



COVENANT & CONVERSATION

THOUGHTS ON THE WEEKLY PARSHA
FROM RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS



I am deeply touched that Covenant & Conversation has been generously sponsored by The MAURICE WOHL CHARITABLE FOUNDATION in memory of Maurice and Vivienne Wohl ז"ל. Maurice was a visionary philanthropist on a vast scale, driven throughout his life by a sense of Jewish responsibility. Vivienne was a woman of the deepest humanity and compassion, who had a kind word for everyone. Together, they were a unique partnership of dedication and grace, for whom living was giving. Through their Charitable Foundation, they continue to bring blessings to Jewish communities around the world. — RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

בראשית תשע"ט
Noach 5779

**** NEW FOR 5779 ****

COVENANT & CONVERSATION: FAMILY EDITION

Covenant & Conversation: Family Edition is a new and exciting initiative from The Office of Rabbi Sacks for 5779. Written as an accompaniment to Rabbi Sacks' weekly *Covenant & Conversation* essay, the *Family Edition* is aimed at connecting older children and teenagers with his ideas and thoughts on the *parsha*. To download the accompanying Family Edition to this Covenant & Conversation essay, please visit www.RabbiSacks.org/CCFamilyEdition or make sure you are subscribed to Rabbi Sacks' free mailing list via www.RabbiSacks.org/Subscribe and you will receive it each week in your inbox.

A Drama in Four Acts

The *parsha* of *Noach* brings to a close the eleven chapters that precede the call to Abraham and the beginning of the special relationship between him and his descendants, and God. During these eleven chapters, the Torah gives prominence to four stories: Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah and the generation of the Flood, and the Tower of Babel. Each of these stories involves an interaction between God and humanity. Each represents another step in the maturation of humanity. If we trace the course of these stories, we can discover a connection that goes deeper than chronology, a developmental line in the narrative of the evolution of humanity.

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The first story is about Adam and Eve and the forbidden fruit. Once they have eaten, and discovered shame, God asks them what they have done:

And He said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?"

The man said, "The woman You put here with me – she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it."

Then the Lord God said to the woman, "What is this you have done?"

The woman said, "The serpent deceived me, and I ate." (3:11 –13)

Faced with primal failure, the man blames the woman, the woman blames the serpent. Both deny *personal* responsibility: it wasn't me; it wasn't my fault. This is the birth of what today is called the victim culture.

The second drama is about Cain and Abel. Both bring offerings. Abel's is accepted, Cain's is not –

why this is so is not relevant here.¹ In his anger, Cain kills Abel. Again there is an exchange between a human being and God:

Then the Lord said to Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?"

"I don't know," he replied. "Am I my brother's keeper?"

The Lord said, "What have you done? Listen! Your brother's blood cries out to Me from the ground (49:9-10).

Once again the theme is responsibility, but in a different sense. Cain does not deny *personal* responsibility. He does not say, "It wasn't me." He denies *moral* responsibility. "I am not my brother's keeper." I am not responsible for his safety. Yes, I did it because I felt like it. Cain has not yet learned the difference between "I can" and "I may."

The third is the story of Noah. Noah is introduced with great expectations: "He will comfort us" (5:29), says his father Lamech, giving him his name. This is the one to redeem man's failure, to offer comfort for "the earth which God cursed." Yet though Noah is a righteous man, he is not a hero. Noah does not save humanity. He saves only himself, his family and the animals he takes with him in the ark. The *Zohar* contrasts him unfavourably with Moses: Moses prayed for his generation, Noah did not. In the end, his failure to take responsibility for others diminishes him as well: in the last scene we see him drunk and exposed in his tent. In the words of the Midrash, "he profaned himself and became profaned."² One cannot be a sole survivor and still survive. *Sauve-qui-peut* ("let everyone who can, save himself") is not a principle of Judaism. We have to do what we can to save others, not just ourselves. Noah failed the test of *collective* responsibility.

The fourth is the enigmatic story of the Tower of Babel. The sin of its builders is unclear, but is indicated by two key words in the text. The story is framed, beginning and end, with the phrase *kol ha'arets*, "the whole earth" (11:1, 8). In between, there is a series of similar sounding words: *sham* (there), *shem* (name), and *shamayim* (heaven). The story of Babel is a drama about the two key words of the first sentence of the Torah: "In the beginning God created *heaven (shamayim)* and *earth (aretz)*" (1:1). Heaven is the domain of God; earth is the domain of man. By attempting to build a tower that would "reach heaven," the builders of Babel were men trying to be like gods.

This story seems to have little to do with responsibility, and to be focusing on a different issue than do the first three. However, not accidentally does the word responsibility suggest *response*-ability. The Hebrew equivalent, *ahrayut*, comes from the word *aher*, meaning "an other." Responsibility is always a *response* to something or someone. In

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Judaism, it means response to the command of God. By attempting to reach heaven, the builders of Babel were in effect saying: we are going to take the place of God. We are not going to respond to His law or respect His boundaries, not going to accept His Otherness. We are going to create an environment where we rule, not Him, where the Other is replaced by Self. Babel is the failure of *ontological* responsibility – the idea

¹ For more on Cain and Abel, see the essay "Violence in the Name of God", *Covenant and Conversation: Genesis*, p29.

² *Bereishit Rabbah* 36:3.

that something beyond us makes a call on us.

What we see in Genesis 1–11 is an exceptionally tightly constructed four-act drama on the theme of responsibility and moral development, presenting the maturation of humanity, as echoing the maturation of the individual. The first thing we learn as children is that our acts are under our control (personal responsibility). The next is that not everything we *can* do, we *may* do (moral responsibility). The next stage is the realisation that we have a duty not just to ourselves but to those on whom we have an influence (collective responsibility). Ultimately we learn that morality is not a mere human convention, but is written into the structure of existence. There is an Author of being, therefore there is an Authority beyond mankind to whom, when acting morally, we respond (ontological responsibility).

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This is developmental psychology as we have come to know it through the work of Jean Piaget, Eric Erikson, Lawrence Kohlberg and Abraham Maslow. The subtlety and depth of the Torah is remarkable. It was the first, and is still the greatest, text on the human condition and our psychological growth from instinct to conscience, from “dust of the earth” to the morally responsible agent the Torah calls “the image of God.”

Shabbat Shalom

Jonathan Sacks

An example section from the new *Covenant & Conversation: Family Edition*



THE CORE IDEA

Between the story of creation and the call to Abraham in next week's *parsha*, the Torah tells us four stories: Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah and the Flood, and the Tower of Babel. Are they there merely because they happened? Or is there a deeper connection between them?

The first story is of how Adam and Eve eat the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden. Adam then blames Eve, who blames the snake. Neither takes personal responsibility.

Then, Cain and Abel bring offerings to God, but only Abel's is accepted. In anger, Cain kills his brother, and when he is asked by God where his brother is he answers: “Am I my brother's keeper?” He denies he has any responsibility to his brother.

Next, the Torah tells us about Noah and the Flood. Noah is described as a pure and righteous man, and therefore

God decided to save him and his family. But Noah was not a hero. He only saved himself, not humanity. Noah did not see himself as responsible for their fate.

Finally, we have the story of the Tower of Babel. Although we know it was a great sin, it isn't clear what the sin was. By trying to build a tower that would “*reach heaven*,” the builders of Babel wanted to take the place of God. They denied they had a responsibility to listen and follow God.

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

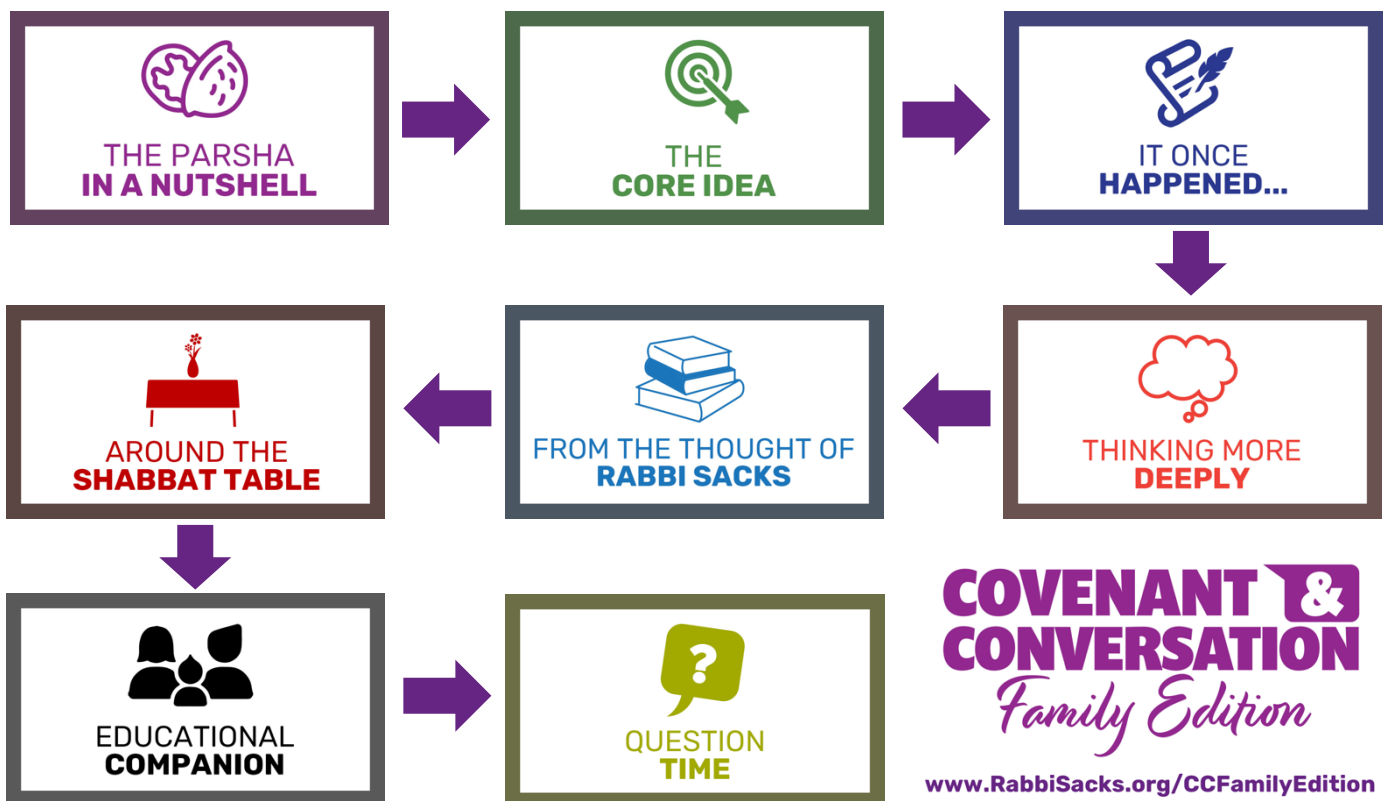
1. What is different between each story?
2. What word or theme connects these four stories?
3. What does that word mean to you in your life?

A bit more about....

COVENANT & CONVERSATION *Family Edition*

- Written as an accompaniment to Rabbi Sacks' weekly *Covenant & Conversation* essay, the *Family Edition* is aimed at connecting older children and teenagers with his ideas and thoughts on the *parsha*.
- Each element of the *Family Edition* is progressively more advanced; *The Core Idea* is appropriate for all ages and the final element, *From The Thought of Rabbi Sacks*, is the most advanced section.
- Each section includes *Questions to Ponder*, aimed at encouraging discussion between family members in a way most appropriate to them.
- We have also included a section called *Around the Shabbat Table* with a few further questions on the *parsha* to think about, and an *Educational Companion* which includes suggested talking points in response to the questions found throughout the *Family Edition*.

Visit www.RabbiSacks.org/CCFamilyEdition to watch a short video explaining the project and download the weekly *Family Edition* of *Covenant & Conversation*.



To receive the *Family Edition* together with the main *Covenant & Conversation* essay each week in your inbox, please join Rabbi Sacks' free mailing list at www.RabbiSacks.org/Subscribe.

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