בס"ד

TEN PATHS TO GOD

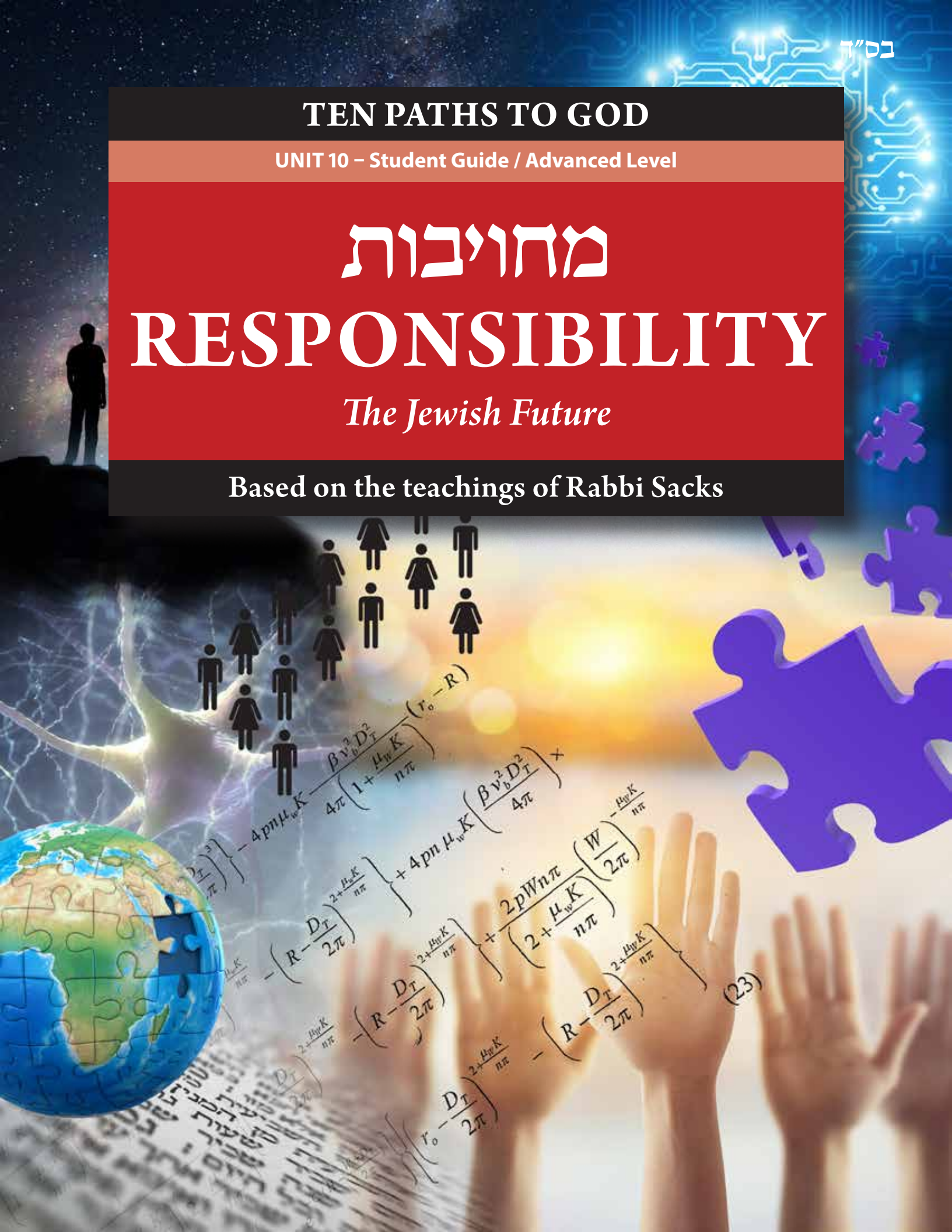
UNIT 10 – Student Guide / Advanced Level

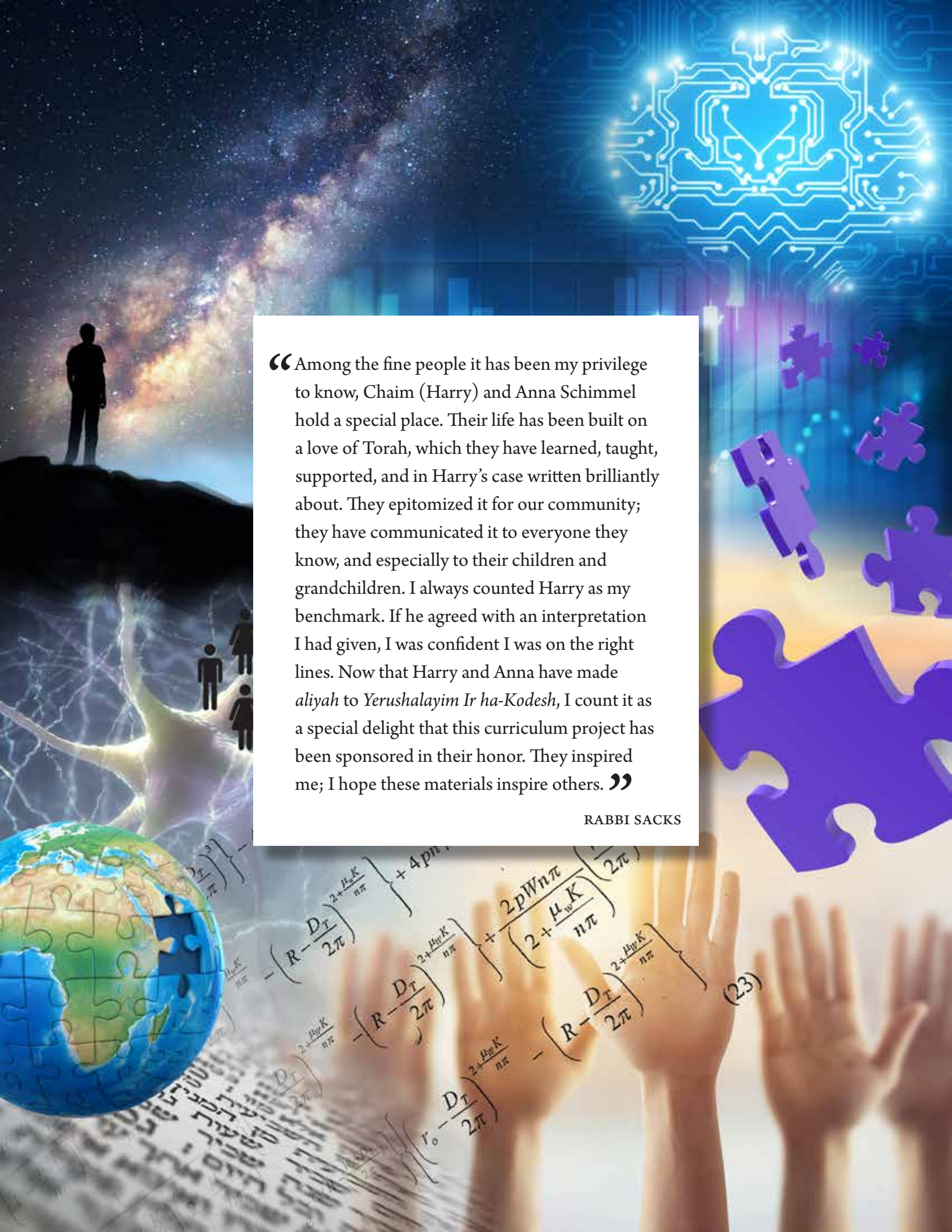
מחויבות

RESPONSIBILITY

The Jewish Future

Based on the teachings of Rabbi Sacks





"Among the fine people it has been my privilege to know, Chaim (Harry) and Anna Schimmel hold a special place. Their life has been built on a love of Torah, which they have learned, taught, supported, and in Harry's case written brilliantly about. They epitomized it for our community; they have communicated it to everyone they know, and especially to their children and grandchildren. I always counted Harry as my benchmark. If he agreed with an interpretation I had given, I was confident I was on the right lines. Now that Harry and Anna have made *aliyah* to *Yerushalayim Ir ha-Kodesh*, I count it as a special delight that this curriculum project has been sponsored in their honor. They inspired me; I hope these materials inspire others."

RABBI SACKS

Introduction

Watch: The opening video for Unit 10

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.

For every Jew today there are roughly 155 Christians and 120 Muslims. More than three thousand years later, the words of Moshe in *Sefer Devarim* remain true: 'The Lord did not set His affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of peoples.' We were then. We are now.

Why did God choose this tiny people for so great a task, to be His witnesses in the world, the people who fought against the idols of the age in every age, the carriers of His message to humanity? Why are we so few? Why this dissonance between the greatness of the task and the smallness of the people charged with carrying it out?

There is a strange passage in the Torah in *Shemot* 30:12: 'When you take a census of the Israelites to count them, each one must pay the Lord a ransom for his life at the time he is counted. Then no mishap (*negef*) will come on them when you number them.' The implication is unmistakable. It is dangerous to count Jews. Centuries later, King David ignored the warning and disaster struck the nation. So why is it dangerous to count Jews?

Nations take censuses on the assumption that there is strength in numbers. The larger the people, the stronger it is. And that is why it is dangerous to count Jews. If Jews ever believed that their strength lay in numbers, we would give way, God forbid, to despair. In Israel they were always a minor power surrounded by great empires. In the Diaspora, everywhere, they were a minority.

Where then did Jewish strength lie if not in numbers? The Torah gives an answer of surpassing beauty. God tells Moshe: Do not count Jews. Ask them to give, and then count the contributions. In terms of numbers we are small. But in terms of our contributions, we are vast. In almost every age, Jews have given something special to the world: the Torah, the literature of the prophets, the poetry of the Psalms, the rabbinic wisdom of *Mishnah*, *Midrash* and *Talmud*, the vast medieval library of commentaries and codes, philosophy and mysticism.

Then, as the doors of Western society opened, Jews made their mark in one field after another: in business, industry, the arts and sciences, cinema, the media, medicine, law and almost every field of academic life. They

revolutionized thought in physics, economics, sociology, anthropology and psychology. Jews have won Nobel Prizes out of all proportion to our numbers.

The simplest explanation is that to be a Jew is to be asked to give, to contribute, to make a difference, to help in the monumental task that has engaged Jews since the dawn of our history, to make the world a home for the Divine presence, a place of justice, compassion, human dignity and the sanctity of life. Though our ancestors cherished their relationship with God, they never saw it as a privilege. They knew it was a responsibility. God asked great things of the Jewish people, and in so doing, made them great.

When it comes to making a contribution, numbers do not count. What matters is commitment, passion, dedication to a cause. Precisely because we are so small as a people, every one of us counts. We each make a difference to the fate of Judaism and the Jewish people. Zechariah said it best: 'Not by might nor by power but by My spirit, says the Almighty Lord.'

Physical strength needs numbers. The larger the nation, the more powerful it is. But when it comes to spiritual strength, you need not numbers but a sense of responsibility. You need a people, each of whom knows that he or she must contribute something to the Jewish, and to the human story. The Jewish question is not, What can the world give me? It is, What can I give to the world? Judaism is God's call to responsibility.

Jonathan Sacks

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.

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Why did God choose this tiny people

1. When was the Jewish people chosen?
2. What does being chosen mean to you? Are you comfortable with the idea of a chosen people?
3. Just how small is this people? Compare the number of Jewish people to the population of the country you live in.

so great a task

1. What task was the Jewish people chosen for?
2. Why do you think Rabbi Sacks describes this as a "great" task?
3. How do you think we are doing with this task?

Why are we so few?

1. Do you think there are factors, for example events in Jewish history, that can explain why the Jewish people are so few in number?
2. Do you think a larger people would have an advantage in fulfilling this "great task"?
3. Do you think our small number may be an important part of God's plan for the Jewish people and its national mission?

Ask them to give

1. What are Jews asked to give in order to be counted?
2. Rabbi Sacks says there is an inherent message in this *mitzvah*. What is it?
3. Can you explain what it means that the Jewish people's strength is not in numbers, but rather in what they give?

in terms of our contributions, we are vast

1. Rabbi Sacks lists many contributions that the Jewish people have given to the world. What are they?
2. Why do you think he calls these "vast"?
3. Do you think we have contributed to the world beyond our numbers? Can you give proof to support your opinion?

Precisely because we are so small as a people, every one of us counts.

1. Do you feel as if you are a member of a small people?
2. If so, how does that impact the way you live your life?
3. Does it encourage you to feel a sense of "commitment, passion, and dedication to a cause"? Why?

Judaism is God's call to responsibility.

1. What does Rabbi Sacks mean by a "call to responsibility"? Responsibility to do what?
2. Do you feel that sense of responsibility?
3. Where do you find this call to responsibility within Judaism? Can you give examples?

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?

The Core Concepts

Exploration of the Core Concepts: Together with your *chavruta*, examine the following quote from a short pamphlet entitled *From Renewal to Responsibility*, written by Rabbi Sacks to mark the beginning of his second decade as Chief Rabbi. Then look at the supplementary sources provided below for each of the core concepts highlighted in the text. Make sure you understand it fully, and write down any questions you have. Explain how the supplementary sources help you understand the core concept they are connected to. Use the questions to guide your discussion and analysis.

A BLESSING TO OTHERS

To be a Jew is to be alert to the poverty, the suffering, the loneliness of others. Karl Marx called religion 'the opium of the people'. No religion is less so than Judaism. Opium de-sensitizes us to pain. Judaism sensitizes us to it.

No Jew who has lived Judaism can be without a social conscience. **To be a Jew is to accept responsibility.** The world will not get better of its own accord. Nor will we make it a more human place by leaving it to others – politicians, columnists, protestors, campaigners – making them our agents to bring redemption on our behalf. Life is God's question; our choices are the answer.

To be a Jew is to be a blessing to others. That is what God told Avraham in the first words he spoke to him, words that four thousand years ago set Jewish history into motion. 'Through you,' He said, 'all the families on earth will be blessed.' To be a Jew is not to ask for a blessing. It is to be a blessing.

Judaism is about creating spiritual energy: the energy that, if used for the benefit of others, changes lives and begins to change the world. Jewish life is not the search for personal salvation. It is a restless desire to change the world into a place in which God can feel at home. **There are a thousand ways in which we help to do this**, and each is precious, one not more so than another.

When we give, when we say, **'If this is wrong, let me be among the first to help put it right,'** we create moments of imperishable moral beauty. We know how small we are, and how inadequate to the tasks God has set us. Even the greatest Jew of all time, Moshe, began his conversation with God with the words, **'Who am I?'** But it is not we who start by being equal to the challenge; it is the challenge that makes us equal to it. We are as big as our ideals. The higher they are, the taller we stand.

From Renewal to Responsibility

To be a Jew is to accept responsibility.

1. What does it mean to accept responsibility? Who and what do we have to take responsibility for?
2. Why does the world need fixing? What needs fixing? Why do you need to be the one to fix it?

SHARING A FATE

A man in a boat began to bore a hole under his seat. His fellow passengers protested. 'What concern is it of yours?' he responded, 'I am making a hole under my seat, not yours.' They replied, 'That is so, but when the water enters and the boat sinks, we too will drown.'

Vayikra Rabba, 4:6

THE GREAT PRINCIPLE

All Israel are responsible for one another.

Sifra, Bechukotai, 2:7

NO ONE LEFT TO SPEAK UP

In Germany they came first for the Communists, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Communist. Then they came for the Jews, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Jew. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a trade unionist. Then they came for the Catholics, and I didn't speak up because I was a Protestant. Then they came for me, and by that time no one was left to speak up.

Pastor Martin Niemöeller, *First They Came…*

1. Can you apply the message of the man in the boat to today, and to your own life?
2. Why are all members of the Jewish people responsible for one another? Do you think we are also responsible for non-Jewish neighbors and friends? What about non-Jewish strangers?
3. What is the message of the famous quote from Martin Niemöeller?
4. Each one of these quotes speaks about a different kind of responsibility. Can you explain the differences between them? (Clue: try using the words passive and active, and negative and positive actions)
5. Do you feel a sense of responsibility? To what?

There are a thousand ways in which we help to do this

1. Name three.
2. How can you as an individual fix the world? What can you do today to help fix the world?

OUR NEXT ACT CAN CHANGE THE WORLD

Throughout the year, everyone should see himself and the world as if evenly poised between innocence and guilt. If he commits a sin he tilts the balance of his fate and that of the world to guilt, causing destruction. If he performs a good deed he shifts the balance of his fate and that of the world to innocence, bringing salvation and deliverance to others. That is the meaning of [the biblical phrase] 'the righteous person is the foundation of the world' (*Mishlei* 10: 25), namely that by an act of righteousness we influence the fate of, and save, the world.

Rambam, *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Teshuvah*, 3:4

THE STARFISH

An old man was walking on the beach at dawn when he noticed a young man picking up starfish stranded by the retreating tide, and throwing them back into the sea one by one. He went up to him and asked him why he was doing this. The young man replied that the starfish would die if left exposed to the morning sun. 'But the beach goes on for miles, and there are thousands of starfish. You will not be able to save them all. How can your effort make a difference?' The young man looked at the starfish in his hand and then threw it to safety in the waves. 'To this one', he said, 'it makes a difference.'

Loren Eiseley, *The Star Thrower*

A SMALL ACT OF CIVILITY

In 1966 an 11-year-old black boy moved with his parents and family to a white neighborhood in Washington. Sitting with his two brothers and two sisters on the front step of the house, he waited to see how they would be greeted. They were not. Passers-by turned to look at them but no one gave them a smile or even a glance of recognition. All the fearful stories he had heard about how whites treated blacks seemed to be coming true. Years later, writing about those first days in their new home, he says, 'I knew we were not welcome here. I knew we would not be liked here. I knew we would have no friends here. I knew we should not have moved here'.

As he was thinking those thoughts, a white woman coming home from work passed by on the other side of the road. She turned to the children and with a broad smile said, 'Welcome!' Disappearing into the house, she emerged minutes later with a tray laden with drinks and cream-cheese and jelly sandwiches which she brought over to the children, making them feel at home. That moment – the young man later wrote – changed his life. It gave him a sense of belonging where there was none before. It made him realize, at a time when race relations in the United States were still fraught, that a black family could feel at home in a white area and that there could be relationships that were color-blind. Over the years, he learned to admire much about the woman across the street, but it was that first spontaneous act of greeting that became, for him, a definitive memory. It broke down a wall of separation and turned strangers into friends.

The young man, Stephen Carter, is now a law professor at Yale, and he eventually wrote a book about what he learned that day. He called it *Civility*. The name of the woman, he tells us, was Sara Kestenbaum, and he adds that it was no coincidence that she was a religious Jew. 'In the Jewish tradition,' he notes, 'such civility is called *Chessed* – the doing of acts of kindness – which is in turn derived from the understanding that human beings are made in the image of God.'

Jonathan Sacks, *To Heal a Fractured World*, pp. 45–45

1. Why do you think Rambam encourages us to think that the fate of the world is in our hands and based on our very next act?
2. What is the message of the 'Star Thrower'? How can you apply that message to your life?
3. How did Sara Kestenbaum change the world?
4. How can small acts change the world? Why is that important to realize?
5. What small act to change the world can you do today?

'If this is wrong, let me be among the first to help put it right,'

1. Why be the first? What do you benefit from this?
2. Are there occasions when standing by, and letting others more qualified attend to a situation, might actually be the right thing to do? Is it wrong to stand by and watch others more qualified get there first?

DO NOT BE A BY-STANDER

Do not stand idly by when your brother's life is in danger. I am the Lord.

Vayikra 19:16

MORDECHAI AND ESTHER: TAKING RESPONSIBILITY

When Esther's words were reported to Mordechai, he sent back this answer: 'Do not think that because you are in the king's house, you alone of all the Jews will escape. For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will come from elsewhere, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?'

Megillat Esther 4:12–14

THE RIGHTEOUS DO NOT COMPLAIN

The pure and righteous do not complain about wickedness: they increase righteousness. They do not complain about heresy: they increase faith. They do not complain about ignorance: they increase wisdom.

R. Avraham Yitzchak Ha-Cohen Kook, *Arpilai Tohar*, pp. 27–28

1. What is a by-stander? What is wrong with being a by-stander? How can you balance that with what we discussed in the previous question – that sometimes we have to let others more qualified do the job?
2. Mordechai asks Esther to hear her calling, to step up to her destiny in history. Do you have a calling? What do you think your role in history could be?
3. The idea contained in Rabbi Kook's quote could also be said in the form of a well-known saying: "If you are not part of the solution, then you are part of the problem." What does that mean?
4. What is the danger in always thinking that someone else will do it?
5. How can you step up today and take responsibility for something?

'Who am I?'

1. Are we inadequate to the task of changing the world? If so, then why bother trying?
2. Does the knowledge that even Moshe doubted his own abilities help you? How?

"I WILL BE WITH YOU"

But Moshe said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and free the Israelites from Egypt?"

And He said, "I will be with you; that shall be your sign that it was I who sent you. And when you have freed the people from Egypt, you shall worship God at this mountain."

Shemot 3:11–12

HILLEL'S WISDOM

Hillel used to say: If I am not for myself, who will be for me? And if I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?

Pirkei Avot, 1: 14

IT IS NOT FOR YOU TO COMPLETE THE TASK

Rabbi Tarfon said: The day is short, the task is great, the laborers are lazy, the reward is much, and the Master insistent. He used to say: It is not for you to complete the task, but neither are you free to stand aside from it.

Pirkei Avot, 2: 20–21

1. How did God answer Moshe, and how did this help? Does it help you?
2. Hillel teaches three very important lessons. What are they? Which of these are critical to the theme of this unit?
3. If we cannot complete the job, why start it?
4. Do you believe you can change the world? How?

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?

Radical Responsibility

The concept of responsibility in the writings of Rabbi Sacks: Together with your *chavruta* join another pair to form a small *chabura* (study group). Examine the following sources to explore how Rabbi Sacks views the central role of the concept of responsibility in Judaism.

This first source is a *midrash*, which uses the literary device of *mashal* and *nimshal*. A *mashal* is a story that is given in order to teach us something about the text we are studying (here we are looking at the story of *Lech Lecha* in the 12th chapter of *Sefer Bereishit*, where Avraham is told by God to leave his birthplace and home and journey to the Land of Israel). The *nimshal* is the lesson we learn from the *mashal* about the original text. The text that follows this *midrash* is Rabbi Sacks' explanation of the midrash, and the quotes that follow that are further ideas from Rabbi Sacks on the subject of responsibility in Judaism.

Use the questions that follow each source to guide your discussion and analysis.

WHO IS THIS AVRAHAM?

אמר רבי יצחק משל **לאחד** שהיה **עובר ממקום למקום** וראה **בירה** אחת **דולקת** אמר תאמר שהבירה זו בלא **מנהיג** הציץ עליו **בעל הבירה** אמר לו אני הוא בעל הבירה כך לפי שהיה אבינו אברהם אומר תאמר שהעולם הזה בלא מנהיג **הציץ** עליו הקב"ה ואמר לו אני הוא **בעל העולם** (שם) ויתאו המלך יפיך כי הוא אדוניך ויתאו המלך יפיך ליפותיך בעולם והשתחוי לו הוי ויאמר ה' אל אברם:

Said R. Isaac: This may be compared to **a man** who was **traveling from place to place** when he saw a **building** in **flames**. 'Is it possible that the building lacks a ***manhig***?' he wondered. The **owner of the building** **peeped out** and said, ' I am the owner of the building.' Similarly, because Avraham our father said, **'Is it conceivable that the world is without a *manhig***?' the Holy One, blessed be He, peeped out and said to him, 'I am the ***Ba'al* of the World**.'

Bereishit Rabba, 39:1

a man / לאחד

1. Who is the man in the *mashal* / *nimshal*?

traveling from place to place / עובר ממקום למקום

1. In the *nimshal* what do you think the traveling might be referring to?

building / בירה

1. What does the Hebrew word בירה usually mean?
2. What kind of a building do you think בירה must be referring to here?
3. What does this building refer to in the *nimshal*? What is the *midrash* trying to teach us by using this word in the *mashal*?

flames / דולקת

1. What do you think the *midrash* is saying the flames represent for the *nimshal*?

manhig / מנהיג

1. What does the word *manhig* / מנהיג mean?
2. What does it mean in the context of the *mashal* (i.e. what do we call the *manhig* of a building)?
3. Why does the man ask where the *manhig* of the building is?

owner of the building / בעל הבירה

1. How is the owner of the building different from the *manhig* of a building?
2. Who is probably the owner of this building in the *mashal*?
3. Why isn't he putting out the fire?

peeped out / הציץ

1. Why do you think he is "peeping"?
2. What message is the *midrash* teaching us by using that word in the *mashal*?

'Is it conceivable that the world is without a *manhig*?'

1. What has Avraham seen in the world to cause him to ask this question?

Ba'al of the World / בעל העולם

1. Does God answer Avraham's question?
2. Why do you think the *midrash* describes God as the *Ba'al* of the world and not the *manhig* of the world?
3. What message do you think the *midrash* wants to convey in describing God as "peeping"?

A PALACE IN FLAMES

Avraham sees a palace. The world has order, and therefore it has a creator. But the palace is in flames. The world is full of *dis*order, of evil, violence and injustice. Now, no one builds a building and then deserts it. If there is a fire there must be someone to put it out. The building must have an owner. If so, where is he? That is the question and it gives Avraham no peace…

From time immemorial to the present, there have always been two ways of seeing the world. The first says, There is no God. There are contending forces, chance and necessity, the chance that produces variation, and the necessity that gives the strong victory over the weak. From this perspective, the evolution of the universe is inexorable and blind; there is no justice and no judge, and therefore there is no question. We can know *how*, but we can never know *why*, for there is no why. There is no palace. There are only flames.

The second view insists that there is God. All that is exists because He made it. All that happens transpires because He willed it. Therefore all injustice is an illusion. Perhaps the world itself is an illusion. When the innocent suffer, it is to teach them to find faith through suffering, obedience through chastisement, serenity through acceptance, the soul's strength through the body's torments. Evil is the cloak that masks the good. There is a question, but there is always an answer, for if we could understand God we would know that the world is as it is because it would be less good were it otherwise. There is a palace. Therefore there are no flames.

The faith of Avraham begins in the refusal to accept either answer, for both contain a truth, and between them there is a contradiction. The first accepts the reality of evil, the second the reality of God. The first says that if evil exists, God does not exist. The second says that if God exists, evil does not exist. But supposing both exist? Supposing there are both the palace and the flames?

…Judaism begins not in wonder that the world is, but in protest that the world is not as it ought to be. It is in that cry, that sacred discontent, that Avraham's journey begins… the easy answer would be to deny the reality of either God or evil. Then the contradiction would disappear and we could live at peace with the world. But to be a Jew is to have the courage to refuse easy answers and to reject either consolation or despair. God exists; therefore life has a purpose. Evil exists; therefore we have not yet achieved that purpose. Until then we must travel, just as Avraham and Sarah travelled, to begin the task of shaping a different kind of world…

What haunts us about the *midrash* is not just Avraham's question but God's reply. He gives an answer that is no answer. He says, in effect, 'I am here,' without explaining the flames. He does not attempt to put out the fire.

It is as if, instead, He were calling for help. God made the building. Man set it on fire, and only man can put out the flames. Avraham asks God, 'Where are you?' God replies, 'I am here, where are you?' Man asks God, 'Why did you abandon the world?' God asks man, 'Why did you abandon me?' So begins a dialogue between earth and heaven that has no counterpart in any other faith, and which has not ceased for four thousand years. In these questions, which only the other can answer, God and man find one another. Perhaps only together can they extinguish the flames…

God gives His word to man, and man gives his word to God. God teaches, man acts, and together they begin the task of *tikkun olam*, 'repairing, or mending, the world'. They become, in the rabbinic phrase, 'partners in the work of creation'.

A Letter in the Scroll pp. 54–56

1. According to Rabbi Sacks, what does the palace represent? What do the flames represent?
2. What kind of people look at the world and cannot see the palace, only the flames?
3. What kind of people look at the world and can only see the palace, and refuse to see the flames? How do they miss the flames?
4. What approach does Judaism take?
5. If there is both a palace and flames, why doesn't God put out the flames? Who does Judaism expect to put out the flames? Why?

FUTURE TENSE

We will not understand Judaism, or the Jewish people, or the trajectory of Jewish history, until we ask: 'What made Jews different?'… What are Jews called on to do? And why, in the twenty-first century, does it matter? The answer… has to do with the future tense. Judaism is supremely the religion of the not-yet… The answer, I believe, lies in four strange, highly distinctive features of Judaism as a faith.

The first occurs at the formative moment in the life of Moshe, when the prophet encounters God at the burning bush… Moshe asks, 'Who are you? When the Israelites ask, who has sent you, what shall I say?' God replies in a cryptic three-word phrase, *Ehyeh asher ehyeh* (Shemot 3:14)… God tells Moshe to say to the Israelites, '"I will be" sent me to you.' It is as if God had said, 'My name is the future tense. If you seek to understand me, first you will have to understand the nature and significance of the future tense.'…

The second is the Jewish sense of time… in the Hebrew Bible, a new concept of time was born… Time, for ancients, was cyclical, a matter of the slow revolving of the seasons and the generations, an endlessly

repeated sequence of birth, growth, decline and death… The Hebrew Bible is a radical break with this way of seeing things. God is to be found in history, not just in nature. Things do change. Human life is an arena of transformation… until Avraham and Moshe, no one thought of time as a journey in which where you are tomorrow will not be where you were yesterday… the future is not a mere repetition of the past. Change, growth, development, are decisive moments that alter everything. God is not only present in eternity. He is also present in the here and now, in the process of change and transformation…

The third has to do with the nature of the Jewish narrative.… The Hebrew Bible is a book of stories, quintessentially so. Whereas science and philosophy represent truth as system, Judaism represents truth as story, a sequence of events that must play themselves out in and through time… there is no other story quite like this. It breaks all the rules of narrative form. It leads us to expectations that are never met in the way we anticipated them. The Hebrew Bible is a story without an ending… The Bible leaves us… with 'the unappeased memory of a future yet to be fulfilled'… in Judaism we are always in the middle of a story whose ending lies in the future.…

Which brings us to the fourth of Judaism's unique ideas. It is the only civilization whose golden age us in the future. Judaism invented the messianic idea… to be a Jew has always been to answer the question 'Has the messiah come?' with the reply 'Not yet'. Not while there is war and terror, hunger and injustice, disease and poverty, corruption and inequality. Hence the fourth conclusion: in Judaism the golden age is always in the future.

We have, then, in Judaism four remarkable, related ideas: a God whose name is in the future tense, a future-orientated concept of time, a literature whose stories always end in a future-not-yet-reached, and a golden age which belongs to the future.

Future Tense, pp. 231–241

1. How was 'Jewish time' different to the perception of time in the ancient world?
2. According to Rabbi Sacks, why doesn't the story of the *Tanach* have an ending?
3. Does Jewish history have an ending? When?
4. What does the future tense have to do with the Jewish people's national mission?
5. Is this idea found in the *midrash* we explored at the beginning of this section? Where?

THE VOICE OF HOPE IN THE CONVERSATION OF MANKIND

This was perhaps the greatest contribution of Judaism – via the Judaic roots of Christianity – to the West. The idea that time is an arena of change, and that freedom and creativity are God's gift to humanity, resulted in astonishing advances in science and our understanding of the world, technology and our ability to control the human environment, economics and our ability to lift people out of poverty and starvation, medicine and our ability to cure disease. It led to the abolition of slavery, the growth of a more egalitarian society, the enhanced position of women, and the emergence of democracy and liberalism…

To be a Jew is to be an agent of hope. Every ritual, every command, every syllable of the Jewish story is a protest against escapism, resignation and the blind acceptance of fate. Judaism, the religion of the free God, is a religion of freedom. Jewish faith is written in the future tense. It is belief in a future that is not yet but could be, if we heed God's call, obey His will and act together as a covenantal community. The name of the Jewish future is hope…

Jews were and are still called on to be the voice of hope in the conversation of humankind.

Future Tense, pp. 249–252

1. How did the Jewish conception of time lead to the Jewish people's greatest contribution to the world?
2. How does the Jewish conception of time lead to hope?
3. What does it mean that "Jewish faith is written in the future tense"?
4. How can we be "the voice of hope in the conversation of humankind"?
5. How do the ideas that Rabbi Sacks has presented here lead to a radical sense of responsibility to the world?

The Assignment

Final Thoughts: The following text, by Rabbi Sacks, summarizes the lessons and concepts we have been studying in this unit, and may be used as the basis for the final assignment:

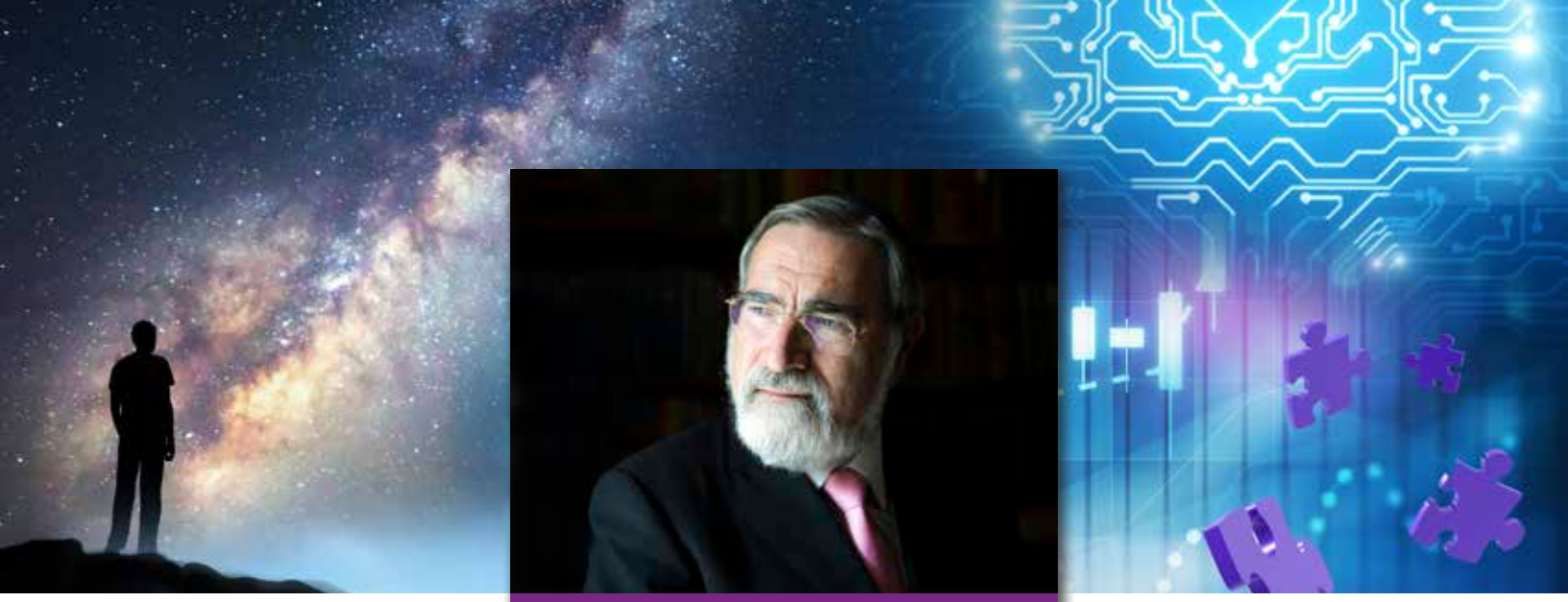
In 1888, Alfred Nobel, the man who invented dynamite, was reading his morning papers when, with a shock, he found himself reading his own obituary. It turned out that a journalist had made a simple mistake. It was Nobel's *brother* who had died.

What horrified Nobel was what he read. It spoke about "the dynamite king" who had made a fortune from explosives. Nobel suddenly realized that if he did not change his life, that was all he would be remembered for. At that moment he decided to dedicate his fortune to creating five annual prizes for those who'd made outstanding contributions in physics, chemistry, medicine, literature and peace. Nobel chose to be remembered not for selling weapons of destruction but for honoring contributions to human knowledge. The question Yom Kippur forces on us is not so much "Will we live?" but "How will we live?" For what would we wish to be remembered?

The Koren Yom Kippur Machzor

Part 1: Write your own obituary. How do you want to be remembered? Write an obituary looking back on your life (of 120 years!) based on all the things you plan to accomplish in your lifetime. What impact have you made on the world?

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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