

#### 4. A Modern Conception of Selfhood

It is in this capacity of the self to evade any necessary identification with any particular contingent state of affairs that some modern philosophers, both analytical and existentialist, have seen the essence of moral agency. To be a moral agent is, on this view, precisely to be able to stand back from any and every situation in which one is involved, from any and every characteristic that one may possess, and to pass judgement on it from a purely universal and abstract point of view that is detached from all social particularity.

Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (London: Duckworth, 1980) 31

The point here is not, as utilitarians may hasten to say, that if the project or attitude is that central to his life, then to abandon it will be very disagreeable to him and great loss of utility will be involved. I have already argued ... that it is not like that; on the contrary, once he is prepared to look at it like that, the argument in any serious case is over anyway. The point is that he is identified with his actions as flowing from projects and attitudes which in some cases he takes seriously at the deepest level, as what his life is about (or, in some cases, this section of his life – seriousness is not necessarily the same as persistence). It is absurd to demand of such a man, when the sums come in from the utility network which the projects of others have in part determined, that he should just step aside from his own project and decision and acknowledge the decision which utilitarian calculation requires. It is to alienate him in a real sense from his actions and the source of his action in his own convictions. It is to make him into a channel between the input of everyone's projects, including his own, and an output of optimistic decision; but this is to neglect the extent to which his actions and his decisions have to be seen as the actions and decisions which flow from the projects and attitudes with which he is most closely identified. It is thus, in the most literal sense, an attack on his integrity. (Williams, *Utilitarianism*, 101).

#### 5. The Jewish Self

Jewish identity commits what is modern moral thinking is seen as a fallacy: it fuses fact with value, 'is' with 'ought'. A Jew is a Jew by virtue of birth. But this fact carries with it certain duties and obligations. Membership of the Jewish community is thus simultaneously a biological and ethical proposition. Jews do not choose the commands by which they are bound.

Sacks, *One People* (London: Litman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1993), 156

I can only answer the question 'What am I to do?' if I can answer the prior question, 'Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?' We enter human society, that is, with one or more imputed characters - roles into which we have been drafted - and we have to learn what they are in order to be able to understand how others respond to us and how our responses are to be construed. It is through hearing stories ... that children learn or mislearn both what a child and what a parent is, what the cast of characters may be in the drama into which they have been born and what the ways of the world are. Deprive children of stories and you leave them unscripted, anxious stutterers in their actions as in their words. (MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 201).

Babylonian Talmud, Kiddushin 39b

ללמדו תורה: מנלן דכתיב (דברים יא, ט) ולמדתם אותם את בניכם והיכא דלא אגמריה אבוה מיחייב איהו למיגמר נפשיה דכתיב ולמדתם

[The baraita teaches that a father is obligated to teach his son Torah]. From where do we derive this requirement? As it is written: "And you shall teach them [velimadtem] to your sons" (Deuteronomy

11:19). And in a case where his father did not teach him he is obligated to teach himself, as it is written: And you shall study [ulmadtem]

**Joseph Soloveitchik, *Kol Dodi Dofek* (Excerpts from “The Covenant of Sinai and Egypt” & “The Covenant of Destiny”)**

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)...

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...

While the Covenant of Egypt was concluded without the consent of the people of Israel (the Holy One took them unto Him before He consulted with them: “And I will take you unto Me as a people” (Exodus 6:7), the Covenant of Sinai was offered to them before it was promulgated. The Holy One sent Moses to tell them His message, and Moses returned to the Holy One with the people’s answer. The halakhah perceives the Covenant of Sinai as a contract which is valid if written with the consent of the obligated party, in this case, the community of Israel. The proclamation that “We shall do and we shall hear” (Exodus 24:7) is the foundation of the Torah.

What is the content of the Covenant of Sinai? It is a special way of life that directs the individual to the fulfilment of an end beyond the reach of the man of fate — the striving of man to resemble his Creator via selftranscendence. The creative activity that fulfills the Covenant of Destiny flows from a totally different source, from man’s rebellion against an “as is,” factual existence, and from the longing that impels him to more enhanced and sublime forms of existence. Acts of lovingkindness and fraternity, which are integrated into the framework of the Covenant of Sinai, are motivated not by the strange sense of loneliness of the Jew, but by the sense of unity experienced by a nation forever betrothed to the one God.

## 6. Conclusion

[Judaism] is not a way of understanding or accepting or being reconciled to the world. To the contrary, it is a protest against the world that is, in the name of the world that ought to be. From this refusal-to-accept eventually emerged the most sustained of all man's attempts to create a social order based on individual freedom and collective grace, a society of equal access to dignity and hope. (Sacks, *Radical Then, Radical Now*, 95)

I have been arguing in these chapters for an ecological approach to politics, not one that denigrates the significance of the individual and the state, but one that maintains that these are not all there is, or all we need, for political health or even individual happiness. The third domain of the polis - the families, communities, and voluntary networks that make up so much of our lives - has been unduly neglected, philosophically for several centuries, practically for the last 50 years. Now the balance needs to be restored. (Sacks, *The Politics of Hope*, 225)

## Writing the Next Chapter in the Jewish Story

The fact that any of us is born a Jew is no mere fact. It happened because more than a hundred generations of our ancestors decided to be Jews and hand on that identity to their children, thus writing the most remarkable story of continuity ever known. Nor was this mere happenstance. It flowed from their most basic conviction, that Jews had entered into a covenant with God that would take them on a journey whose destination lay in the distant future but whose outcome was of immense consequence for humankind. What that journey was would be the subject of the next part of my search, but one thing was clear from the outset. It would not be completed instantly. Unlike almost every other vision of the ideal society, Jews knew that theirs was the work of many generations and that therefore they must hand on their ideals to their children so that they too would be part of the journey, letters in the scroll. To be a Jew, now as in the days of Moses, is to hear the call of those who came before us and know that we are the guardians of their story...

I am a Jew because, knowing the story of my people, I hear their call to write the next chapter. I did not come from nowhere; I have a past, and if any past commands anyone, this past commands me. I am a Jew because only if I remain a Jew will the story of a hundred generations live on in me. I continue their journey because, having come thus far, I may not let it and them fail. I cannot be the missing letter in the scroll. I can give no simpler answer, nor do I know of a more powerful one.

*Radical Then, Radical Now, pp. 45–46 (also titled A Letter in the Scroll, pp. 43–44)*

### QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. What arguments for continuing our Jewish traditions does Rabbi Sacks present here?
2. Which of these is most compelling to you?
3. Who has been responsible for Jewish continuity until now, our ancestors or God? Who will be responsible for Jewish continuity going forward?

## What Does it Mean to Belong to the Jewish People?

The Jewish people exists in all its bewildering complexity because it is both a religion and a nation, a faith and a fate. Remove either element and it will fall apart. That is what is wrong in focusing exclusively on fate – antisemitism, the Holocaust, the people that dwells alone. For it is faith that keeps bringing us back to the idea that Jews are a people: it was as a people that our ancestors left Egypt, as a people that they made a covenant with God in the desert, as a people that they took up the challenge of life in the Holy Land, and as a people that they understood their destiny. Jewish life is quintessentially communal, a matter of believing and belonging. Maimonides rules: ‘one who separates himself from the community, even if he commits no sin but merely holds himself aloof from the congregation of Israel ... and shows himself indifferent to their distress’ has no share in the world to come.

Judaism is not a sect of the like-minded. The Jewish people is not a self-selecting community of saints. It is not, in other words, like most communities of faith. Jewish identity, with the exception of conversion, is something into which we are born, not something we choose. This mix of fate and faith, nationhood and religion, means that from the very beginning, Jews have had to live with the tension of these two very different ideas, and it is that tension that has made Jews creative, unpredictable, diverse, conflicted, yet somehow more than the sum of their parts.

There were times – between the first and nineteenth centuries – when the primary bond between Jews was faith. There were others – during the Holocaust – when it was fate. It is that double bond that has held Jews together. When one failed, the other came to the fore. Call it chance, or the cunning of history, or an invisible hand, or Divine Providence, but the old polarities – fate and faith, *goral* and *ye’ud* – remain, dividing Jews and uniting them in a way that is sometimes exasperating but often inspiring.

*Future Tense, pp. 47–48*