

Is Judaism a Religion?

Source Sheet by Reuven Ibragimov

Is Judaism a religion or an ethnicity? A nation or a tribe? A clan or a culture?

Sanhedrin 44a

When God explained to Joshua the reason for the Jewish people's defeat at the city of Ai, He said: **"Israel has sinned"** (Joshua 7:11). **Rabbi Abba bar Zavda says:** From here it may be inferred that even when the Jewish people have sinned, they are still called "Israel." **Rabbi Abba says:** This is in accordance with the adage **that people say:** Even when a myrtle is found among thorns, its name is myrtle and people call it myrtle.

סנהדרין מ"ד א

עכן מאי טעמא איענוש משום דהווי ידעי ביה אשתו ובניו (יהושע ז, יא) חטא ישראל אמר רבי אבא בר זבדא אע"פ שחטא ישראל הוא אמר ר' אבא היינו דאמרי אינשי אסא דקאי ביני חילפי אסא שמיה ואסא קרו ליה (יהושע ז, יא) וגם עברו את בריתי אשר צויתי אותם גם לקחו מן החרם גם גנבו גם כחשו גם שמו בכליהם

Rashi 44A:2

חטא ישראל - מדלא אמר חטא העם עדיין שם קדושתם עליהם:

Do not say the people have sinned for they still have the name of sanctity on them

Exodus 6:1-8

(1) Then the LORD said to Moses, "You shall soon see what I will do to Pharaoh: he shall let them go because of a greater might; indeed, because of a greater might he shall drive them from his land."
 (2) God spoke to Moses and said to him, "I am the LORD. (3) I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as El Shaddai, but I did not make Myself known to them by My name (4) I (יהוה) also established My covenant with them, to give them the land of Canaan, the land in which they lived as sojourners. (5) I have now heard the moaning of the Israelites because the Egyptians are holding them in bondage, and I have

שמות ו' א'-ח'

(א) ויאמר יי אל־מִשֶׁה עֲתָה תֵרְאֶה אֲשֶׁר אֲעֲשֶׂה לְפָרְעֹה כִּי בְיַד חֲזָקָה יִשְׁלַחַם וּבְיַד חֲזָקָה יִגְרֹשֶׁם מֵאֶרֶץ: (ב) וַיִּדְבֹר אֱלֹקִים אֶל־מִשֶׁה וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו אֲנִי יְהוָה: (ג) וְאָרָא אֶל־אַבְרָהָם אֶל־יִצְחָק וְאֶל־יַעֲקֹב בְּאֵל שַׁדַּי וְשָׁמִי יי לֹא נִודַעְתִּי לָהֶם: (ד) וְגַם הִקְמַתִי אֶת־בְּרִיתִי אִתָּם לְתַת לָהֶם אֶת־אֶרֶץ פְּגֻעַן אֵת אֶרֶץ מִגְרֵיהֶם אֲשֶׁר־גְּרוּ בָהּ: (ה) וְגַם אֲנִי שָׁמַעְתִּי אֶת־נַאֲקַת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר מִצְרַיִם מַעֲבָדִים אִתָּם וְאָזְכַר אֶת־בְּרִיתִי: (ו) לָכֵן אֶמַר לְבְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲנִי יי וְהוֹצֵאתִי אֶתְכֶם מִמִּצְרַיִם מִמִּצְרַיִם

remembered My covenant. (6) Say, therefore, to the Israelite people: I am the LORD. I will free you from the labors of the Egyptians and deliver you from their bondage. I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and through extraordinary chastisements. (7) And I will take you to be My people, and I will be your God. And you shall know that I, the LORD, am your God who freed you from the labors of the Egyptians. (8) I will bring you into the land which I swore to give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and I will give it to you for a possession, I the LORD.”

Ezekiel 20:32-38

(32) And what you have in mind shall never come to pass—when you say, “We will be like the nations, like the families of the lands, worshipping wood and stone.” (33) As I live—declares the Lord GOD—I will reign over you with a strong hand, and with an outstretched arm, and with overflowing fury. (34) With a strong hand and an outstretched arm and overflowing fury I will bring you out from the peoples and gather you from the lands where you are scattered, (35) and I will bring you into the wilderness of the peoples; and there I will enter into judgment with you face to face. (36) As I entered into judgment with your fathers in the wilderness of the land of Egypt, so will I enter into judgment with you—declares the Lord GOD. (37) I will make you pass under the shepherd’s staff, and I will bring you into the bond of the covenant. (38) I will remove from you those who rebel and transgress against Me; I will take them out of the countries where they sojourn, but they shall not enter the land of Israel. Then you shall know that I am the LORD.

והצילתי אתכם מעבדותם וגאלתי אתכם
 בזרוע נטויה ובשפטים גדלים: (ז)
 ולקחתי אתכם לי לעם והייתי לכם
 לאלקים וידעתם כי אני יי אלקיכם
 המוציא אתכם מתחת סבלות מצרים:
 (ח) והבאתי אתכם אלה הארץ אשר
 נשאתי את ידי לתת אותה לאברהם
 ליצחק וליעקוב ונתתי אתה לכם מורשה
 אני יהוה:

יחזקאל כ': ל"ב-ל"ח

(לב) והעלה על-רובתכם ה' לא תהיה
 אשר ו אתם אמרים נהיה כגוים
 כמשפחות הארצות לשרת עץ ואבן: (לג)
 חיי אני נאם אדושם יי אם לא ביד חזקה
 ובזרוע נטויה ובחמה שפוכה אמלוך
 עליכם: (לד) והוצאתי אתכם מן העמים
 וקבצתי אתכם מן הארצות אשר
 נפוצתם גם ביד חזקה ובזרוע נטויה
 ובחמה שפוכה: (לה) והבאתי אתכם
 אל-מדבר העמים ונשפטי אתכם שם
 פנים אל-פנים: (לו) באשר נשפטי
 את-אבותיכם במדבר ארץ מצרים בן
 אשפט אתכם נאם אדושם יהוה: (לז)
 והעברתי אתכם תחת השבט והבאתי
 אתכם במסרת הברית: (לח) וברותי מכם
 המרדים והפושעים בי מארץ מגוריהם
 אוציא אותם ואל-אדמת ישראל לא יבוא
 וידעתם כיי אני יהוה:

God calls on us to undertake a journey. He did so to Abraham and his family. He did so again to Moses and his people. They were free to decline. At many points along the way they, or those they led, had doubts. But somehow the vision they saw was compelling—not because of its coercive force, its implacable fate, but by its moral beauty and spiritual grace.

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks - The Story We Tell | Bo, Covenant & Conversation 5778

Yet Moses does not talk about freedom, or the land flowing with milk and honey, or the journey they will have to undertake through the desert. Instead, three times, he turns to the distant future, when the journey is complete and the people – free at last – are in their own land. And what he talks about is not the land itself, or the society they will have to build or even the demands and responsibilities of freedom.

Instead, he talks about education, specifically about the duty of parents to their children. He speaks about the questions children may ask when the epic events that are about to happen are, at best, a distant memory. He tells the Israelites to do what Jews have done from then to now. *Tell your children the story.* Do it in the maximally effective way. Re-enact the drama of exile and exodus, slavery and freedom. Get your children to ask questions. Make sure that you tell the story as your own, not as some dry account of history. Say that the way you live and the ceremonies you observe are “because of what God did *for me*” – not my ancestors but me. Make it vivid, make it personal, and make it live.

He says this not once but three times:

“It shall be that when you come to the land which God will give you as He said, and you observe this ceremony, and your children say to you, ‘What does this service mean to you?’ you shall say, ‘It is a Passover sacrifice to the Lord, who passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt when He struck the Egyptians and spared our homes.’” (Ex. 12:25-27).

“On that day you shall tell your child, ‘It is because of what the Lord did for me when I came out of Egypt’” (Ex. 13:8).

“In the future, when your child asks you, ‘What is this?’ you shall tell him, ‘With a mighty hand, the Lord brought us out from Egypt, from the land of slavery.’” (Ex. 13:14).

Why was this the most important thing he could do in this intense moment of redemption? Because freedom is the work of a nation, nations need identity, identity needs memory, and memory is encoded in the stories we tell. Without narrative, there is no memory, and without memory, we have no identity. The most powerful link between the generations is the tale of those who came before us – a tale that becomes ours, and that we hand on as a sacred heritage to those who will come after us. *We are the story we tell ourselves about ourselves, and identity begins in the story parents tell their children.*

That narrative provides the answer to the three fundamental questions every reflective individual must ask at some stage in their lives: Who am I? Why am I here? How then shall I live? There are many answers to these questions, but the Jewish ones are: I am a member of the people whom God rescued from slavery to freedom. I am here to build a society that honours the freedom of others, not just my own. And I must live in conscious knowledge that freedom is the gift of God, honoured by keeping His covenant of law and love.