



# COVENANT & CONVERSATION

## Family Edition

כי תשא תשע"ט  
Ki Tissa 5779

### A Stiff-Necked People

#### 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 KI TISSA IN A NUTSHELL

*Ki Tissa* begins with the final details about the Sanctuary, including a collection of money that was to serve as a census to count the Israelite population. The *parsha* then tells one of the most gripping stories in Jewish history. The people, confused and panicking without the leadership of Moses (who is up the mountain, receiving the tablets from

God), make a Golden Calf and dance before it. God tells Moses to go down. Moses does, and in his anger he smashes the tablets. He lectures the people, then returns to the mountain to beg God to forgive them. Eventually Moses again descends Mount Sinai, with a second set of tablets, unaware that his face is now radiating light.



#### THE CORE IDEA

It is a moment of the very highest drama. The Israelites, a mere forty days after God revealed Himself to them at Sinai, have made an idol: a Golden Calf. God threatens to destroy them: "I have seen these people," the Lord said to Moses, "and they are a *stiff-necked people*. Now leave Me alone so that My anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them. Then I will make you into a great nation." (Ex. 32:9).

Moses, demonstrating a perfect example of the character of Israel as one who "wrestles with God and man," (Exodus 32:29) confronts both Israel and God. To God, he prays for mercy for the people. Coming down the mountain and facing Israel, he smashes the tablets, the symbol of the covenant. He grinds the calf to dust, mixes it with water, and makes the Israelites drink it. He tells the Levites to punish the wrongdoers.

Then he climbs the mountain once again and tries to re-establish the shattered relationship between God and the people. God accepts Moses' request and tells him to carve two new tablets of stone. At this point, however, Moses makes a strange demand:

"And Moses hurried and knelt to the ground and bowed, and he said, 'If I have found favour in your eyes, my Lord, may my Lord go among us, because [*ki*] it is a stiff-necked people, and forgive our wickedness and our sin, and take us as your inheritance.'" (Ex. 34:8-9)

The difficulty in the verse is obvious. The reason Moses gives God for forgiving the Israelites is the very trait that God had previously given as a reason to abandon them: How can Moses use the people's stubbornness as the very reason for God to continue His presence among them? What is the meaning of Moses' "because" – "may my Lord go among us, *because* it is a stiff-necked people"?

The commentators offer a variety of interpretations. Rashi reads the word *ki* as "if" – "If they are stiff-necked, then forgive them." Ibn Ezra and Chizkuni read it as "although" or "despite the fact that" (*af al pi*). These are straightforward readings, though they assign to the word *ki* a meaning it does not normally have. Nachmanides takes a different approach. Precisely because of the rebelliousness of Israel, this requires the close attention of a forgiving God – like a rebellious child for whom the kindest cure is the attention and concern of a loving parent.

There is, however, another far more striking interpretation that can be traced across the centuries. In the twentieth century it was voiced by Rabbi Yitzchak Nissenbaum. The fact that Rabbi Nissenbaum lived and died in the Warsaw Ghetto makes his words all the more powerful:

Almighty God, be patient with this people, because what is now their greatest flaw will one day be their most heroic quality. They are indeed a stubborn people. When they have everything to thank You for, they complain. Mere weeks after hearing Your voice they make a Golden Calf. But just as now they are stiff-necked in their disobedience, so one day they will be equally stiff-necked in their loyalty. Nations will call on them to assimilate, but they will refuse. Mightier religions will urge them to convert, but they will resist. They will suffer humiliation, persecution, even torture and death just because of the people they belong to

and the faith they have, but they will stay true to the covenant their ancestors made with You. They will go to their deaths saying *Ani ma'amin*, "I believe." This is a people awesome in its obstinacy – and though now it is their failing, there will be times far into the future when it will be their noblest strength.

#### QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. Do you think Jews are stubborn? Can you give examples?
2. When a parent describes their child as stubborn, is that a good thing or a bad thing? Is this similar to God and His relationship to the Jewish people?
3. Why are Rabbi Yitzchak Nissenbaum's words particularly powerful once we know who he was and where he lived?



#### IT ONCE HAPPENED...

The following story was told by the Jewish historian Shlomo ibn Verga in the 15th century, whilst discussing the Jews' expulsion from Spain:

*I heard from some of the elders who came out of Spain that one of the boats was infested with the plague, and the captain of the boat forced the passengers to disembark at some uninhabited place. Most of them died there of starvation, while some gathered up all their strength to set out on foot in search of a settlement. There was one Jew among them who struggled on foot together with his wife and two children. The wife grew faint and died from the challenging journey. The husband continued on, carrying his children until both he and they fainted from hunger. When he regained consciousness, he found that his two children had died.*

*In deep grief he rose to his feet and cried out: "O Lord of all the universe, You are trying hard to give me reason to lose my faith. But know this my Lord, – even against the will of heaven – a Jew I am and a Jew I will always be. Nothing that You have already done to me, nor anything that You will in the future cause to happen to me, will change that." He then buried his children and continued on, in search of a settlement.*

#### QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. Do you find this story depressing, or inspiring and heroic? Can it be both?
2. How is this story connected to *The Core Idea*?



#### THINKING MORE DEEPLY

One is awestruck by the faith described in *The Core Idea* and *It Once Happened*. Such faith – such obstinate faith. Almost certainly it was this idea that lies behind a famous Talmudic passage about the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai:

*And they stood under the mountain: R. Avdimi b. Chama b. Chasa said: This teaches that the Holy One blessed be He, overturned the mountain above them like a barrel and said, "If you accept the Torah, it will be well. If not, this will be your burial place." R. Akha b. Yaakov observed: This constitutes a strong protest against the Torah. Said Rava: Even so, they re-accepted it in the days of Ahasuerus, for it is written, the Jews confirmed and took upon them, meaning, "they confirmed what they had accepted before." (Talmud Bavli Shabbat 88a)*

The meaning of this strange text seems to be this: at Sinai (according to R. Avdimi) the Jewish people had no choice but to accept the covenant. They had just been rescued from Egypt. God had divided the sea for them; He had sent them manna from heaven and water from the rock. Acceptance of a covenant under such conditions cannot be called free.

The real test of faith came when God was hidden. Rava's quotation from the Book of Esther is pointed and precise. Megillat Esther does not contain the name of God. The rabbis suggested that the name Esther is an allusion to the phrase *haster astir et panai*, "I will surely hide My face." The book relates the first warrant for genocide against the Jewish people. That Jews remained Jews under such conditions was proof positive that they did indeed reaffirm the covenant.

Obstinate in their disbelief during much of the biblical era, they became obstinate in their belief ever afterwards. Faced with God's presence, they disobeyed Him. Confronted with His absence, they stayed faithful to Him. That is the paradox of the stiff-necked people.

Not by accident does the main narrative of the Book of Esther begin with the words "And Mordechai would not bow down" (Esther 3:1). His refusal to defer to Haman sets the story in motion. Mordechai is also obstinate, and if there is one thing that is hard to do with a stiff neck, it is bowing. At times, Jews

found it hard to bow down to God – but they were certainly never willing to bow down to anything less. That is why, alone of all the many peoples who have entered the arena of history, Jews – even in exile, dispersed, and everywhere a minority – neither assimilated to the dominant culture nor converted to the majority faith.

"Forgive them because they are a stiff-necked people," said Moses, because the time will come when that stubbornness will be not a tragic failing but a noble and defiant loyalty. And so it came to be.



## FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

After the Holocaust, a ravaged, devastated people came back to the land of Israel and built there one of the great states of the modern world. Out in the wilderness they built farms and planted forests. In place of the totalitarian states from which many of them came, they framed a democracy. From a small population they created an army of invincible courage. In place of Jerusalem "in mourning and in ruins" they created a Jerusalem built "as a city that is closely joined together." They made the Hebrew language, the language of the Bible, live again. They built *yeshivot*, citadels of Jewish education, so that the streets of Jerusalem would once again echo with the sound of ancient learning. They brought Jewish communities, threatened by persecution, to safety. Together they brought about the collective resurrection of the Jewish people from the shadow of death to the land of life. Today when Jews sing of Israel they say *od lo avdah tikvatenu*, "Our hope is not destroyed."

If you were to ask what our response to the Holocaust should be, I would say this: Marry and have children, bring new Jewish life into the world, build schools, make communities, have faith in God who had faith in man and make sure that His voice is heard wherever evil threatens. Pursue justice, defend the defenceless, have the courage to

be different and fight for the dignity of difference. Recognise the image of God in others and defeat hate with love. Twice a year, on Yom Hashoah and the Ninth of Av, sit and mourn for those who died and remember them in your prayers. But most of all, continue to live as Jews.

When I stand today in Jerusalem, or in a Jewish school, or see a Jewish couple under the wedding canopy, or observe parents at the Shabbat table blessing their children, there are times when I am overcome with tears, not in sadness nor in joy, but in awe at this people who came face to face with the angel of death and refused to give it a final victory. The Jewish people lives, and still bears witness to the living God.

***Radical Then, Radical Now, pp. 183–184***

### QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. According to Rabbi Sacks, what is the most important response to the Holocaust?
2. How is this text connected to the ideas in the rest of *Covenant & Conversation*?



## AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. Is it good or bad to be a stiff-necked people? Is it good or bad to be a stubborn child?
2. Do you think Jews are stubborn? Can you think of examples?
3. What is the message behind the Midrash that says God held Mount Sinai over the heads of the Israelites and threatened to drop it unless they accepted the Torah?
4. Why did the Midrash suggest that the Purim story was the time when the Jews finally accepted the Torah with freewill?
5. How do the stories of Purim and of modern Jewish history illustrate the main idea of this week's *Covenant & Conversation* (as expressed by Rabbi Yitzchak Nissenbaum)?



## 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 *parsha* 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

### THE CORE IDEA

1. It is never wise to generalise about an entire nation, but sometimes Jews are described as stubborn. This does not necessarily have to be taken in a negative way. If we understand this by finding other words to express the same idea we could use words like driven, committed, loyal, strong, passionate, and having an unquenchable desire to survive and continue the legacy of the Jewish people. This drive to survive and thrive often under very hostile conditions has led to Jews often becoming known as ambitious and successful in all sorts of realms, such as economics and education, morality and activism, and public service. The survival of the Jewish people over centuries of persecution and homelessness is in itself the ultimate example of a stubborn will for survival. See also *From the Thought of Rabbi Sacks* above for further examples from modern Jewish history.
2. While it can be infuriating to have a child who knows their own mind and displays independence and a strong will at an early age, ultimately most parents will (maybe quietly) be proud and satisfied that this bodes well for the child's future, who they hope will become successful and secure in their future lives. This is the gist of Rabbi Yitzchak Nissenbaum's interpretation of Moses' words to God.
3. The fact that he said these words during the worst travails of Jewish history, yet could so eloquently describe the Jews' stubborn loyalty to their people and their God, and their indomitable will to survive, makes his words deeply inspiring and powerful.

### IT ONCE HAPPENED...

1. It certainly is depressing and deeply sad, and is just one example of a story from one tragic period of Jewish history. But the man's refusal to lose his faith under unbearable conditions reminds us of the biblical character Job who does the same. In this respect the story is inspiring and heroic.
2. This story fulfils the words of Rabbi Yitzchak Nissenbaum, where he describes the Jewish refusal to lose their faith in the face of unbearable challenges to it. This, according to Rabbi Nissenbaum is what Moses means when he says God should forgive the Israelites because they are stubborn.

### FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

1. To continue to be Jewish. To live as a Jew. To continue the legacy of the Jewish people by marrying and having children and bringing them up as proud Jews. And for Rabbi Sacks, being Jewish means "Pursue justice, defend the defenceless, have the courage to be different and fight for the dignity of difference. Recognise the image of God in others and defeat hate with love." All of this is the ultimate response to the Holocaust, and to Hitler who tried to destroy us all.
2. The examples that Rabbi Sacks brings from modern Jewish history (the continuation of the Jewish people and the creation of a thriving Jewish state just years after the darkest period of Jewish history), are brilliant illustrations of the stubborn Jewish people refusing to give up, to lose their faith, or to surrender to their enemies.

### AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. See answer 2 of *The Core Idea*.
2. See answer 1 of *The Core Idea*. There are many examples given in this *Covenant & Conversation*, including the Purim story, stories from the Roman period, the Spanish Expulsion, the Holocaust and the Modern State of Israel.
3. This troubling Midrash suggests that the Israelites did not accept the Torah out of freewill. This is a very problematic theological position. Rabbi Sacks interprets this in the following way: "at Sinai (according to R. Avdimi) the Jewish people had no choice but to accept the covenant. They had just been rescued from Egypt. God had divided the sea for them; He had sent them manna from heaven and water from the rock. Acceptance of a covenant under such conditions cannot be called free."
4. Because we have noted that God hid His face during this story (His name is not mentioned once in the whole Megillah and the name Esther means hidden). The real test of faith is to accept the Torah when God is hidden, during a traumatic and turbulent period of Jewish history, like the Purim story.
5. The characteristic of being stiff-necked has served the Jewish people well throughout their difficult history. Jews have refused to give up on their faith, on their people, and on their God.