



RABBI SACKS

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks A global religious leader, philosopher, award winning author and moral voice for our time. Rabbi Sacks is the winner of the 2016 Templeton Prize.

לעילוי נשמות: פינחס בן יעקב אשר אייז ז"ל, עזריאל בן אריה לייב שרטר ז"ל

Why Civilisations Fail

What is the real challenge of maintaining a free society? In Parshat Eikev, Moshe springs his great surprise. Here are his words:

Be careful that you do not forget the Lord your God . . . Otherwise, when you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down, and when your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase and all you have is multiplied, then your heart will become proud and you will forget the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery . . . You may say to yourself, "My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me." . . . If you ever forget the Lord your God . . . I testify against you today that you will surely be destroyed. (D'varim 8:11-19)

What Moshe was saying to the new generation was this: You thought that the forty years of wandering in the wilderness were the real challenge, and that once you conquer and settle the land, your problems will be over. The truth is that it is then that the real challenge will begin. It will be precisely when all your physical needs are met - when you have land and sovereignty and rich harvests and safe homes - that

your spiritual trial will commence.

The real challenge is not poverty but affluence, not insecurity but security, not slavery but freedom. Moshe, for the first time in history, was hinting at a law of history. Many centuries later it was articulated by the great 14th century Islamic thinker, Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406), by the Italian political philosopher Giambattista Vico (1668-1744), and most recently by the Harvard historian Niall Ferguson. Moshe was giving an account of the decline and fall of civilisations.

Ibn Khaldun argued similarly, that when a civilisation becomes great, its elites get used to luxury and comfort, and the people as a whole lose what he called their *asabiyah*, their social solidarity. The people then become prey to a conquering enemy, less civilised than they are but more cohesive and driven.

Vico described a similar cycle:

"People first sense what is necessary, then consider what is useful, next attend to comfort, later delight in pleasures, soon grow dissolute in luxury, and finally go mad squandering their estates."

Bertrand Russell put it powerfully in the introduction to his *History of Western Philosophy*. Russell thought that the two great peaks of civilization were

reached in ancient Greece and Renaissance Italy. But he was honest enough to see that the very features that made them great contained the seeds of their own demise:

What had happened in the great age of Greece happened again in Renaissance Italy: traditional moral restraints disappeared, because they were seen to be associated with superstition; the liberation from fetters made individuals energetic and creative, producing a rare fluorescence of genius; but the anarchy and treachery which inevitably resulted from the decay of morals made Italians collectively impotent, and they fell, like the Greeks, under the domination of nations less civilised than themselves but not so destitute of social cohesion.

Niall Ferguson, in his book *Civilization: the West and the Rest* (2011) argued that the West rose to dominance because of what he calls its six "killer applications": competition, science, democracy, medicine, consumerism, and the Protestant work ethic. Today however it is losing belief in itself and is in danger of being overtaken by others.

All of this was said for the first time by Moshe, and it forms a central argument of the book of D'varim. If you assume - he tells the next generation - that you yourselves won the land and the freedom you enjoy, you will grow complacent and self-satisfied. That is the beginning of the end of any civilization. In an earlier chapter, Moshe uses the graphic word V'NOSHANTEM, "you will grow old" (D'varim 4:25), meaning that you will no longer have

the moral and mental energy to make the sacrifices necessary for the defence of freedom.

Inequalities will grow. The rich will become self-indulgent. The poor will feel excluded. There will be social divisions, resentments and injustices. Society will no longer cohere. People will not feel bound to one another by a bond of collective responsibility. Individualism will prevail. Trust will decline. Social capital will wane.

This has happened, sooner or later, to all civilisations, however great. To the Israelites - a small people surrounded by large empires - it would be disastrous. As Moshe makes clear towards the end of the book, in the long account of the curses that would overcome the people if they lost their spiritual bearings, Israel would find itself defeated and devastated.

Only against this background can we understand the momentous project the book of D'varim is proposing: the creation of a society capable of defeating the normal laws of the growth-and-decline of civilisations. This is an astonishing idea.

How is it to be done? By each person bearing and sharing responsibility for the society as a whole. By each knowing the history of his or her people. By each individual studying and understanding the laws that govern all. By teaching their children so that they too become literate and articulate in their identity.

Rule 1: Never forget where you came from.

Next, you sustain freedom by establishing courts, the rule of law and the implementation of justice. By caring for the poor. By ensuring that everyone has the basic requirements of dignity. By including the lonely in the people's celebrations. By remembering the covenant daily, weekly, annually in ritual, and renewing it at a national assembly every seven years. By making sure there are always prophets to remind the people of their destiny and expose the corruptions of power.

Rule 2: Never drift from your foundational principles and ideals.

Above all it is achieved by recognising a power greater than ourselves. This is Moshe's most insistent point. Societies start growing old when they lose faith in the transcendent. They then lose faith in an objective moral order and end by losing faith in themselves.

Rule 3: A society is as strong as its faith.

Only faith in God can lead us to honour the needs of others as well as ourselves. Only faith in God can motivate us to act for the benefit of a future we will not live to see. Only faith in God can stop us from wrongdoing when we believe that no other human will ever find out. Only faith in God can give us the humility that alone has the power to defeat the arrogance of success and the self-belief that leads, as Paul Kennedy argued in *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (1987), to military overstretch and national defeat.

Towards the end of his book *Civilization*, Niall Ferguson quotes a

member of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, part of a team tasked with the challenge of discovering why it was that Europe, having lagged behind China until the 17th century, overtook it, rising to prominence and dominance.

At first, he said, we thought it was your guns. You had better weapons than we did. Then we delved deeper and thought it was your political system. Then we searched deeper still, and concluded that it was your economic system. But for the past 20 years we have realised that it was in fact your religion. It was the (Judeo-Christian) foundation of social and cultural life in Europe that made possible the emergence first of capitalism, then of democratic politics.

Only faith can save a society from decline and fall. That was one of Moshe's greatest insights, and it has never ceased to be true. 🕯



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The Limits of Grief

"You are children of the Lord your God. Do not cut yourselves or shave the front of your heads for the dead, for you are a people holy to the Lord your God. Out of all the peoples on the face of the Earth, the Lord has chosen you to be His treasured possession" (D'varim 14:1-2).

These words have had a considerable history within Judaism. The first inspired the famous statement of Rabbi Akiva: "Beloved is man because he was created in the image [of God]. Beloved are Israel for they are called children of the All-present" (Avot 3:14). The phrase, "Do not cut yourselves", was imaginatively applied by the sages to divisions within the community (Yevamot 14a). A single town should not have two or more religious courts giving different rulings.

The plain sense of these two verses, though, is about behaviour at a time of bereavement. We are commanded not to engage in excessive rituals of grief. To lose a close member of one's family is a shattering experience. It is as if something of ourselves had died too. Not to grieve is wrong, inhuman: Judaism does not command Stoic indifference in the face of death. But to give way to wild expressions of sorrow - lacerating one's flesh, tearing out one's hair - is also wrong. It is, the Torah

suggests, not fitting to a holy people; it is the kind of behaviour associated with idolatrous cults. How so, and why so?

Elsewhere in Tanach we are given a glimpse of the kind of behaviour the Torah has in mind. It occurs in the course of the encounter between Eliyahu and the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel. Eliyahu had challenged them to a test: Let us each make a sacrifice and see which of us can bring down fire from heaven. The Baal prophets accept the challenge:

Then they called on the name of Baal from morning till noon. "O Baal, answer us!" they shouted. But there was no response; no one answered. And they danced around the altar they had made. At noon Eliyahu began to taunt them. "Shout louder!" he said. "Surely he is a god! Perhaps he is deep in thought, or busy, or traveling. Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened." So they shouted louder and slashed themselves with swords and spears, as was their custom, until their blood flowed. (Melachim Alef 18:26-28)

This was, of course, not a mourning ritual, but it gives us a graphic sense of the rite of self-laceration. Emil Durkheim provides us with a description of mourning customs among the aborigines of Australia. When a death is announced, men and women begin to run around wildly, howling and weeping, cutting

themselves with knives and pointed sticks.

Despite the apparent frenzy, there is a precise set of rules governing this behaviour, depending on whether the mourner is a man or woman, and on his or her kinship relationship with the deceased. "Among the Warramunga, those who slashed their thighs were the maternal grandfather, maternal uncle and wife's brother of the deceased. Others are required to cut their whiskers and hair and then cover their scalps with pipe clay." Women lacerate their heads and then apply red-hot sticks to the wounds in order to aggravate them (Emil Durkheim, *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, translated by Karen Fields, Free Press, 1995, pp. 392-406).

(A similar ritual is performed by some Shia Muslims on Ashura, the anniversary of the martyrdom of Imam Hussein, the prophet's grandson, at Karbala. People flagellate themselves with chains or cut themselves with knives until the blood flows. Some Shia authorities strongly oppose this practice.)

The Torah sees such behaviour as incompatible with kedusha, holiness. What is particularly interesting is to note the two-stage process in which the law is set out. It appears first in Vayikra, chapter 21.

The Lord said to Moshe, "Speak to the kohanim, the sons of Aharon, and say to them: A kohen may not defile himself for any of his people who die, except for a close relative . . . They may not shave their heads or shave the

edges of their beards or cut their bodies. They must be holy to their God and must not profane the name of their God." (Vayikra 21:1-6)

There it applies specifically to kohanim on account of their holiness. In D'varim, the law is extended to all Israel (the difference between the two books lies in their original audiences: Vayikra is mainly a set of instructions to the kohanim, D'varim is Moshe's addresses to the whole people). The application to ordinary Israelites of laws of sanctity that apply to kohanim is part of the democratisation of holiness that is central to the Torah idea of "a kingdom of kohanim..." The question remains, however: what has restraint in mourning to do with being "children of the Lord your God", a holy and chosen people?

[1] Ibn Ezra says that just as a father may cause a child pain for his or her long-term good, so God sometimes brings us pain - here, bereavement - which we must accept in trust without an excessive show of grief.

[2] Ramban suggests that it is our belief in the immortality of the soul that is why we should not grieve overmuch. Even so, he adds, we are right to mourn within the parameters set by Jewish law since, even if death is only a parting, every parting is painful.

[3] R. Ovadiah Sforno and Chizkuni say that because we are "children of God" we are never completely orphaned. We may lose our earthly parents but never our ultimate Father; hence there is a limit to grief.

[4] Rabbenu Meyuchas suggests that royalty does not defile itself by undergoing disfiguring injuries (nivul). Thus Israel - children of the supreme King - may not do so either.

Whichever of these explanations speaks most strongly to us, the principle is clear. Here is how Rambam sets out the law: "Whoever does not mourn the dead in the manner enjoined by the rabbis is cruel [achzari - perhaps a better translation would be, 'lacking in sensitivity']" (Hilchot Avel 13:12). At the same time, however, "One should not indulge in excessive grief over one's dead, for it is said, 'Weep not for the dead, nor bemoan him' [Yirmiyahu 22:10], that is to say, weep not too much, for that is the way of the world, and he who frets over the way of the world is a fool" (ibid. 13:11).

Halacha, Jewish law, strives to create a balance between too much and too little grief. Hence the various stages of bereavement: aninut (the period between the death and burial), shiva (the week of mourning), sheloshim (thirty days in the case of other relatives) and shana (a year, in the case of parents). Judaism ordains a precisely calibrated sequence of grief, from the initial, numbing moment of loss itself, to the funeral and the return home, to the period of being comforted by friends and members of the community, to a more extended time during which one does not engage in activities associated with joy. The more we learn about the psychology of bereavement and the stages through which we must pass before loss is healed, so the wisdom of Judaism's ancient laws and

customs has become ever more clear. As it is with individuals, so it is with the people as a whole. Jews have suffered more than most from persecution and tragedy. We have never forgotten these moments. We remember them on our fast days - especially on Tish'a b'Av with its literature of lament, the kinot. Yet, with a power of recovery that at times has been almost miraculous, it has never allowed itself to be defeated by grief. One rabbinic passage (Tosefta Sota 15:10-15; see also Bava Batra 60b) epitomises the dominant voice within Judaism:

After the Second Temple was destroyed, ascetics multiplied in Israel. They did not eat meat or drink wine . . . Rabbi Joshua told them: "Not to mourn at all is impossible, for it has been decreed. But to mourn too much is also impossible."

In this anti-traditional age, with its hostility to ritual and its preference for the public display of private emotion (what Philip Rieff, in the 1960s, called "the triumph of the therapeutic"), the idea that grief has its laws and limits sounds strange. Yet almost anyone who has had the misfortune to be bereaved can testify to the profound healing brought about by observance of the laws of avelut (mourning).

Torah and tradition knew how to honour both the dead and the living, sustaining the delicate balance between grief and consolation, the loss of life that gives us pain, and the re-affirmation of life that gives us hope.