

TEN PATHS TO GOD

UNIT 8 – Educator Guide / Entry Level

ישראל
ISRAEL
The Jewish Land

Based on the teachings of Rabbi Sacks





Introduction

Overview: In this unit we will explore the role of the Land of Israel in Rabbi Sacks' thought and philosophy of Judaism. Rabbi Sacks is well known for his advocacy and passion for the modern State of Israel, especially in his social media presence. Israel also plays a prominent theological role in his writings. For Rabbi Sacks, the Jewish people living in security in their homeland, building a society based on the core values of Judaism, is critical to the fulfillment of Jewish destiny and the Jewish national mission.

Educational aims for this unit:

- For students to consider the central role of Israel
 - Historically
 - *Halachically*
 - Culturally
 - Spiritually
- For students to explore the notion of contemporary *aliyah* within the context of these parameters.
- For students to consider the miraculous nature of the history of the modern State of Israel, and the balance in that narrative between human and divine accomplishments.
- For students to understand the role Israel must play in the fulfillment of Jewish destiny and the Jewish national mission, as envisioned by Rabbi Sacks.
- For students to consider what a 'Jewish society' would look like as the fulfillment of Jewish destiny and the Jewish national mission.

Trigger Activity:

First, ask your students if any of them have experienced a miracle in their lives. Ask for volunteers to share what those miracles were, and write them on the board.

Then make a list of everyday occurrences, or events from history, that people consider miraculous. If you can, collect images of these events to project onto a screen, or pictures to put up, as this can be more effective in stimulating a discussion. For each event, ask your students if they think it is miraculous or natural, or if, in fact, miracle and nature could be one and the same (i.e. God acting through nature).

Your list could include:

- the birth of a baby
- healing in a hospital
- rain in the desert
- enemies making peace (or different races embracing as friends)
- the underdog winning the championship
- a student passing a test
- The Six-Day-War


- a Shoah survivor's story
- the Jewish people's return to Israel after 2000 years of exile
- the Niagara Falls
- the Grand Canyon
- natural beauty of the local surroundings

Conclude with a discussion on the definition of a miracle, whether miracles have to be supernatural, or whether natural processes can be considered miraculous. Debate the question: Does God perform His work through natural means?

Watch: The opening video for Unit 8



■ **Discussion:** Ask the students for their initial reactions to the video.

 **First Reading:** Read through the text from the video. Highlight each word or phrase that you are unsure of, whether it is the meaning of the language or the meaning of the concept.

■ **Individual text work:** Ask the students to do this next activity on their own.

No religion in history has been as closely tied to a land as has Judaism. That connection goes back almost 4,000 years, from the first words of God to Avraham: 'Leave your country, your birthplace and your father's house and go to the land I will show you.' No sooner had he arrived than God said: 'To your offspring I will give this land.' Seven times God promised the land to Avraham, and promised it again to Yitzchak and Yaakov.

The word *teshuvah*, often translated as 'repentance', literally means 'homecoming' in a double sense: spiritually to God, and physically to the land of Israel. For Israel is the Jewish people's place of destiny: a tiny land for a tiny people, yet one whose role in religious history is vast. It is the land to which Moshe and the Israelites travelled across the desert, the land from which they were exiled twice, the land to which our ancestors journeyed whenever they could and which they never voluntarily left, never relinquished. Jewish history is the story of the longing for a land.

The holy land remains the place where Jews were summoned to create a society of justice and compassion under the sovereignty of God. And though it was subsequently held holy by Christianity and Islam, the centers of these other faiths were elsewhere: for Western Christians, Rome, for Eastern Christians, Constantinople, and for Muslims, Mecca and Medinah. There are 56 Islamic states today, 82 Christian ones, but only one Jewish state. It is the only place on earth where Jews are a majority, where they



enjoy self-rule, where they are able to build a society and shape a culture as Jews.

The Balfour Declaration in 1917, subsequently ratified by the League of Nations, long before the Holocaust, was an attempt to rectify the lingering denial of a nation's right to its land and the subsequent persecution of Jews in country after country, century after century, in a history of suffering that has no parallel.

The Jews who returned were not strangers, outsiders, an imperial presence, a colonial force. They were the land's original inhabitants: the only people in 4,000 years who created an independent nation there. All other occupiers of the land – from the Assyrians and Babylonians to the Ottomans and the British – were imperial powers, who ruled the land as a district of their vast realms. The Egyptians did not offer the Palestinians a state when they ruled Gaza between 1948 and 1967; neither did the Jordanians when they ruled the West Bank during those years. The only nation to have offered Palestinians a state is the State of Israel. And every day, we pray for its peace.

Jonathan Sacks

Frontal teaching: Ask for a list of words or concepts that students had trouble understanding. Write them on the board. Discuss them briefly to clarify their basic meaning.



Analysis in Chavruta: Now in *chavruta* (pairs), take a look again at the text. Discuss and answer the questions on the key terms and phrases that are highlighted for you.

Chavruta text analysis: Pair up the students and ask them to read through the text once more, this time using the questions below to guide their discussion. You may wish to ask them to write down their answers, or to use the questions as an oral guide to their textual analysis.

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The word *teshuvah*, often translated as 'repentance', literally means **'homecoming'** in a double sense: spiritually to God, and physically to



the land of Israel. For Israel is the Jewish people's place of destiny: a tiny land for a tiny people, yet one whose role in religious history is vast. It is the land to which Moshe and the Israelites travelled across the desert, the land from which they were exiled twice, the land to which our ancestors journeyed whenever they could and which they never voluntarily left, never relinquished. **Jewish history is the story of the longing for a land.**

The holy land remains the place where Jews were summoned to create a society of justice and compassion under the sovereignty of God. And though it was subsequently held holy by Christianity and Islam, the centers of these other faiths were elsewhere: for Western Christians, Rome, for Eastern Christians, Constantinople, and for Muslims, Mecca and Medinah. There are 56 Islamic states today, 82 Christian ones, but only one Jewish state. **It is the only place on earth where Jews are a majority**, where they enjoy self-rule, **where they are able to build a society and shape a culture as Jews**.

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first words of God to Avraham

1. What is the implication that the first words God spoke to Avraham were, 'Leave your country, your birthplace and your father's house and go to the land I will show you'?
2. What is the meaning of these words?
3. Why do you think God decided to begin his relationship with Avraham with these words and this command? What does this mean for us?



'homecoming'

1. The literal meaning of the word *teshuvah* is 'return'. How is repentance a 'return'? What are we returning to?
2. Rabbi Sacks translates the word *teshuvah* as 'homecoming'. After we have done true *teshuvah* we are said to have 'returned'. How is this return like a homecoming?
3. Rabbi Sacks connects the 'homecoming' of *teshuvah* with the physical return to the Land of Israel. Can you explain the connection?

Jewish history is the story of the longing for a land.

1. Can you support this claim with proof from Jewish history?
2. Can you find proof of this in *halacha* and Jewish rituals?
3. Can you explain why the Jewish people never gave up on returning to their land?

It is the only place on earth where Jews are a majority

1. What are the effects of being a minority?
2. Why is it important to be a majority? What are the benefits?
3. How do you feel living as a minority in your country? Would you like to one day live in Israel because it has a Jewish majority? Why?

where they are able to build a society and shape a culture as Jews

1. Can Jews build a society, and shape the culture of that society, when they live in the diaspora?
2. What would a Jewish society look like?
3. Is Israel a Jewish society today? How so?

The Balfour Declaration

1. The Balfour Declaration was the first time since the birth of modern Zionism that a world power had recognized the Jewish people's claim to a homeland in *Eretz Yisrael*. Why did we need a world power to recognize this right?
2. On what basis did the Jewish people have a right to a land over which we had not been sovereign for 2000 years?
3. It is now over a hundred years since the Balfour Declaration. Do you think the world has come to terms with this right?



They were the land's original inhabitants

1. What does Rabbi Sacks mean when he claims that the Jews who heeded the call of modern Zionism and began returning to *Eretz Yisrael* from the 1880s onward were 'the land's original inhabitants'?
2. Who disagrees with Rabbi Sacks on this point? What is the basis of their argument?
3. What are your thoughts on this?

The only nation to have offered Palestinians a state is the State of Israel.

1. Why do you think no Palestinian state was created while other Arab nations were in power in this land?
2. Why do you think the State of Israel made these painful concessions to the Palestinian people, offering to help create a Palestinian state? Why do you think the Palestinian leadership rejected the offer?
3. What do you think needs to happen for peace to finally be achieved in the Land of Israel?



Share your analysis: Come together as a class and share your answers. Listen carefully to the perspectives of your classmates. Did anyone take a different approach to the text from you? Does their approach resonate with you?

■ **Frontal teaching:** Facilitate a class discussion on the text based on the students' answers.

The Core Concepts



Exploration of the Core Concepts: Together with your *chavruta*, consider the five core concepts contained in the opening text. Use the questions to guide your discussion and analysis.

Chavruta text analysis: In the same *chavrutot*, ask the students to read through the text again, and to this time consider the five core concepts that have been highlighted. Ask them to use the questions to guide their discussion. You may wish to ask them to write down their answers, or just to use the questions as an oral guide to their textual analysis.

No religion in history has been as closely **tied to a land** as has Judaism. That connection goes back almost 4,000 years, from the first words of God to Avraham: **'Leave your country, your birthplace and your father's house and go to the land I will show you.'** No sooner had he arrived than God said: **'To your offspring I will give this land.'** Seven times God promised the land to Avraham, and promised it again to Yitzchak and Yaakov.

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The holy land remains the place where Jews were **summoned to create a society of justice and compassion** under the sovereignty of God. And though it was subsequently held holy by Christianity and Islam, the centers of these other faiths were elsewhere: for Western Christians, Rome, for Eastern Christians, Constantinople, and for Muslims, Mecca and Medinah. There are 56 Islamic states today, 82 Christian ones, but only one Jewish state. It is the only place on earth where Jews are a majority, where they enjoy self-rule, where they are able to build a society and shape a culture as Jews.

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only people in 4,000 years who created an independent nation there. All other occupiers of the land – from the Assyrians and Babylonians to the Ottomans and the British – were imperial powers, who ruled the land as a district of their vast realms. The Egyptians did not offer the Palestinians a state when they ruled Gaza between 1948 and 1967; neither did the Jordanians when they ruled the West Bank during those years. The only nation to have offered Palestinians a state is the State of Israel. And every day, we pray for its peace.

tied to a land

1. In what way is Judaism 'tied to a land'?
2. If Judaism is so closely tied to a land, how do you think it has survived for so many generations in exile?
3. Do you think a Judaism in the diaspora is in anyway inferior to Judaism practiced in Eretz Yisrael?

'Leave your country, your birthplace and your father's house and go to the land I will show you.'

1. What *mitzvah* is Avraham being asked to perform here?
2. What were the challenges facing Avraham's *aliyah*? Are they the same challenges as those faced by *olim* today?
3. What reasons can you think of for making *aliyah*? Assuming you were living in the diaspora, could you imagine making *aliyah* yourself?

'To your offspring I will give this land.'

1. To which generation of Avraham's descendants do you think God is promising the land?
2. Why do you think God did not give the land to Avraham there and then?
3. Has this promise been fulfilled in history? When?

Israel is the Jewish people's place of destiny

1. What is destiny?
2. What is the Jewish people's destiny? How does it involve Israel?
3. What is your destiny? How does it correlate with your vision for the Jewish people?

summoned to create a society of justice and compassion

1. What would a society based on these ideas look like? How do you build such a society?
2. Do you think that the modern State of Israel is a society of justice and compassion?
3. Why has God summoned the Jewish people to do this?



Share your analysis: Come together as a class, and share your answers to the questions. Listen carefully to the perspectives of your classmates. Did anyone take a different approach to the text from you? Does their approach resonate with you?

As a class, consider the following meta-questions (big picture questions):

1. Why is *Eretz Yisrael* so central to Judaism?
2. What is the national mission of the Jewish people and how is it connected to having our own land?
3. Are we fulfilling this mission in our land today? If not, what can we do to achieve it?

Frontal teaching: Facilitate a class discussion in order to arrive at a summary of the core concepts.

The Miracle of the Rebirth of Israel



Together with your *chavruta* join another pair to form a small *chabura* (study group). Examine the following texts from *The Jonathan Sacks Haggadah*. Here Rabbi Sacks describes some of the miracles of the founding of the modern State of Israel, and discusses who was behind them. Use the guiding questions that follow each text to help you with your analysis, and at the same time consider these general underlying questions:

1. What is your definition of a miracle?
2. Can a miracle be man-made? If it can, is it still divine in origin?
3. If the story of the State of Israel is miraculous in nature, how does that impact the way we think of it?

Group text analysis: Pair up two or more of the *chavrutot* from the previous section. Direct them to read through the excerpts from the *Jonathan Sacks Haggadah* below, and to use the questions to guide their discussion. You may tell them to write down their answers, or just to use the questions as an oral guide to their textual analysis. Make sure the students also consider the questions above while they explore Rabbi Sacks' presentation of the miraculous history of the modern State of Israel.



So Zionism was born. It would be hard to find any other movement that brought together so many dissonant, competing visions. There were utopian religious Zionists like Rav Kook, and practical religious Zionists like Rabbi Reines. Among the secularists were political Zionists like Herzl, cultural Zionists such as Ahad ha-Am, Nietzscheans like Berdichevski, Tolstoyans of the caliber of Aaron David Gordon, and dozens of others, each with their own carefully wrought utopia. They clashed, at times vehemently. Yet out of their clamorous discord came one of the most astonishing achievements of all time.

The creation of the State of Israel was fraught with difficulty. Despite the Balfour Declaration (1917), in which Britain, the new mandatory power in Palestine, promised Jews a national home, there was intense opposition – from the Arab world, other international forces, from politicians in Britain, and at times from Jews themselves. For thirty years, various compromises were proposed, all accepted by Jews and rejected by their opponents. On the day the State was proclaimed, it was attacked on all fronts by its neighbors. Since then it has lived under constant threat of war, violence, terror and delegitimization. Yet it has achieved wondrous things.

The Jonathan Sacks Haggadah, pp. 51–52



1. Is it a miracle that so many different Zionists with such divergent views managed to join together to build the State of Israel?
2. What does 'utopia' mean? What does it mean that a Zionist philosophy is 'utopian'?
3. Which groups of people does Rabbi Sacks list as opposing the creation of the State of Israel? Why did each group oppose it?
4. Why do you think Israel has lived in a constant state of war ever since its creation?
5. Is it possible that this constant threat of war has had any advantage for Israel achieving 'wondrous things'?



Through it Hebrew, the language of the Bible, was reborn as a living tongue. Jewish communities under threat have been rescued, including those like the Jews of Ethiopia who had little contact with other Jews for centuries. Jews have come to Israel from over a hundred countries, representing the entire lexicon of cultural diversity. A desolate landscape has bloomed again. Jerusalem has been rebuilt. The world of Torah scholarship, devastated by the Holocaust, has been revived and the sound of learning echoes throughout the land. Economically, politically, socially and culturally, Israel's achievements are unmatched by any country of its age and size. The sages said that, at the crossing of the Red Sea, the simplest Jew saw miracles that the greatest of later prophets were not destined to see. That, surely, was the privilege of those who witnessed Israel's rebirth and youth. The messiah has not come. Israel is not yet at peace. The *Beit Hamikdash* has not been rebuilt. Our time is not yet redemption. Yet many, if not all, of the prayers of two thousand years have been answered...

Ibid, p. 52

1. Was the rebirth of the ancient language of the Bible into a modern vibrant language a miracle?
2. Why do you think the State of Israel feels a responsibility for the safety of Jews around the world, such as the Ethiopian Jewish community?
3. How did the Jews in Israel make the desert bloom? Is that a miracle?
4. Are there miracles in Israel's economic, political, social and cultural history?
5. Which of our prayers of two thousand years have not yet been answered? Does that change the way we see Israel?



The Irish historian Conor Cruise O'Brien once remarked that Jews who see themselves as unreligious are sometimes very religious indeed. That was true of Hess, Pinsker, Herzl, Chaim Weizmann, David Ben-Gurion and many other heroes and pioneers of the return to Zion. They were not 'spiritual' nor did they observe many of the commandments. But the vision of the prophets and the covenant of Jewish history flowed through their veins. God works through people; sometimes, so the prophets taught, without their conscious knowledge and consent. It is difficult to reflect deeply on the rebirth of Israel without sensing the touch of heaven in the minds of men and women, leading them to play their parts in a drama so much greater than any individual could have executed, even conceived. The historian Barbara Tuchman, writes, 'Viewing this strange and singular history one cannot escape the impression that it must contain some special significance for the history of mankind, that in some way, whether one believes in divine providence or inscrutable circumstance, the Jews have been singled out to carry the tale of human fate.'

Ibid, p. 53

1. Do you think aspects of secular Zionism can be considered 'religious'?
2. What is the 'vision of the prophets and the covenant of Jewish history'?
3. What does Rabbi Sacks mean when he says the secular Zionists had the 'touch of heaven' in their minds? How do you think they would feel if they were to hear Rabbi Sacks' view of them?
4. Do you think that God has directed history through people who are not necessarily religious or aware of their religious impact?
5. Do you think that Jewish history contains 'some special significance for the history of mankind'? What do you think that significance might be?



Who then wrote the script of the Jewish drama? God, or the Jewish people? Or was it, as the sages taught, an inextricable combination of both: God as he was heard by the people, and the people as they responded to God? Isaac Bashevis Singer came close when he said, 'God is a writer and we are both the heroes and the readers.' One thing is certain, that without Pesach, celebrated over the centuries, the State of Israel would not have been born. The prophets were right: the exodus of the past contained within it the exodus of the future; and I, born in the same year as the State, can only say, 'Blessed are you, O Lord... who kept us alive and sustained us and brought us to this day.'

Ibid, pp. 51–53

1. 'Who then wrote the script of the Jewish drama?' How would you answer this question?
2. What does it mean to be both the hero and the reader of Jewish history?
3. If God is the writer, can we still really be the heroes?
4. What connection do you think Rabbi Sacks is making between Pesach and the birth of the State of Israel?
5. Rabbi Sacks concludes this essay with the *beracha* of *Shehecheyanu*. What profound statement is he making about the State of Israel?



Share your analysis: Come together as a class, and share your answers. Listen carefully to the perspectives of your classmates. Did anyone take a different approach to the texts from you? Does their approach resonate with you?

Include your responses to the following questions in the class discussion:

1. What is your definition of a miracle?
2. Can a miracle be man-made? If it is, does that still make it divine in origin?
3. If the story of the State of Israel is miraculous in nature, how does that impact the way we think of it?

Frontal teaching: Facilitate a class discussion on the texts based on the students' answers. Conclude the classroom discussion with the three questions that were posed at the beginning of this section.

The Assignment

Project based learning: Using the simulation of being a “Paranormal Activity Investigator”, your students will evaluate and debate the miraculous nature of the history of the modern State of Israel. They will do this through exploring three specific events of their choice, and making an argument for both sides of the question; seeing the hand of God in these narratives, and seeing them as the achievement of man alone. They are asked to conclude the project with their own opinion as to the relationship between God and man in the narrative of modern Jewish history. You may wish to add your own suggestions to the list of events for the students to choose from.

In this unit we have explored the role of the Land of Israel in Judaism and the destiny of the Jewish people. We have also considered the story of the modern State of Israel and reflected on its miraculous nature, and the possible role of man and God in this story.

Part 1: You are a Paranormal Activity Investigator, and your client has asked you to research the history of the modern State of Israel for evidence of miraculous activity. Choose three examples of events in Israel’s history and describe what happened. Then, for each event you have chosen give two sides of the argument – firstly demonstrating God’s hand in the miracle, and conversely, how this could be seen as the work of purely human effort. Your final paragraph should be your own conclusions, whether the history of the State of Israel points towards the hand of God, man’s ingenuity and effort, or a combination of both.

Here are some examples of events from Israel’s history you may wish to research (but there are many others you could present instead):

- The rebirth of Hebrew as a modern language
- The UN Partition Plan vote of 1947
- The War of Independence
- The immigration and absorption of a million refugees in the first decade of Israel’s existence
- The Six-Day War
- The settling of the Negev desert and making it bloom
- The rescue of Jewish communities around the world, including Yemen, Iraq, Ethiopia, and Russia
- Israel’s economic boom in the last two decades

Part 2: For bonus points, prepare a list of questions for Rabbi Sacks on any of the topics we have studied in this unit. Send your questions to your teacher, who will forward a number of insightful questions from the class to Rabbi Sacks. Rabbi Sacks will respond to a selection of the questions he receives for each unit from students around the world. Visit www.RabbiSacks.org/TenPaths to see his responses.



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