious man, spoke, probably intending to dispel some of the gloom: "It was ever thus", he said, and he quoted the famous lines of the prophet Balaam:

"It is a people that dwells alone
Not reckoned among the nations"

..." What makes you so sure that Balaam meant those words as a blessing?" I asked; "Might it not have been that he intended them as a curse?"

Consider, I said, the incidence of the word *badad*, 'alone', in the Hebrew Bible. It is used about a leper: 'He shall live alone [*badad*]; his dwelling place shall be outside the camp' (Lev. 13:46). It was used by Isaiah: 'The fortified city stands desolate [*badad*], an abandoned settlement, forsaken like the desert' (Isa. 27:10). Most

famously, it occurs in the first line of the book of Lamentations: 'How solitary [badad] sits the city once full of people.'

God, who, in monotheism, is necessarily alone. The phrase 'a people that dwells alone' is like Max Weber's description of Jews as a 'pariah people'...

Consider, I continued, who said the words, 'It is a people that dwells alone.' It was the pagan prophet Balaam, who, according to the Pentateuch, was an enemy of the Israelites. ...The Talmud says, 'Better the curses with which Ahijah the Shilonite cursed Israel than the blessings with which Balaam blessed them.' ...The sages believed that though Balaam had blessed the people, he had done so in deliberately ambiguous terms, so that the blessing would become a curse.

I realised I had delivered an outburst, but I felt driven to continue. **There is the psychological phenomenon, I said, of the self-fulfilling prophecy...**That, I concluded, was the-perennial Jewish danger. **If you define yourself as the people that dwells alone, that will be your fate. You will convince yourself that you have no friends; you are isolated; no one understands you; the world hates you. Your efforts at self-explanation will be half-hearted.** Your expectations of winning allies will be low. You will not invest as much effort as others do, to make your case in the audience chamber of the world. For inwardly you are convinced that all efforts will fail. You will have decided that this is the Jewish fate that nothing can change. It was ever thus and always will be.

Jews have enemies, ... but we also have friends, and if we worked harder at it we would have more.

...The inward-looking strategy made sense for two thousand years, when Jews were dispersed across the globe, everywhere a minority, without rights and without a voice in the public domain. It makes no sense now, in the diverse, multifaith and multicultural liberal democracies of the West. **For perhaps the first time in history the Jewish voice is respected. It is turned to for wisdom. If Jews fail to make their voice heard, there will not be silence. The space will be filled by other voices not always sympathetic to Jews and Judaism. Jews were called on to be a blessing to the world. They cannot do that if they are disengaged from the world. The place where that engagement is most important is Israel, the land where Judaism was born.**" (Future Tense pg.113-130)

7. Palestinians

I believe that the Palestinians should have a state. So do the overwhelming majority of Israelis. I believe that they should have freedom and dignity; that their children should have a future; that there should be an end to the terrible suffering that has existed since 29 September 2000 because of the collapse of the peace process. Their fate has been a tragic one, and no one with the slightest humanitarian instincts could wish it to continue.

Jews did not return home to deny others a home. That was neither the intent of the early settlers, nor the language of the Balfour Declaration or the United Nations resolution. The tragedy is that Israelis can understand the plight of the Palestinians better than any other people on earth. They know what it is to eat the bread of affliction and the bitter herbs of suffering. They know that Jews are commanded to love the stranger.

The broad shape of a solution to the problem of Israel and the Palestinians has never been in doubt. It was implicit in the Balfour Declaration in 1917, explicit in the 1947 United Nations resolution on partition... two states for two peoples, a political solution to a political problem. As Shimon Peres said when someone asked him whether he could see light at the end of the tunnel: 'I can see the light. The problem is, there is no tunnel. The solution is clear. The question has always been how to get from here to there.

... A fundamental falsehood permeates almost every discussion of the Israel-Palestine conflict, namely that it is a zero-sum game in which one side loses and the other side wins. That is precisely what it is not. From peace both sides gain. From violence both sides suffer. That is why not only Israelis, but also those who genuinely care for the Palestinians and for their children's right to a future, must give their support to peace. (pg.150-151)

8. Why the Land of Israel?

The Land that Makes You Look to Heaven

There is another intriguing footnote, within the Bible itself, as to why this land is different. In a masterstroke of delayed information, Moses tells the Israelites as they are almost within sight of the land that there is a qualification to the description he has given previously, that it is 'a land flowing with milk and honey'. It is a good land, but with one caveat:

The land you are entering to take over is not like the land of Egypt, from which you have come, where you planted your seed and irrigated it by foot as in a vegetable garden. The land you are crossing the Jordan to take possession of is a land of mountains and valleys that drinks rain from heaven. It is a land the Lord your God cares for; the eyes of the Lord your God are continually on it from the beginning of the year to its end. (Deut. 11:10-12)

Israel is not the Nile delta or the Tigris-Euphrates valley. It is a land dependent on rain, and rain in that part of the world is not predictable. We knew this already: Abraham, Isaac and Jacob all have to leave the land temporarily because of drought and famine... But the passage intimates a correlation between geography and spirituality. Israel is a place where people look heaven in search of rain, not down to earth and its natural water up to supply. It is a place where you have to pray, not one in which nature and its seasons are predictable.

That is part of a larger narrative. Because the terrain of Israel is such that it cannot become the base of an empire, it will constantly be at threat from larger and stronger neighbouring powers. Israel will always find itself outnumbered. It will need to rely on exceptional courage from its soldiers, and ingenuity

in battle. That will take high national morale, which in turn will require from the people a sense of belonging to a just and inclusive society. Commitment will be needed from every individual. They will need to feel that their cause is justified and that they are fighting for something worth preserving. So the entire configuration of the Torah's social ethics, whose guardians were the prophets, is already implicit in the kind of geo-political entity Israel is and will be. It would always be a small and highly vulnerable country set in a strategic location at the junction of three continents, Europe, Africa and Asia.

9. Reishit Tzmichat Geulateinu

<https://rabbisacks.org/faith-lectures-the-messianic-idea-today/>

What is the relationship of the current State of Israel to the Messianic Age? On this, you cannot simplify it more than six different views and here they are.

1. **The view of Rav Kook**, father and soon, which is the official view of the Israeli Rabbinate which is that the State of Israel is Messianic. What is the key phrase in the Israeli prayer for the State of Israel? *Rayshit smichat ge'ulataynu* – the beginning of the flowering of our redemption. View one: the State of Israel is *atchalta dege'ula* – the beginning of the Messianic Age.
2. The view of **Rav Reines**, the founder of Mizrahi, which is that the State of Israel has no Messianic significance and no religious significance. It is only *pikuach nefesh* – a way of rescuing endangered Jews.
3. **Neturei Karta**. The State of Israel is not Messianic and it is not non-Messianic. It is anti-Messianic. It is an attempt to achieve by human beings what actually can be achieved only by God alone and therefore we're against it.
4. The view of many **secular Zionists**, all of whom thought Theodore Herzl was Moshiach, which is that secular Zionism and the State of Israel is the secularisation of the Messianic idea, so that you have a socialist Utopia, a communist Utopia, a cultural Utopia, an anarchic Utopia, a Tolstoyan Utopia of A. D. Gordon – all of which were swirling about in the early kibbutz movement.
5. The view of **Brenner, Berdichevsky** and everyone else you can think of whose name begins with a 'B' who thought Zionism was the abandonment of the Messianic idea – *schon genug* with Moshiach – Let's just be normal.
6. And, finally – the extremely boring but nonetheless not bad view of Chief Rabbis of Great Britain – the late **Sir Israel Brodie, the late Lord Jakobovitz and myself** – all of whom have mandated forms of prayer for the State of Israel which do not contain the phrase *rayshit tsmichat ge'ulataynu* – which see Israel as religiously significant but about which we are **not yet ready to say that it is of Messianic significance**.

Those are the six views, and of course there are many more – like the friend of mine in Jerusalem who calls his plumber Moshiach! He says, 'I await him daily. He never shows up.'

However, what you can say without shadow of doubt is, in answer to the questions 'Has Moshiach come?', the Jewish answer is 'Not yet'. However, in that very 'not yet' are two monumental assertions. And this is what I want to say.

1. **When we say 'not yet', we are saying no to any premature consolation, any willingness to settle for less than our vision of an ideal world.** How can we say with Christian that the Messiah has come in a world still riven by violence, conflict, terrorism, inequality and injustice? How could we say, with that other great Jewish Messianic vision, Marxist Communism, that the world is saved by the mere withering of the state. I mean, for heaven's sake! One is okay, one's a nightmare. But we have been prepared always to say, 'Not yet. We will not settle for premature consolations.'

2. The other thing is that when we say 'not yet' but will we still say, *im kol zeh echakeh lo bechol yom sheyavo* – *af al pi ken* – we still await him daily – is the refusal to accept the second alternative which is the world we inhabit today which is the world of Postmodernism in which there are no ultimate meanings. Postmodernism is the rejection of the redemption narrative. "Postmodernism", says Jean-Paul Lyotard,

means the distrust of meta-narratives." "Postmodernism," says George Steiner in his latest book "Grammars of Creation", "is the eclipse of the Messianic." And we say: No. We do not say the ultimate meaning is the world we live in today where meanings are essentially private, whether they be therapeutic, Buddhist, New Age or any other alternative. **We say that the meanings of our world are not private: they are shared. They are something we call the common good.**

And that means that we absolutely reject both those who think that salvation has come or is within reach and those who say there is no such thing.

What is at stake in this Messianic narrative? I will tell you. What is at stake in the prophetic consciousness, the *ish nevua*, the linear imagination, the Jewish meta-narrative of redemption, I have here to differ to a man who put it so much better than I could – the non-Jewish writer Paul Johnson. This is what Paul Johnson says in the beginning of his book on Jewish history – and it is so true and so beautiful and here it is.

"No people has ever insisted more firmly than the Jews that history has a purpose and humanity a destiny. The Jews, therefore, stand right at the centre of the perennial attempt to give human life the dignity of a purpose."

That is what is at stake. I believe the Jewish vision is the noblest, most profound, most subtle attempt ever to give human life the dignity of a purpose – and heaven forbid that we should be so deaf to the music of our tradition, so apathetic in the face of the challenge of redemption, that the Jewish voice in the conversation of mankind simply fades away as it has been doing for these past 30 to 40 years.