

The Relationship between the People and God

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Your Grace, Your Graces and beloved friends,

I did actually say I wasn't going to tell any stories but I am about to break my promise because I never knew it was going to be quite this hot. And it does remind me of one of my favourite stories of all about a really humid evening in the lower Eastside of New York where there was a Jewish restaurant and one of the unruly customers, feeling a little like you are feeling at the moment, called the waiter over and said 'Waiter it's too hot in here – switch the air conditioning on' and the waiter went off. Ten minutes later he calls the waiter back 'Waiter it's now too cold in here, switch the air conditioning off' and the waiter goes out and ten minutes later he calls him back and he says 'it's now too hot in here – turn the air conditioning on again' and the waiter is just about to leave for a third time and one of the customers near the door says 'Waiter, I feel so sorry for you, that man must be driving you mad and the waiter replies 'No, actually I'm driving him mad – you see there is no air conditioning.'

But Friends -- this is for me personally a profoundly moving moment. You have invited me, a Jew, to join your deliberations, and I thank you for that, and for all it implies. There is a lot of history between our two faiths, and for me to stand here, counting as I do His Grace the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Archbishop of York as cherished and beloved colleagues, is I believe a signal of hope for our children and for our world.

The sages of Judaism of 2000 years ago said, who is a hero? Not one who defeats his enemy but one who turns an enemy into a friend. That is what has happened between Jews and Christians: strangers have become friends. And so I think on this maybe, I'm not sure, the first occasion a rabbi has addressed a plenary session of the Lambeth Conference, I want to thank God in the words of our traditional Jewish prayer, *Shehecheyanu vekiyemanu vehigiyanu lazman hazeh*. Thank You, God, for bringing us to this time.

Friends you have asked me to speak about covenant, and that is what I am going to do. We will discover in covenant, not only a transformative idea, an idea that changes us as we think of it; and it is not only a way forward for faith in the 21st century. But we will also find ourselves, when we think about it, better able to answer the question: what is the role of religion in society, even in a secular society like Britain today.

And I want to begin a little journey with the place we passed on that wonderful march we did together last Thursday, in Westminster. It was such a beautiful day, was it not a beautiful day, and it was such a lovely day that I kind of imagined meeting up with my little granddaughter on the way back and taking her to see some of the sights of London. And we'd begin where we were, outside Parliament, and I imagine her asking what happens there, Szaba Grandpa what happens there and I'd say what happens there is politics. And she'd say, what's politics about, and I'd say: it's about the creation and distribution of power.

And then we'd go to the city, and see the Bank of England, and she'd ask what happens there and I'd say what happens there is economics. And she'd say: what's economics about, and I would say economics is about the creation and distribution of wealth.

And then on our way back we'd pass St Paul's Cathedral, and she'd ask, what happens there, and I'd say what happens there is worship. And she'd ask: What does worship produce, create and distribute? And that's a good question, because you see for the past 50 years, our lives have been dominated by those two other institutions: politics and economics, the state and the market, the logic of power and the logic of wealth. The state is us in our collective capacity. The market is us as individuals. And the debate has been for the past fifty years: which of the two is more effective? The left tends to favour the state. The right tends to favour the market. And there are endless shadings in between.

But that leaves out of the equation a third phenomenon of the utmost importance, and I want to explain why. The state is about power. The market is about wealth. And they're two ways of getting people to do what we want them to do. One of them is to force them to do it – the way of power. The other one is to pay them to – the way of wealth.

But there is a third way, and to see exactly what makes the third way different from the other two I just want to do a little elementary arithmetic with you because elementary arithmetic is about as much as I can do. Even my mobile phone gives me an inferiority complex so higher mathematics is not my style but here it is. Imagine, for a moment, you have total power, and then, in the fit of craziness you decide to share it with nine other people. How much power do you have left? You have 1/10 of what you began with. Supposing you have a thousand pounds,

and you decide to share it with nine other people. How much do you have left? 1/10 of what you had when you began.

But now supposing that you decide to share, not power or wealth, but love, or friendship, or influence, or even knowledge and you decided to share those, with nine others. How much would you have left? Would you have less than when you began? No, you would have more; and why is that - Because love, friendship and influence are things that only exist by virtue of sharing them with others. And those are the goods I call covenantal goods – covenantal goods are the goods that, the more I share, the more I have. And that makes covenant different from wealth and power.

In the short term wealth and power are zero-sum games. That means if I win, you lose. If you win, I lose. Covenantal goods are non-zero-sum games, meaning, we both win, The more I give away the more I have – we both win. And that has huge consequences.

Because you can see with wealth and power, economic and politics, the market and the state, they must be – they cannot be other than arenas of *competition*, - that's right that's good but covenantal goods are arenas of *co-operation*.

And the question is where will we find covenantal goods like love, like friendship, like trust, like influence? You won't find them in the state, you won't find them in the market, you will find them in marriages, in families, in congregations, in communities – you will find them in society, so long as you remember that society is something different from the state.

And that is one way of seeing what is key to government. You see there are two words that sound as if they were almost the same but they are actually very different. I mean the word *contract* and I mean the word *covenant*.

What's a contract, a contract is an agreement between two or more individuals, each pursuing their own interest, and they come together to make an exchange for mutual benefit. And so you get a commercial contract that creates the market, and you get the social contract that creates the state.

A covenant is something different. In a covenant, two or more individuals, each respecting the dignity and the integrity of the other, come together in a bond of love and trust, to share their interests, sometimes even to share their lives, by pledging our faithfulness to one another, to do together what neither of us can do alone.

And that is not the same as a contract at all. A contract is a *transaction*. but a covenant is a *relationship*. Or to put it slightly differently: a contract is about interests. but a covenant is about identity. And that is why contracts *benefit*, but covenants *transform*.

And there it is – as simply as I can put it. Economics and politics are about the logic of competition, Covenant is about the logic of co-operation.

II

And now I want to ask a very fundamental question, why is it that societies cannot exist without co-operation? Why is it that state and market alone cannot sustain a society?

And the answer to that is an absolutely fascinating story, and it begins with Charles Darwin.

Charles Darwin, if I understand him correctly in his book *'The Descent of Man'* identified a problem that he could not solve. According to Darwin if I understand him correctly all life evolves by natural selection, which means, by competition for scarce resources: food, shelter and the like.

If so, you would expect to find all societies valuing the most competitive, maybe even the most ruthless individuals. That is what you would expect in a Darwinian universe. But what Darwin himself noticed is that it isn't so. In fact, in every society of which he knew, it was the most altruistic individuals who were the most highly valued, not the most competitive. Or, if I can put it in the language of Richard Dawkins - the paradox is that a bundle of selfish genes get together to produce selfless people. That is the paradox – how does it happen? That paradox lay unsolved until the late 1970s.

And it was then that three very different disciplines converged: one was sociobiology, another was a branch of mathematics called games theory, and the third was a high-speed computer simulation, and they produced something called the iterated prisoner's dilemma. If you really want to stop a conversation say the words 'iterated prisoners' dilemma' and they will all start looking for the door.

Anyway, to cut a long story short, what they discovered was this that natural selection – yes – it works through the genes of individuals, individuals – but individuals, certainly in the higher life-forms -- survive only because they are parts of groups. And groups only survive on the basis of reciprocity and trust, and what I have called covenant, the logic of co-operation- without co-operation no group and you need a group to survive. One human being versus one lion, the lion wins. Ten human beings versus one lion, and the humans are in with a chance.

And it turns out. It turns out that the very things that make Homo sapiens different – our use of language, and the size of our brains, even the moral sense itself – all of these have to do with the ability to form and sustain groups and this phenomenon is called by: neo-Darwinians

reciprocal altruism. Sociologists call it trust. Economists call it social capital. And it is one of the great intellectual discoveries of our time. Individuals need groups. Groups need co-operation. And co-operation needs covenant, bonds of reciprocity and trust.

Traditionally, that was and I believe still is the domain of religion. That is what religions create and distribute. The very word 'religion' itself, as you know, comes from a Latin root meaning 'to bind' people or things together. And everybody knew this – it's just that they forgot it. And whether we take someone conservative like Edmund Burke, or a radical like Thomas Paine, or a social scientist like Emil Durkheim, or simply insightful like Alexis de Tocqueville, they all saw this. And now it has been scientifically demonstrated. If you only have competition but not co-operation, if you only have the state and the market and not covenant, then society will not survive.

What then happens to society when religion wanes and there is nothing covenantal to take its place?

What happens is that relationships break down. Marriage grows weak. Families become fragile. Communities atrophy. And the result is that people feel vulnerable and alone. And they turn those feelings outward, and the result is often anger which, God forbid, can become violence. Or they can turn those feelings inward, and the result, God forbid, is depression, stress related syndromes, eating disorders, and drug and alcohol abuse. What happens when religion wanes when covenant wanes is that you will find spiritual poverty in the midst of material affluence.

It doesn't happen all at once, but it happens slowly, gradually and inexorably. Societies without covenants and without institutions needed to inspire and sustain them, gradually disintegrate. And the result is a loss of freedom and the loss of the dimension of graciousness in our lives together. So that is where we are and where we are headed – God forbid.

III

And now let's go back to where it all began.

In the ancient Near East, - you know there in the ancient Near East covenants existed in the form of treaties between tribes or states and they had very little to do with religion. To the contrary, in the ancient world, religion was about politics and economics, religion was about power and wealth. After all the gods were the supreme powers. They were also the controllers of wealth, in the form of rain and earth and harvests. So, if you wanted power or you wanted wealth, you had to get the gods on your side.

The idea that there could be a covenant between God and humanity must have seemed absurd. If you had told people there could be, between the Infinite and the finite, between the eternal and the ephemeral, a bond of love and trust, they would say to you what my office often says to me 'Chief Rabbi go and lie down until the mood passes.

And if you had gone further and said that God loves, not the wealthy and the powerful, but the poor and the powerless, they would have thought you were mad. But that was the idea that transformed the world.

Covenant is a key word of Tenach, the Hebrew Bible, where it occurs more than 250 times. No one put it more simply than the prophet Hosea, in words which men say every weekday morning when we

start of our prayers:

I will betroth you to me forever;

I will betroth you to me in righteousness and justice, love and compassion.

I will betroth you to me in faithfulness,

and you shall know the LORD.

That is covenant - a betroth - a bond of love and trust. And the prophet Jeremiah, who in the name of God so beautifully spelled out the result in a line we read out this Saturday in our synagogues:

I remember the kindness of your youth,

the love of your betrothal,

how you were willing to follow me into the desert,

into an unknown, unsown land.

Covenant is what allows us to face the future without fear, because we know we are not alone. The purest line of covenant says

'Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for

You are with me.' Covenant is the redemption of solitude.

Now there are in the Books of Genesis and Exodus three covenants.

Number 1 in Genesis 9, is the covenant with Noah and through him with all humanity.

Number 2 in Genesis 17, God's covenant with Abraham.

Number 3 in Exodus chapters 19-24, God's covenant with the Israelites in the days of Moses and none supersedes or replaces the others. And without going into detail, I want to look at one significant difference between them – between the Noah covenant and the Abrahamic and the Sinai covenants.

And to explain this difference I have to use a distinction that we owe to a man whom I regard as the greatest Jewish thinker of the 20th century, his name may not be familiar to you, it was Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik. I want to explain the distinction he made between two kinds of covenant.

And the simplest way of approaching it is to ask you a very simple question: when, according to the Bible did the Israelites become a nation? You will find in the Bible two apparently contradictory answers to that. If you look at Deuteronomy chapter 26: in the declaration an Israelite had to make when bringing the first fruits to the Temple he made a declaration ' my Father was a wandering Aramenian and he went down to Egypt and there they became a nation'. According to Deuternomy 26 the Israelites became a nation in Egypt when they were slaves. And then of course according to Exodus chapter 19 they only became a nation when they *left* Egypt and stood at the foot of Mount Sinai, and accepted a covenant with God to become a Kingdom of priests in the Holy Nation'. So where did they become a Nation in Egypt or only when they left.

Rabbi Soloveitchik said in a Rabbinical way they are both true, but they involve different kinds of covenant. There is, he said, a covenant of *fate* and there is a covenant of *faith*, and they are different things.

A group can be bound in the covenant of fate when the members of that group suffer together, or when they face a common enemy. They have shared tears, they have

shared fears, they have shared responsibility. They huddle together for comfort and mutual protection. That is a covenant of fate.

A covenant of faith is different. That is made by people who share dreams, aspirations, ideals. They don't need a common enemy, because they have a common hope. They come together to create something new. They are defined not by what happens to them by fate but by what they commit themselves to do. That is a covenant of faith.

And now we can immediately understand how the Israelites had not one foundational moment but two, number 1 in Egypt and number two at Sinai. In Egypt they became a nation bound by a covenant of fate -- a fate of slavery and suffering. But at Sinai they became a nation bound by a covenant of faith, defined by the Torah and by its commands. And that distinction is vital to what I have to say today.

I puzzled about this - that distinction that Rabbi Soloveitchik made is so fundamental and it so obviously fits how come know one said it or at least no one said it so explicitly before, in 4000 years of Jewish history - how could that insight come about only in the lifetime of Rabbi Soloveitchik by which, in effect, I mean after the 1940s? And the answer is obvious it lies in one word: Holocaust.

You see at the level of faith, in the 19th and 20th centuries Jews were deeply divided. But in the Holocaust they shared the same fate, Orthodox and non-Orthodox, religious or secular, identifying or totally assimilated. What Soloveitchik was doing, within a deeply fragmented Jewish world, was to rescue some sense of solidarity with the victims - a covenant of fate. As soon as we have made this distinction we can state a proposition of the utmost importance.

V

If you read Genesis and Exodus superficially, it looks as if the three covenants on the one hand Noah, and on the other hand Abraham Moses and Sinai they look as if they are the same sort of thing but actually if you think about it now you will see that they are not the same kind of thing at all.

The covenant with Abraham and the covenant with Sinai were covenants of faith about believing in the one God and about keeping his laws. But if you look at Genesis 9 the covenant of Noah says not one word about faith. The world had been almost destroyed by a flood. All mankind, all life, excluding Noah's Ark, shared the same fate. Humanity after the Flood was like the Jewish people after the Holocaust. The covenant of Noah was not a covenant of faith but a covenant of fate.

God says: I promise I will never again destroy the world. But I cannot promise that *you* will never destroy the world -- because you see I gave you free will. All I can do is teach you how not to destroy the world. How?

The covenant of Noah has, I think, three essential dimensions. Number one: 'He who sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for in the image of God, He made man - . *the sanctity of human life*.

Number 2: Look carefully at Genesis 9 and you will see that Noah spent *five times* in that one chapter emphasizing that God insists that the covenant of Noah is not merely with humanity alone, but with everything that lives on the face of earth. Five times - the covenant is not with human beings but with all of nature. So the second element of the covenant of Noah is *the integrity of the created world* - what we call today The Environment.

And Number 3: the sign of the covenant, which is a rainbow, the white, the light of God fragmented into all the colours of the spectrum, or as I put in the title of one of my books '*The dignity of difference*'. The miracle of monotheism is that unity up there creates diversity down here. And those three elements, the sanctity of human life, the integrity of the environment and respect for diversity are the three elements of the global covenant of fate that God made with Noah and still makes with us.

You know here is a famous prophecy in the 11th chapter of Isaiah, you know this as well as we do, what is it that one day the wolf will lie down with the lamb. I don't think it's happened yet (although I did hear about a zoo in Los Angeles where they had a cage where the wolf lies down with the lamb and one visitor asked the zoo keeper - How do you do that? The zookeeper said: 'Easy - you just need a new lamb every day').

Actually, for instance there was once, when the wolf *did* lie down with the lamb. Where was that? And the answer is in Noah's Ark. And why did the wolf lie down with the lamb. Not because they liked one another, but because otherwise they would drown. That is the covenant of fate – that is the global covenant of human solidarity and you will note the covenant of fate precedes the covenant of faith because faith is always particular but fate is universal.

VI

And with that, I come to the present. We are living through one of the most fateful ages of change since Homo sapiens first set foot on earth. Globalisation and the new information technologies are changing everything in our world in ways we cannot possibly predict but we can say what they are doing already. They are doing two things simultaneously. Number One: they are fragmenting our world into ever smaller pieces into ever smaller sects of the like minded. And Number Two: In the opposite direction globalisation is also thrusting us together as never before in history. The destruction of a rainforests there adds to global warming everywhere. Political conflict in one place can create a terrorist incident thousands of miles away. Poverty there moves consciences here. At the very moment that covenants of faith are breaking apart, the covenant of fate is forcing us together -- *and we have not yet proved equal to it.*

All three elements of the global covenant are in danger. The sanctity of human life is being ravaged by political oppression and by terror. The integrity of creation is being threatened by environmental catastrophe. And the respect for diversity is imperiled by what one writer has called a clash of civilisations. And to repeat -- the covenant of fate precedes the covenant of faith. Because before we can live *any* faith we have to be able to live. And we have to have to honour our covenant with future generations so that they will be able to live. And that is the call of God in our times.

VII

Friends, friends I stand before you as a Jew, which means not just as an individual, but as a representative of my people. And as I prepared this lecture, within my soul were the tears of my ancestors. We may have forgotten, but for a thousand years, between the First Crusade and the Holocaust, the word 'Christian' struck fear into Jewish hearts. I think of the words the Jewish encounter with Christianity added to the vocabulary of human pain: blood libel, disputations, forced conversions, inquisition, auto da fe, expulsion, ghetto and pogrom.

And I could not stand here today in total openness, and not mention that book of Jewish tears.

And I have asked myself, what would our ancestors want of us today?

And the answer to that lies in the scene that brings Genesis to a climax and a closure. You remember the scene: it happens after the death of Jacob, and the brothers fear that Joseph will take revenge. After all, they had sold him into slavery in Egypt.

Instead, Joseph forgives -- but he does much more than forgive. I want us to listen carefully to his words: He said

You intended to harm me,
but God intended it for good,
to do what is now being done,
to save many lives.

Joseph does more than forgive. He says look, out of all that bad has come good. It has allowed me to save many lives. Which lives was he referring to? He was certainly not to the lives of his brothers only, he was referring to the lives of the Egyptians, the lives of strangers. And look he says I have been able to feed the hungry. I have been able to honour the covenant of fate -- and by honouring the covenant of fate between him and strangers, Joseph was able to mend the broken covenant of faith between him and his brothers.

In effect, Joseph says to his brothers: we cannot *unwrite* the past, but we can *redeem* that past - if we take our tears and use them to sensitise us to the tears of others.

And I want you now to see a remarkable thing. Just think carefully about the Book of Genesis. Although Genesis is centrally about the covenant of faith between God

and Abraham, none the less it begins and ends with the covenant of fate: it begins the covenant in the days of Noah, and it ends with Joseph.

Look at the similarities and the differences both of these lives both of these covenantal moments involve water: in the case of Noah, there is too much, a flood; in the case of Joseph, too little, a drought.

Both involve saving human life. But look at the difference. In human terms Noah saves only his family. Joseph saves a whole nation – a nation of strangers, not his people.

Both involve forgiveness. But in the story of Noah it is God that forgives. In the story of Joseph, it is a human being who forgives.

And both involve a relationship with the past. In the case of Noah, the past is obliterated. In the case of Joseph, the past is redeemed.

VIII

In the case of Jews and Christians, that past is being redeemed. In 1942, in the midst of humanity's darkest night, a great Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple, and a great Chief Rabbi, J. H. Hertz, came together in a momentous covenant of fate, called the Council of Christians and Jews. And since then, Jews and Christians have done more to mend their relationship than any other two faiths on earth, and today we meet as beloved friends.

And now we must extend that friendship more widely. We must renew the global covenant of fate, the covenant that began with Noah and reached a climax in the work of Joseph, the work of saving many lives.

And friends, that is what we began to do last Thursday when we walked side-by-side: Christians, Jews, Sikhs, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Jains, Zoroastrians and Baha'i. And yes we don't share a faith, but we surely share a fate. Because whatever our faith or lack of faith, hunger still hurts, disease still strikes, poverty still disfigures, and hate still kills. And few put it better than that great Christian poet, John Donne, the perfect epitomy of the covenant of fate: 'Every man's death diminishes me, for I am involved in mankind.'

Friends, if you have a chance to look at Genesis 50, you will see that just before he says the great words of reconciliation, the text says: 'Joseph wept.' Why did Joseph weep? He wept for all the needless pain he and his brothers had caused one another. And shall we not weep when we see the immense challenges that humanity has been faced with in the 21st century - the challenge of poverty, hunger, disease, of environmental catastrophe. And what has the face religion all too often shown to the world? The face of conflict -- between faiths, and sometimes within faiths.

And we, Jews and Christians, who have worked so hard and so effectively at reconciliation, and reached it, we must now take the lead in showing the world there is another way.: the way of the covenant of fate - honouring humanity as God's image, protecting the environment as God's creation, respecting diversity as God's will, keeping the covenant as God's word.

Friends, too long we have dwelt in the valley of tears.

Let us walk together towards the mountain of the Lord,

Side-by-side,

Hand in hand,

bound by a covenant of fate that has the power to turn strangers into friends.

In an age of fear, let us be agents of hope.

Together let us be a blessing to the world.

Thank you.