



# COVENANT & CONVERSATION

## Family Edition

בס"ד

פְּקוּדֵי תשע"ט  
Pekudei 5779

**On Jewish Character**

### WELCOME TO COVENANT & CONVERSATION 5779 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 receive this via email please make sure you are subscribed to Rabbi Sacks' main mailing list at [www.RabbiSacks.org/Subscribe](http://www.RabbiSacks.org/Subscribe).



### PARSHAT PEKUDEI IN A NUTSHELL

The parsha of Pekudei brings us to the end of the book of Exodus. Moses orders all the donations given for the making of the Tabernacle to be counted, and a record is

made of how each of the materials are used. The priestly garments are made. Moses finally sets up the Tabernacle, and it becomes filled with the glory of the Lord.



### THE CORE IDEA

This week's parsha could almost be mistaken for a mathematics lesson in school. It begins with calculations of all the money and materials that were donated by the people to make the Sanctuary. But if you look past all the sums and numbers there is a deep message here that follows on from two extraordinary stories. One is told in last week's parsha, the other the week before. Together, these teach us something deep about Jewish nature that is still true today.

The first incident is when God told Moses to ask the people to contribute materials to the building of the Sanctuary. They brought gold, silver and copper. They also brought wool, linen, animal skins, acacia wood, oil, spices and incense. Some even gave precious stones for the High Priest's breastplate. What was remarkable was how willing the people were to give. In fact, they brought so much that Moses had to tell them to stop!

We often see the Israelites argue and complain, but here we see a people with a deep wish to give.

One parsha earlier, we read a very different story. Moses had been up the mountain for a long time and the people had

become worried. Was he still alive? If not, how would they receive the Divine word telling them what to do and where to go? So they asked Aaron to make them a golden calf, to be an "oracle", an object through which God could speak to them.

Aaron, according to many commentators, realised that he could not stop the people by simply refusing so he tried to slow them down instead. He asked them to bring him their precious jewellery. According to the Midrash, he thought this would create arguments within families and the project would be delayed.

Instead, immediately thereafter, without a pause, we read: "So all the people took off their earrings and brought them to Aaron." (Exodus 32:3). Here again is the same generosity we saw with the Tabernacle.

These two projects could not be less alike. One, the Tabernacle, was holy. The other, the making of the Golden Calf, was close to creating an idol. Building the Tabernacle was a supreme mitzvah; making the calf was a terrible sin. Yet the people's response was the same in both cases.

That is why the Sages said: “One cannot understand the nature of this people. If they are asked to give for a calf, they give. If they are asked to give for the Tabernacle, they give!”

The common factor was the people’s characteristic of generosity. Jews may not always make the right choices in what they give to, but they *give*.

### QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. Why do you think the people were so generous in contributing to the Tabernacle?
2. What is the positive message taken from the story of the Golden calf?
3. Why do you think giving comes so naturally to Jews?



### IT ONCE HAPPENED...

On 24<sup>th</sup> February 2017, at 2 o’clock in the morning, arsonists broke into a mosque in Tampa, Florida, and torched the building. Police soon concluded that this was a hate crime, shocking the local community. Later that day Adeel Karim, a worshipper at the mosque, set up a crowdfunding page called Stand With New Tampa Muslims Against Hate, in order to raise funds to rebuild the mosque. The community rallied, and within less than a week the campaign had reached \$60,000, surpassing his original goal of \$40,000.

But Adeel noticed something strange about many of the donations they had received. “I couldn’t understand why people were donating in what seemed like weird amounts to the cause.” He wrote on Facebook later that week.

“There are sums of \$18, \$36, \$72 etc. Then I figured out after clicking on the names Avi, Cohen, Goldstein, Rubin ... Jews donate in multiples of 18 as a form of what is called “Chai”. It wishes the recipient a long life.”

“The Jewish faith has shown up in force to support our New Tampa Islamic community. I’m floored,” the post continued. It concluded with the hashtag #chaidelivered.

### QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. What is the symbolism behind giving charity in multiples of 18?
2. Why do you think so many Jews gave to this cause?



### THINKING MORE DEEPLY

In the twelfth century, Moses Maimonides twice interrupts his customary calm legal prose in his law code, the Mishneh Torah, to make the same point. Speaking about *tzedakah*, charity, he says:

*“We have never seen or heard about a Jewish community which does not have a charity fund.”*

[Laws of Gifts to the poor, 9:3]

The idea that a Jewish community could exist without a network of charitable provisions was almost inconceivable. Later in the same book, Maimonides says:

*“We are obligated to be more scrupulous in fulfilling the commandment of tzedakah than any other positive commandment because tzedakah is the sign of the righteous person, a descendant of Abraham our father, as it is said, “For I know him, that he will command his children ... to do tzedakah” ... If someone is cruel and*

*does not show mercy, there are sufficient grounds to suspect his lineage ... Whoever refuses to give charity is called Belial, the same term which is applied to idol worshippers.”* [Laws of Gifts to the poor, 10:1-3]

Maimonides is here saying more than simply ‘Jews give charity’. He is saying that the characteristic of being charitable is written into Jewish genes, part of our inherited DNA. It is one of the signs of being a child of Abraham, so much so that if someone does not give charity there are “grounds to suspect his lineage.” Whether this is nature or nurture or both, to be Jewish is to give.

There is a fascinating feature of the geography of the land of Israel. It contains two seas: the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea. The Sea of Galilee is full of life. The Dead Sea, as its name implies, is not. Yet they are fed by the same river, the Jordan. The difference is that the Sea of Galilee receives water and also gives water. The Dead Sea receives but does not give. To

receive but not to give is, in Jewish geography as well as Jewish psychology, simply not life.

So it was in the time of Moses. So it is today. In virtually every country in which Jews live, their charitable giving is out of all proportion to their numbers. In Judaism, to live is to give.



## FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

Tzedakah means both justice and charity, because we believe that they go hand in hand. Justice is impersonal, charity is personal. We call God 'Avinu Malkeinu', "Our Father, our King". A king dispenses justice, a parent gives a child a gift out of love. That is the meaning of tzedakah, an act that combines both justice and love. Giving to others is one of the most beautiful things we can do, and one of the most creative. We create possibilities for other people. We soften some of the rough edges of the world. We help alleviate poverty and pain. We give God the sacrifice He most desires of us: that we honour His image in other people.

Nothing more marks Judaism as a religion of love than its emphasis on tzedakah. We do not accept poverty, hunger, homelessness or disease as God's will. To the contrary,

God's will is that we heal these fractures in His world. As God feeds the hungry, so must we. As God heals the sick, so must we. We become good by doing good. We walk in God's ways by acting out of love.

### *Ten Paths, Unit 5, Tzedakah: Love as Justice*

#### QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. What is the difference between the word "charity" and the word "tzedakah"? What does this tell us about the Jewish concept of tzedakah?
2. Who is the focus of the mitzvah of tzedakah, the giver or the receiver? Or is there another consideration?



## AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. Why do you think the people were so generous in contributing to the Tabernacle?
2. Why do you think the people were so generous in contributing to the Golden Calf? Is it the same reason for both?
3. What do you think Rabbi Sacks means by "the characteristic of being charitable is written into Jewish genes, part of our inherited DNA"?
4. Can you suggest an explanation for why this might be?
5. Can you give any examples from your experience of the Jewish character trait of giving?



## QUESTION TIME

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Email [CCFamilyEdition@rabbisacks.org](mailto:CCFamilyEdition@rabbisacks.org) with your name, age, city and your best question about the *parsha* after reading the *Covenant & Conversation Family Edition*. **Entrants must be 18 or younger.** Thank you to Koren Publishers for kindly donating these wonderful siddurim.



### THE CORE IDEA

1. We can only speculate as to the motivation behind the generosity shown by the Israelites in contributing to the building of the Tabernacle. Perhaps it was the people's eagerness to perform this historic mitzvah – simply carrying out the word and instruction of God. Or maybe the importance of this particular commandment – the building of the Tabernacle, the focus of the Divine service, was the motivating factor. Possibly even more than just that, the people wanted to feel a part of this mitzvah, to feel ownership, so they could feel they had a role in the worship of God through the sacrificial service (which was largely performed centrally, on behalf of the people, by the priests.) However, Rabbi Sacks is also suggesting that it is an inherent character trait of Jews to be generous, and this is the overarching motivating factor behind the generosity seen in this story.
2. Despite the clearly problematic methods the people chose, they were desperate to have an intermediary between them and God. Moses had served in this role, and in his absence they forced Aaron to create a replacement. Their underlying motivation was connection and service of God. The second positive aspect to the story is the unhesitatingly generous response to Aaron's call for jewellery to create the Golden Calf. The Midrash suggests that Aaron requested this from the people assuming they would hesitate and this would delay the process long enough for Moses to return. Or perhaps it would put the people off entirely. But, because generosity was a core value of the people, his plan did not work.
3. It is hard to imagine there is a generosity gene that can be found in the DNA of the Jewish people, and certainly science has not yet discovered one if it exists. So then we must assume it is nurture. This core value of giving is at the centre of Judaism's philosophy, and it can be found both in the narrative of its classical text, and at the heart of its ethical code. Therefore it comes as second nature to every Jew to be generous.

### IT ONCE HAPPENED...

1. The numerical value of the Hebrew word for life – *chai* – is 18. This explains why so many Jews give charity in multiples of 18. It symbolises the will to life, and is a statement of intent – the wish that the charity should create and sustain life.
2. Although the message of the Core Idea is that generosity is an inherently Jewish value and character trait, it is natural that people give charity to their immediate community before looking to give beyond. ("Charity begins at home" is in fact a halachic concept expressed clearly in Maimonides' Code of Jewish Law). However, in this case, it seems that many Jews were inspired to give charity to a community that was not their own. It could be that this was to engender a feeling of peace and goodwill between the two communities. And perhaps this was also a case of Jews saying 'we know what it is like to be persecuted and attacked, and we have your back'.

### FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

1. Charity can be defined as an act of generosity to aid the poor, ill, or helpless. The root of the Hebrew word *tzedakah* is tz-d-k – which means justice. Charity is focused more on the individual (whether the giver or the recipient) and the individual act, as opposed to *tzedakah* which is focused on healing society and redressing the injustices of poverty and helplessness that inflicts a wound on society.
2. The focus of charity is the giver – it is his/her generosity. However the focus of *tzedakah* is the recipient – that the injustice of his/her life should be redressed through the act of *tzedakah*. *Tzedakah* then also takes into account the dignity of the recipient more than charity. This is expressed in the laws of *tzedakah* that demand that the dignity of the recipient be of paramount importance in the manner in which the act of *tzedakah* is carried out.

### AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. See answer 1 of *The Core Idea*.
2. The people were desperate to have an intermediary between them and God. Moses had served in this role, and in his absence they urged Aaron to create a replacement. Their underlying motivation was connection and service of God. The unhesitatingly generous response to Aaron's call for jewellery to create the Golden Calf could be also be the same core value that drove the people to give to the Tabernacle. The Midrash states that Aaron suggested the people donate jewellery to the creation of the Golden Calf in order to delay or put the people off the plan, but because generosity was a core value of the people, his plan did not work. The Midrash seems to suggest that the underlying explanation to this story is the same core value of generosity that we see in the story of the Tabernacle.
3. It is hard to imagine there is a generosity gene that can be found in the DNA of the Jewish people, and certainly science has not yet discovered one. So this is not what Rabbi Sacks is implying. Generosity is a core value at the centre of Judaism, featuring prominently both in the narrative parts of its classical texts and at the core of its ethical code. Therefore it comes as second nature to every Jew to be generous. We can therefore say this is written into our 'spiritual DNA' through the culture and values inherited by every generation, transmitted from parent to child, and teacher to student.
4. Generosity is a core value playing a prominent role in Judaism's classical texts, including the narrative parts of the Torah, as well as a central value found at the heart of Judaism legal texts, such as the Talmud, legal codes, and responsa. It is a core value of practical Jewish law to this day. This is how it has become central and second nature to every Jew.
5. Encourage the people around your Shabbat table to think of examples they have experienced or heard about of Jews demonstrating the character trait of giving, the fulfillment of the mitzvah of *tzedakah*, and perhaps also general chessed (kindness). Generosity and giving do not just involve financial help, but can also be donating time and effort.