



COVENANT & CONVERSATION

.....Family Edition.....

FINDING FAITH IN THE PARSHA WITH RABBI SACKS



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בס"ד

זמאת הברכה
Vezot Habracha

**The
Inheritance
That
Belongs to
All**

** KEY IDEA OF THE WEEK **

Education is the key to human dignity and should be equally available to all.



PARSHAT VEZOT HABRACHA IN A NUTSHELL

Vezot Habracha is Moshe's blessing, delivered on the last day of his life, to the Israelites, tribe by tribe. The parsha ends emotionally with the story of the death and burial of Moshe. Moshe dies in the land of Moab, in an unknown location, so that "to this day no one knows his burial place" (Devarim 34:6). Hashem did not want his grave to become a place of pilgrimage and worship.

The very last verses of the Torah are a tribute to the greatest leader and Prophet the Israelites ever had. The ultimate tribute the Torah gives Moshe is both simple and powerful. He was "the man Moshe" (Bamidbar 12:3), "the servant of the Lord" (Devarim 34:5). Vezot Habracha is not read as an

ordinary Shabbat portion, but instead we read it on the festival of Simchat Torah. It is a powerful statement about mortality and what it means to be a human. The Moshe we encounter in the Torah is simply a human being made great by the task he was set and by his humility. He became the ultimate channel through whom the word and power of God flowed.

QUESTION TO PONDER:

Does learning about the death of Moshe make him more inspiring or less inspiring as a leader?



THE CORE IDEA

The Book of Devarim is largely a record of the speeches that Moshe delivered to the Israelites before his death, before they entered the Land of Israel. These speeches were the record of a pioneering adult education experience in which the Master Prophet took the entire people as his disciples, teaching them both the law – the commands, statutes, and judgements – and no less importantly, the history that lay behind the law. Hence the prologue to the "song" of Ha'azinu: "Moshe recited the words of this song from beginning to end in the hearing of the whole assembly of Israel" (Devarim 31:30).

Likewise, the prologue to Moshe's blessing in Vezot Habracha: "This is the blessing with which Moshe, the man

of God, blessed the Israelites before his death.... Moshe commanded us the Torah, an inheritance of the congregation of Yaacov" (Devarim 33:1, 4). This verse tells us that the Torah belongs to everyone. It is the possession not of the learned, the elect, the specially gifted, not of a class or caste. It is the inheritance of the entire congregation of Yaacov.

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. Why do you think Moshe's final act as the leader of the Jewish people was an act of education – teaching the Israelites everything they needed to know about being Jewish?
2. Is it a radical idea that the Torah belongs to everyone?



IT ONCE HAPPENED...

This final chapter of the Covenant & Conversation: Family Edition is the only one written after the death of Rabbi Sacks ז"ל. In most of the Covenant & Conversation essays Rabbi Sacks wrote for Vezot Habracha, including this one, he focused in some way on the life of Moshe as the greatest Jewish leader in history. When reading his words, it is uncanny how applicable they sound to himself. Of course this was not his intention, but it is hard for us not to read them in this way, especially now he is no longer with us. In this last 'It Once Happened', we will briefly tell the story of Rabbi Sacks' life, with a focus on his leadership as an educator, and the similarity to his presentation of Moshe as a leader and educator in this week's Covenant & Conversation will be clear.

Jonathan Henry Sacks was born on the 8th of March 1948 in London. The first of four boys who would be born to Louis and Libby, the Sacks home was one dedicated to Judaism, education, and the bonds of family love. Louis Sacks did not have the same educational opportunities he worked hard to give his sons, and Rabbi Sacks would fondly tell stories from his childhood where he would ask his father Torah questions that he could not answer. His father would instead respond "one day Jonathan, you will learn all the answers and then you will teach me!"

A young Jonathan Sacks attended non-Jewish primary and secondary schools close to his home in Finchley. Despite the schools being Christian, as many as half the students were Jewish, and Jonathan found himself taking responsibility for the Jewish assemblies every morning. This was a foretaste of his future leadership roles, as well as his comfort in the company of non-Jews and his exceptional ability to represent Judaism to non-Jewish society.

He proved to be a brilliant student and in 1966 he began his university studies at Cambridge University, reading Philosophy. At this time, he deliberated between a career as an economist, an accountant, or an academic. But then, global and personal events took him on a very different journey that would ultimately lead him to a career that was not on his horizon at all, and that would ultimately bring him to impact the lives of many thousands of others. In the summer of 1967, Israel, facing elimination at the hands of her hostile neighbours, miraculously beat back five enemy armies, capturing historical Jewish lands, and reuniting Jerusalem. He was deeply impacted by this historical event, and felt a powerful yearning to embark on a journey to discover what his Jewish identity meant to him.

The following summer, he travelled to America to meet with the leading Rabbis of the generation. Two great Rabbis had a particularly important influence on him, as he would later say "the Lubavitcher Rebbe challenged me to lead and Rabbi Soloveitchik challenged me to think!" From this moment on he felt the calling of the rabbinate, and while continuing his academic studies, graduating in 1969 and receiving his Ph.D. from Kings College in 1981, he also pursued rabbinic studies, receiving *semicha* in 1976, and accepting his first

rabbinic position as Rabbi of Golders Green Synagogue in 1978.

In 1970 he had married Elaine, who was at his side throughout his life and who he would often describe as his greatest supporter and without whom he could not have achieved all of his success as a Jewish thinker and leader. Together they raised three children, Joshua, Dina, and Gila, and many grandchildren, bringing them deep joy and pride.

In 1991 it was announced that Rabbi Sacks would succeed Rabbi Lord Immanuel Jakobovits as the sixth Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth. With this the scope of Rabbi Sacks as a global Jewish leader increased, and together with the award of a Life Peerage in the House of Lords in 2005, as Baron Sacks of Aldgate in the City of London, Rabbi Lord Sacks became a moral voice with an even greater global reach.

Upon installation as Chief Rabbi he immediately set out his priorities for Anglo-Jewry, calling for a "Decade of Renewal". This included establishing Jewish Continuity, an educational foundation focused on maintaining and enriching Jewish identity. Rabbi Sacks believed passionately in the importance of Jewish education for all Jews of all ages, and yet at the same time understood that different people engage in different ways in our ancient and contemporary Jewish wisdom.

He became an erudite and inspiring speaker, mesmerising Jewish and non-Jewish audiences across the world. He wrote one book a year from the time he turned forty, completing over 35 books, some intellectual challenging and stimulating, read by politicians and global religious leaders, others on the weekly parsha or prayer, read in shuls around the world, and others that simply tell the stories of people he had met who had inspired him in his life. Something for everyone.

But not everyone is interested in listening to a lecture or reading a book. Rabbi Sacks was fascinated by the power of technology and new media, and together with his team, harnessed the technological revolution of our age to bring his message to new markets and audiences. From social media feeds to podcasts, white board animation videos to BBC radio and TV broadcasts, Rabbi Sacks he relentlessly and creatively found new avenues to spread his Torah.

In 2013 he stepped down as Chief Rabbi after 22 successful years. With more time on his hands, he increased his efforts in spreading his ideas, working even harder to write, teach, tour and produce new resources. He kept to a punishing work schedule until the very end, seeming never to sleep, writing and teaching people all over the world via his computer from the study in his attic during the months of lockdown due to Covid pandemic.

Rabbi Sacks was taken from us on the morning of the 7th of November 2020, Shabbat Kodesh, 20th MarCheshvan 5781. His sudden passing shocked the world and led to a global outpouring of grief.

In recent years he focused much of his energies on supporting educators to help them teach his Torah to a younger generation. Thus was born the Ten Paths to God curriculum, and the *Covenant & Conversation* and *Ceremony & Celebration* Family Editions. These resources will be part of his enduring legacy. Together with your support, we will continue to create resources to help spread his teachings further and wider afield, as we know he would wish.

Because as we learn in *Vezot Habracha*, Jewish education should be equally available to all: “Moshe commanded us the Torah, an inheritance of the congregation of Yaacov.”

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. What comparisons can you think of between Moshe and Rabbi Sacks?
2. Why do you think so many people were so grief-stricken when Rabbi Sacks passed away? What is the best way to respond to the pain of his loss?



THINKING MORE DEEPLY

The verse, “This is the blessing with which Moshe, the man of God, blessed the Israelites before his death... Moshe commanded us the Torah, an inheritance of the congregation of Yaacov” (Devarim 33:1, 4), is quoted by the character in a powerful story found in the midrash to prove that Torah belongs to everyone:

Once R. Yannai was walking along the way when he met a man who was elegantly dressed. R. Yannai said to him, “Will the master be my gues tonight?” He replied, “As you please.”

R. Yannai then took him home and quizzed him on Bible, but he knew nothing; on Talmud, but he knew nothing; on Aggadah, but he knew nothing. Finally, he asked him to lead the benching. The man, however, replied, “Let Yannai say grace in his house.”

R. Yannai then said to him, “Can you repeat what I tell you?” The man answered, “Yes.”

R. Yannai then said: “Say ‘a dog has eaten Yannai’s bread.’”

The guest then rose up and seized R. Yannai, demanding, “Where is my inheritance that you have and are keeping from me?”

“What inheritance of yours do I have?”

He replied, “The children recite, ‘Moshe commanded us the Torah, an inheritance of the congregation of Yaacov (Devarim 33:4). It is not written, ‘congregation of Yannai,’ but ‘congregation of Yaacov.’”

To explain, R. Yannai saw an elegantly dressed stranger and assumed that he must be well-educated. He took him home and discovered the man had had no Jewish education whatsoever. He knew nothing of the rabbinic literature and could not even lead benching. R. Yannai, a Torah scholar, treated the guest with contempt. But the stranger, with great dignity, said to him in effect: “The Torah is my inheritance as well as yours. Since you have much, and I have none, share a little of what you have with me. Instead of dismissing me, teach me.”

Few ideas in the history of Judaism have greater power than this: the idea that Torah knowledge belongs to everyone; that everyone should have the chance to learn; that education

should be universal; that everyone should be, if possible, literate in the laws, the history, and the faith of Judaism; that education is the highest form of dignity and should be accessible to all.

This idea goes so far back and so deep in Judaism that we can easily forget how radical it is. Knowledge – in the phrase commonly attributed to Sir Francis Bacon – is power. Those who have it are usually reluctant to share it with others. Most societies have had literate elites who controlled the administration of government. To this day, many professions use a technical vocabulary intelligible only to insiders, so that their knowledge is impenetrable to outsiders.

Judaism was different, profoundly so. I have speculated that this is connected with the fact that the birth of Judaism happened at roughly the same time as the birth of the alphabet, appearing in the age of the patriarchs, and whose earliest traces have been discovered in the Sinai desert in areas where slaves worked. The alphabet, with its mere twenty-two symbols, for the first time opened up the possibility of a society of universal literacy. Judaism, as we saw earlier, bears the mark of this throughout. Abraham was chosen to be a teacher: “For I have chosen him so that he will instruct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord” (Ber. 18:19). Moshe repeatedly speaks about education: “Teach them to your children, speaking of them when you sit at home and when you travel on the way, when you lie down and when you rise” (Dev. 11:19).

Above all is the personal example of Moshe himself. At a critical moment, when Eldad and Medad were prophesying in the camp and Yehoshua felt that Moshe’s authority was being challenged, Moshe replied: “Are you jealous on my behalf? Would that all the Lord’s people were Prophets and that the Lord would put His Spirit on them!” (Bamidbar 11:29). Moshe wished that everyone shared his access to the Divine.

The distinctive character of the covenant-making ceremony at Mount Sinai lay in the fact that it was, uniquely in the religious history of humankind, a revelation of God not to a Prophet or an elite but to *the entire people*, a point the Torah stresses repeatedly: “The people all responded together” (Ex. 19:8);

“Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it to the people” (Shemot 24:7).

The *hak'hel* ceremony, occurring every 7 years, was to include everyone: “Assemble the people – men, women, and children, and the strangers living in your towns – so they can listen and learn to fear the Lord your God and follow carefully all the words of this law” (Devarim 31:12). It was not that everyone *may* have knowledge of the laws and traditions of the people; it was that they *must*. This was a path-breaking form of fairness: not equality of power or wealth but equality of access to education.

The impact of this radical democratisation of knowledge can be seen in a remarkable detail in the Book of Shoftim. The context is this: The Judge Gideon (c. 1169 BCE) has been waging war against the Midianites. He asks the people of the town of Succot to give his troops food. They are famished and exhausted. The people refuse. First, they say, win the war, and then we will give you food. Gideon is angry, but he goes on to win the war. On his return, we read: “*He caught a young man of Succot and questioned him, and the young man wrote down for him the names of the 77 officials of Succot, the elders of the town.*” (Shoftim 8:14)

The rest of the story does not concern us here. What is extraordinary is that, more than 3000 ago, an Israelite leader took it for granted that a young man, chosen at random, could read and write! What is more impressive is that this is a minor detail rather than something to which the narrator wishes to draw our attention.

Nor was the lesson forgotten. In the fifth century BCE, seeking to restore coherence to a nation that had suffered defeat and exile by the Babylonians, Ezra convened the people in Jerusalem, giving them what in essence was an adult education seminar in Jewish literacy:

So on the first day of the seventh month Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, which was made up of men and women

and all who were able to understand. He read it aloud from daybreak till noon as he faced the square before the Water Gate in the presence of the men, women, and others who could understand. And all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law. (Nehemiah. 8:2–3).

Ezra and Nehemiah had positioned Levites throughout the crowd so that they could explain to everyone what was being said and what it meant (Nehemiah 8:8). This went on for many days. Ezra became, as was Moshe, an exemplar of a new kind of leadership, born in biblical Israel: *the teacher as hero*. Eventually this became the basis of the Judaism that survived the cultural challenge of Greece and the military might of Rome: not the Judaism of kings, priests, palaces, and Temple but the Judaism of the school, the synagogue, and the house of study. By the first century, a complete system of universal, compulsory education was in place, an achievement the Talmud attributes to Yehoshua b. Gamla (Bava Batra 21a), the first of its kind anywhere in the world.

Not until modern times did this idea of universal education spread beyond Judaism. It did not exist even in England, then the premier world power, until the Education Act of 1870. It has taken the internet revolution – Google and the rest – to make it a reality throughout the world. Even today, some fifty million children are still deprived of education, in countries like Somalia, Eritrea, Haiti, Comoros, and Ethiopia.

I believe that one of the most profound ideas in all of history is that education is the key to human dignity and should be equally available to all. It was born in those powerful words of *Parshat Vezot Habracha*: “Moshe commanded us the Torah, an inheritance of the congregation of Yaacov.”

QUESTION TO PONDER:

How does this approach to suffering in the world lead to humility and strength?



FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

The greatest leader we ever had was Moses. And what fascinates me is the title we gave him. Moses was a liberator, a law-giver, a military commander and a Prophet. But we call him none of these things. Instead we call him Moshe Rabbeinu, ‘Moses our teacher’, because that, for us, is the highest honour...

Teachers open our eyes to the world. They give us curiosity and confidence. They teach us to ask questions. They connect us to our past and future. They’re the guardians of our social heritage. We have lots of heroes today, and they are often celebrities – athletes, supermodels, media personalities. They come, they have their fifteen minutes of fame, and they go. But the influence of good teachers stays with us. They are the people who really shape our life.

From Optimism to Hope, pp. 131-132



AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. Why is the verse “Moshe commanded us the Torah, an inheritance of the congregation of Yaacov” an appropriate way to start your last speech as leader of the Jewish people?
2. Why is the uneducated life an undignified life?
3. What impact has this Jewish value of universal access to Torah learning had on the Jewish people throughout their history?



EDUCATIONAL COMPANION TO THE QUESTIONS

IN A NUTSHELL

1. Moshe is known as the greatest of all Jewish leaders. He is the only human known to have spoken to God face-to-face. It can be hard to relate to a leader who is on such a high spiritual level. Yet in reading about his mortality, we can connect to him as a human being. In fact, throughout the Torah we are given examples of how Moshe was a human being just like us, including details of his birth and upbringing, and various examples of his trials and tribulations, including his early lack of self-belief, and occasions when he failed. His mortality is like our own (all people die), so this is yet another aspect that allows us to connect to him as a human being. This makes his unparalleled achievements all the more inspiring.

THE CORE IDEA

1. Moshe was, first and foremost, an educator. Of all the titles he could have had, such as judge, prophet, politician, warrior, we instead call him Moshe Rabbeinu – Moshe our Teacher. As his final act of leadership, he chooses to make sure every Jew knew what it means to be a Jew, where they come from, where they are going, and what God expects of them. This is an important message for us all to learn, and Moshe, our Teacher, taught it to us.
2. In other societies, education was not always open and equally accessible to all. Sometimes only the rich can afford education. In other times, only men were educated and not women. The Torah makes it clear that the Torah is the inheritance of every Jew, and this is why Jewish education became compulsory according to Jewish law in Talmudic times, some 18 centuries before the Western world arrived at the same conclusion.

IT ONCE HAPPENED...

1. There are many comparisons, and the more we read about Moshe’s leadership (especially through the eyes of Rabbi Sacks, which can be seen in many of his *Covenant & Conversation* essays, especially from the cycle entitled *Lessons in Leadership*, also published in book form by Maggid) the more we realise that Rabbi Sacks modelled his own leadership on Moshe. He dedicated his life to serving the Jewish people in the same way Moshe did, and he shared the same leadership values as Moshe. The leadership value displayed by Moshe in this week’s parsha, universal education, is a case-in-point. This was a core value for Rabbi Sacks, who built his leadership career around it.
2. Rabbi Sacks was an inspiring leader for many thousands of people who they looked to him for guidance on how to lead their lives. Many of these people had never even met Rabbi Sacks in person, yet they felt close to him as an ever-present influence in their lives (especially through his regular writings, broadcasts and videos, as well as his books and other media). When he died we all felt a terrible chasm in our lives, as we were left bereft of a spiritual and moral guide. This is a natural emotional response to losing a great leader, and in fact the Torah describes the loss of Moshe, Aharon, and Miriam in much the same way. The best response to the pain of losing a teacher and spiritual guide is to continue to live life according to the values they taught, and to continue to learn and spread their Torah. This is how the legacy of Rabbi Sacks will endure and how he will continue to have a deep impact on our lives.

THINKING MORE DEEPLY

1. If there are people in the community who lack education, instead of judging (or worse, mocking) them, the leadership must take responsibility for them. People lacking in Jewish education reflect badly not on themselves, but rather on the leadership of the community. Rabbi Sacks worked tirelessly to increase and improve Jewish education in the Jewish community, as well as teach Jews and even non-Jews around the world. He understood this was the most important aspect of his leadership role – to provide education for all people.

AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. This is such a core message, that the Torah that Moshe brought from Sinai belongs to every Jew, that this is one of the last messages, perhaps the last enduring message, he wished to leave his followers with, before departing and handing over the leadership to Yehoshua.
2. Education is the secret to a dignified life because it is the ultimate democratising element in society. It allows for economic and intellectual development, as well as in the case of Torah education, religious development. As the saying goes, “knowledge is power”. If everyone has equal access to Torah knowledge, then there is no hierarchy where the power belongs only to the elite, either the priesthood, or the monarchy, or even the religious leadership (in biblical times the Prophets, since then the rabbinic leadership). All Jews, through their own Torah learning, can have a relationship with God.
3. The Jewish emphasis on learning and teaching Torah to the next generation has undoubtedly contributed to the miracle of Jewish survival during two thousand years of exile and dispersion. It has created an unbreakable chain of tradition and continuity. It has also enhanced the Jewish contribution to the world in all the fields in which they have excelled, furthering the development and achievements of humankind.