



**WOHL LEGACY**

# COVENANT & CONVERSATION

## Family Edition

FINDING FAITH IN THE PARSHA WITH RABBI SACKS

*"With thanks to The Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation for their generous sponsorship of Covenant & Conversation. Maurice was a visionary philanthropist. Vivienne was a woman of the deepest humility. Together, they were a unique partnership of dedication and grace, for whom living was giving."*

בס"ד

נח תש"ף  
Noach 5780

**The Light in the Ark**

### \*\* KEY IDEA OF THE WEEK \*\*

**Our understanding of Torah can be illuminated by our understanding of the world.**



### PARSHAT NOACH IN A NUTSHELL

In this week's *parsha* God sees how wicked humankind has become and decides to bring a Flood to destroy the whole world, and start again with Noah and his family. God commands Noah to build an ark, and to bring his family, and some animals, into the ark, so they can all survive.

After forty days of rain, the flooding finally ends and the water begins to disappear. When Noah can finally leave the ark, he offers a sacrifice to God, and God makes a covenant (an agreement) with Noah and all humans. In the covenant God tells humans how to be good, and promises never again to destroy the world with a flood.

Soon, a new generation of humans try to build a city whose tower will reach heaven. This is called the Tower of Babel. God prevents them by confusing their language, so that no one can understand anyone else.

The *parsha* ends with a list of the ten generations from Noah's son Shem to Abraham, who becomes the first ever Jew in next week's *parsha*.

### QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. Why do you think God needs to tell us how to be good? Shouldn't we just know?



### THE CORE IDEA

One of the many detailed ark-building instructions given to Noah is particularly important:

Make a *tzohar* for the ark and terminate it within a cubit of the top. (Bereishit 6:16)

There is a difficulty understanding what "*tzohar*" means, since the word does not appear anywhere else in Tanach. All our commentators agree that it is a source of illumination. It is what will give light within the ark itself. But what exactly was it? Rashi quotes a Midrash in which two Rabbis disagree as to its meaning: Some say this was a window; others say that it was a precious stone that gave light to them.

It is fascinating to think about why the Rabbis of the Midrash, and Rashi himself, would spend time on a question that has no practical relevance. God promises us at the end of this week's *parsha* that there will be no further

flood. We will never again need an ark floating on the water to save humankind. So why should it matter what source of light Noah had in the ark during those stormy days? Why this discussion? What is the lesson here for the future generations?

I would like to offer a possible interpretation. The answer, I suggest, lies in the history of the Hebrew language. Throughout the biblical era, the word *tevah* is used to mean an ark – a large one in the case of Noah and the flood, and very small one in the case of the basket that protected baby Moses on the River Nile (Shemot 2:3). More generally, it means "box." However, by the time of the Midrash, *tevah* had come also to mean "word."

It seems to me that the Rabbis of the Midrash were not so much commenting on Noah and the ark as reflecting on a fundamental question of *Torah*. Where and what is the *tzohar*, the brightness, the source of illumination, for the

Torah, the *tevah*, the Word? Does it come solely from within, or also from without? Does the Torah come with a window or with a precious stone? Can we find truth in ideas outside the Torah or only from within it?



## IT ONCE HAPPENED...

*There once was a wealthy man who had three sons. He wanted to give all of his riches only to the cleverest of his sons, and so he set them a task to prove their intelligence. He showed them a barn on his estate, and challenged the sons to each take a turn trying to fill the barn to the very fullest. Whoever best succeeded in this task would win the entire inheritance.*

*The eldest son worked hard gathering rocks and pebbles of all shapes and sizes and he filled the barn from the floor to the roof. His father was impressed with his effort, but he noticed many cracks in between the rocks and stones. The second son used straw, and packed the barn from floor to ceiling with it. However, his father still found tiny spaces and pockets of air between the straw. When the turn of the younger son came he took his father by the hand and led him into an empty barn.*

## QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. What is the light in the ark a metaphor for?
2. What do *you* think about light for the Word? Can non-Torah knowledge help us understand the Torah?

*His father became upset, that he had not taken the challenge seriously, but at that moment, the son took a small candle from his pocket and lit it.*

*Instantly, the barn became filled, from the floor to the roof, corner to corner and in every nook and cranny, with light.*

## QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. What do you think the message of the story is? How is it connected to *The Core Idea*?
2. Why do you think knowledge (and the Torah) is likened to light?



## THINKING MORE DEEPLY

There were always those who believed that Torah was self-sufficient. If something is difficult in Torah it is because "the words of Torah are sparse in one place but rich in another". In other words, the answer to any question in Torah can be found elsewhere in Torah. "Turn it over and turn it over for everything is within it." This was probably historically the majority view. That there is nothing to be learned outside. The Torah is illuminated by a precious stone that generates its own light. This is even hinted at in the title of the greatest work of Jewish mysticism, the *Zohar*.

There were, however, other views. Most famously, Rambam believed that a knowledge of science and philosophy – a window to the outside world – was essential to understanding God's word. He made the radical suggestion, in the *Mishnah Torah*, that it was precisely these forms of study that were the way to the love and fear of God. Through science – the knowledge of "He who spoke and called the universe into existence" – we gain a sense of the majesty and beauty, the almost infinite scope and intricate detail of creation and thus of the Creator. That is the source of love. Then, realising how small we are and how brief our lives in the total scheme of things: that is the source of fear.

The case Rambam made in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, long before the rise of science, has been strengthened a thousand times with our accelerated knowledge of the nature of the universe. Every new discovery of the vastness of the cosmos and the wonders of the micro-cosmos, fills the mind with awe. "Lift

up your eyes and look to the heavens: Who created all these?" (Yishayahu 40:26).

Rambam did not think that science and philosophy were secular disciplines, totally irrelevant to Torah. He believed that they were ancient forms of Jewish wisdom, that the Greeks had acquired from the Jews and sustained at a time when the Jewish people, through exile and dispersion, had forgotten them. So they were not foreign borrowings. Rambam was re-claiming a tradition that had been born in Israel itself. Nor were they source of independent illumination. They were simply a window through which the light of God's created universe could help us decode the Torah itself. *Understanding God's world helps us understand God's word.*

This made a significant difference to the way Rambam was able to convey the truth of Torah. So for example, his knowledge of ancient religious practices – albeit based on sources that were not always reliable – afforded him the deep insight (in *The Guide for the Perplexed*) that many of the *chukim*, the statutes, the laws that seem to have no reason, were in fact directed against specific idolatrous practices.

His knowledge of Aristotelian philosophy enabled him to formulate an idea that exists throughout both Tanach and the rabbinic literature, but that had not been articulated so clearly before, namely that Judaism has a *virtue ethic*. It is interested not just in what we do but in what we are, in the kind of

people we become. That is the basis of his pathbreaking *Hilchot De'ot*, "Laws of Ethical Character."

The more we understand the way the world is, the more we understand why the Torah is as it is. It is our roadmap through reality. It is as if secular and scientific knowledge were the map, and Torah the route.

This view, articulated by Rambam, was developed in the modern age in a variety of forms. Devotees of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch called it *Torah im derech erez*, "Torah with general culture." In Yeshiva University it came to be known as *Torah u-Madda*, "Torah and science." Together with the late Aaron Lichtenstein zt"l, I prefer the phrase *Torah ve-Chochmah*, "Torah and wisdom," because wisdom is a biblical category.

Recently, the science writer David Epstein published a fascinating book called *Range*, subtitled, *How Generalists Triumph in a Specialised World*. He makes the point that over-concentration on a single specialised topic is good for efficiency but bad for creativity. The real creatives, (people like the Nobel prize winners), are often those who had outside interests, who knew other disciplines, or had passions and hobbies outside their specialist subject. Even in a field like sport, for every Tiger Woods, who had a feel for golf even before he could speak, there is a Roger Federer, who exercised his skills in many sports before, quite late in youth, choosing to focus on tennis.

It was precisely Rambam's breadth of knowledge of science, medicine, psychology, astronomy, philosophy, logic, and many other fields that allowed him to be so wise and creative in everything he wrote, from his letters, to his *Commentary to the Mishnah*, to the *Mishnah Torah* itself, structured differently from any other code of Jewish law, all the way to *The Guide for the Perplexed*. Rambam said things that many

may have sensed before, but no one had expressed so cogently and powerfully. He showed that it is possible to be utterly devoted to Jewish faith and law and yet be creative, curious about the whole world and how it works, showing people spiritual and intellectual depths they had not seen before. That was his way making a *tzohar*, a window for the *tevah*, the Divine word.

On the other hand, the Zohar conceives of Torah as a precious stone that generates its own light and needs none from the outside. Its world is a closed system, a very deep, passionate, moving, sustained search for intimacy with the Divine that dwells within the universe and within the human soul.

We are not forced to choose either the one explanation or the other. The Chizkuni said that Noach had a precious stone for the dark days and a window for when the sun shone again. Something like that happened when it came to Torah also. During the dark days of persecution, Jewish mysticism flourished, and Torah was illuminated from within. During the benign days when the world was more open to Jews, they had a window to the outside, and so emerged figures like Rambam in the Middle Ages, and Samson Raphael Hirsch in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

**I believe that the challenge for our time is to open a series of windows so that the world can illuminate our understanding of Torah, and so that the Torah may guide us as we seek to make our way through the world.**

#### QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. Can you think of any times when the Torah has been illuminated to you from an "outside window"?



#### FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

*"If science is about the world that is, and religion is about the world that ought to be, then religion needs science because we cannot apply God's will to the world if we do not understand the world."*

**The Great Partnership, p.214.**



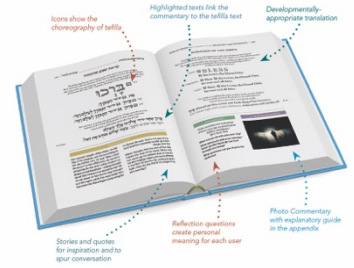
#### AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. Why do you think the classic book of Jewish mysticism, the *Zohar*, took its name from the *parsha*?
2. What is the connection between "light" and the terms "illuminate" and "enlighten" when referring to knowledge and understanding?
3. What are the practical ramifications of the debate surrounding whether the Torah's illumination comes with a precious stone (self-sufficient) or a window (an external source)?



## QUESTION TIME

Do you want to win a **Koren Aviv Weekday Siddur**? Email [CCFamilyEdition@rabbisacks.org](mailto:CCFamilyEdition@rabbisacks.org) with your name, age, city and your best question or observation about the ideas from the *Covenant & Conversation Family Edition*. **Entrants must be 18 or younger.** Thank you to Koren Publishers for kindly donating these wonderful siddurim.



## EDUCATIONAL COMPANION TO THE QUESTIONS

### IN A NUTSHELL

1. Judaism believes that every person is born with the freewill to do good or bad, and we each have the inclination to do both right and wrong. We therefore all need to work hard to be good people and choose the right path. Sometimes that path is unclear and it can be hard to choose correctly between different values. Life in this world can be very complicated! That is why God helps us by showing us what the right path is, and giving us guidelines.

### THE CORE IDEA

1. Rabbi Sacks, using a second meaning for the word *tevah* (ark) – "the word", suggests that the light from the *Tzohar* stone/window is understanding or knowledge that comes either from the Torah itself, or from the outside world that illuminates the Torah and helps us to understand it.
2. Rabbi Sacks legitimises both approaches, but in doing so, really implies there is room to understand that non-Torah knowledge can help us better understand the Torah.

### IT ONCE HAPPENED...

1. Just as light has the power to permeate every inch of a room, so knowledge, often likened to light, can permeate every inch of our souls.
2. Knowledge and light are often used interchangeably. The English words *illuminate* and *enlighten* refer to knowledge and understanding, with *light* as the etymological root for the terms. The Torah is also compared to light. Someone who has the light can see through the darkness to see the world of truth.

### THINKING MORE DEEPLY

1. Rabbi Sacks writing in his weekly *Covenant & Conversation* is a great example of a thinker who regularly uses secular knowledge to help understand the values and themes contained in the Torah. This week's edition has one such example, when Rabbi Sacks quotes David Epstein's book *Range* to help him explain the point he is making. This question encourages those participating to find personal instances when experiences, lessons learned from wider reading, media, education, news and other times in our lives have shown us something that helped us to better understand the Torah and the world.

### AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. The Zohar explains the hidden mystical secrets of the universe. Someone who understands them has gained enlightenment. The author of the Zohar chose this name because of the meaning of the term Zohar in this week's *parsha* – the source of light in the ark.
2. One who is enlightened has understanding. One who is "in the dark" about a matter, has no understanding. If you are in a dark room and cannot see anything, you do not have understanding or the truth. If you have a source of light (understanding), then you can see your environment and the truth and have become enlightened.
3. If the Torah is self-sufficient then there is never a reason to study anything outside of the Torah to gain an understanding of the world, or to help you understand the Torah itself. However, if secular non-Torah learning can help our understanding of the Torah and its application to the world, then we have a responsibility to educate ourselves outside of Torah knowledge, by learning other areas, such as science and the arts.