

COVENANT & CONVERSATION

Covenantal Politics

NITZAVIM, VAYELECH • 5770

At the end of his life, Moses gave the people the penultimate command – the 612th of the 613 that comprise the Torah. It was a command of far-reaching significance. The Israelites were about to cross the Jordan, and enter and take possession of the promised land. There they would begin life as a self-governing nation under the sovereignty of God.

It would not be easy. With his prophetic eye turned to the furthestmost horizon of the future, Moses had been warning the people throughout Devarim that the real dangers would be the ones they least suspected. They

would not be war or famine or poverty or natural disaster. They would be ease and affluence and freedom and prosperity.

That is when a nation is in danger of forgetting its past and its mission. It becomes complacent; it may become corrupt. The rich neglect the poor. Those in power afflict the powerless. The people begin to think that what they have achieved, they achieved for and by themselves. They forget their dependence on God. At the very height of its powers, Israelite society would develop fault-lines that would eventually lead to disaster.

No one has set out the terms of survival of a civilization more starkly than Moses in Deuteronomy. Nations begin to die from within. Affluence leads to overconfidence which leads to forgetfulness which leads to decadence which leads to lack of social solidarity which leads in the end to demoralization –

the prelude to defeat. Israel's very existence, said Moses, would depend on memory, mission and morality – remembering where it came from, what it is called on to do, and how it is called on to do it. Hence the great 612th command, known as Hakhel, or national assembly:

At the end of every seven years, in the year for canceling debts, during the Feast of Tabernacles, when all Israel comes to appear before the Lord your God at the place He will choose, you shall read this law before them in their hearing. Assemble the people—men, women and children, and the strangers living in your towns—so they can listen and learn to fear the Lord your God and

follow carefully all the words of this law. Their children, who do not know this law, must hear it and learn to fear the Lord your God as long as you live in the land you are crossing the Jordan to possess.

Deut. 31:10-13

Once every seven years, on the second day of Succot in the year after the sabbatical year, the king was to gather the people together in the Temple courtyard and read to them from the Torah – specifically, selections from Deuteronomy itself (the details are set out in [Rambam, Hilkhhot Chagigah, chapter 3](#)). Hakhel was a re-enactment of the covenant ceremony at Mount Sinai (Rambam ad loc. 3: 6). It was intended to remind the people of their history, the laws they are called on to

keep and the principles they must live by. It was to be a ceremony of national rededication – a renewal of their inherited and chosen destiny, a reminder of the duties they owed to their ancestors, their descendants not yet born and, primarily, to God Himself.

We do not know how this command was carried out in practice. Yet one thing is clear from the biblical record. It is what the leaders of the nation did at critical junctures in their history. Joshua did so at the end of his life ([Joshua 24](#)). King Josiah did so when the Torah was rediscovered during a restoration of the Temple:

Then the king called together all the elders of Judah and Jerusalem. He went up to the Temple of the Lord with the men of Judah, the people of Jerusalem, the priests and the prophets—all the

people from the least to the greatest. He read in their hearing all the words of the Book of the Covenant, which had been found in the Temple of the Lord. The king stood by the pillar and renewed the covenant in the presence of the Lord – to follow the Lord and keep His commands, regulations and decrees with all his heart and all his soul, thus confirming the words of the covenant written in this book. Then all the people pledged themselves to the covenant.

II Kings 23:1-3

Ezra did so for the generation that saw the return of exiles from Babylon:

So on the first day of the seventh month Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, which was made up of men and women and all who were able to understand. He read it aloud from daybreak till noon as he faced the square before the Water Gate in the presence of the men, women and others who could understand. And all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law.

Nehemiah 8:2-3

Hakhel has a significance that goes far beyond its specific details. It belongs to a unique form of politics – covenantal politics. Philip Selznick, in his *The Moral*

Commonwealth, explains: “The compact creates a self-conscious moral order. Most vividly at Sinai, the agreement with God is an agreement to uphold a code of responsible conduct. God’s commands are obeyed by fulfilling obligations to family and community; a social ethic is the linchpin of the covenant” (ibid., 478–9).

Covenantal politics are moral politics; they involve ideas of duty and obligation. They are also interwoven with a particular view of the history of the nation, whose fate is seen as a reflection of its success or failure in honouring the terms laid down by its founders.

Only one nation in modern times has constructed its politics in terms of a covenant, namely the United States, whose Puritan founding fathers were saturated by the ideas of Deuteronomy, and which has continued, to the present day, to see itself in these terms. Some years ago, writing my Commentary to the Haggadah, I made a remarkable discovery (helped by the insights of American sociologist Robert Bellah: see his *Beyond*

Belief and The Broken Covenant). Something like Hakhel still exists. It is called an American Presidential Inaugural Address.

What an American President does in an Inaugural Address is recognizably in the tradition of Josiah and Ezra in biblical times. He recapitulates the nation's history. He speaks of the principles and ideals on which it is based (most famously, of course, in a speech that was not an Inaugural, Lincoln's Gettysburg Address: "Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal"). He reviews the challenges the nation faces if it is to stay faithful to those ideals. And regardless of whether the President is personally religious or not, the speech will be religious in tone, biblical in language, and include, explicitly or implicitly, reference to God.

Here for example is John F Kennedy in 1961:

The world is very different now. For man holds in his mortal hands the power to abolish all forms of human poverty and all forms of human life. And yet the same revolutionary beliefs for which our forebears fought are still at issue around the globe—the belief that the rights of man come not from the generosity of the state, but from the hand of God.

And this, Lyndon Baines Johnson in 1965:

They came here—the exile and the stranger, brave but frightened—to find a place where a man could be his own man. They made a covenant with this land. Conceived in justice, written in liberty, bound in union, it was meant one day to inspire the hopes of all mankind; and it binds us still. If we keep its terms, we shall flourish.

Here is Ronald Reagan, in 1985:

History is a ribbon, always unfurling;
history is a journey. And as we continue
our journey, we think of those who
traveled before us . . . For all our
problems, our differences, we are
together as of old, as we raise our voices
to the God who is the Author of this most
tender music. And may He continue to
hold us close as we fill the world with
our sound-sound in unity, affection, and
love-one people under God, dedicated to
the dream of freedom that He has placed
in the human heart, called upon now to
pass that dream on to a waiting and
hopeful world.

And this, George W. Bush in 2005:

America's vital interests and our deepest beliefs are now one. From the day of our Founding, we have proclaimed that every man and woman on this earth has rights, and dignity, and matchless value, because they bear the image of the Maker of Heaven and earth. Across the generations we have proclaimed the imperative of self-government, because no one is fit to be a master, and no one deserves to be a slave. Advancing these ideals is the mission that created our Nation . . . History has an ebb and flow of justice, but history also has a visible

direction, set by liberty and the Author of Liberty.

In no other country do political leaders speak in these terms (the closest is Václav Havel, President of the Czech Republic). American Presidential Inaugurals from 1789 to today are best understood as a continuing commentary to the Book of Deuteronomy, and as a secular counterpart to the command of Hakhel.

Today the State of Israel faces formidable problems. So, in different ways, do Britain and the rest of Europe. Terror threatens freedom across the globe. There is nothing inevitable about the survival of great powers: the pages of history are littered with tales of their decline and fall. Few indeed are those that have defeated this almost inevitable cycle. Moses must surely rank as the greatest political leader of all time

(Jean-Jacques Rousseau said so, in a note discovered after his death), and the institution of Hakhel was central to his vision.

What Moses understood so clearly is that a nation that loses its sense of purpose cannot survive. Purpose does not come from nowhere. It is shaped by historians and prophets; taught in schools and homes; rehearsed in prayer; symbolically enacted in rituals; and recalled periodically in Hakhel-type moments. It is essentially religious, for if not, then it becomes (as the late Yeshayah Leibowitz never failed to remind us) idolatry – a nation worshipping itself. It may sound strange, yet I truly believe, that finding a contemporary equivalent of Hakhel is our most pressing task if free societies are to survive