



# 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

מטות-מסעי תש"ף  
Matot-Masei  
5780

**My Teacher:  
In Memoriam**

**\*\* KEY IDEA OF THE WEEK \*\***  
**In Judaism, the heroes are teachers**



### PARSHAT MATOT - MASEI IN A NUTSHELL

Parshat Matot begins with Moses teaching the people about promises - vows and oaths – how they should be kept and how they can be cancelled.

Two tribes, Reuven and Gad, together with half the tribe of Menashe, then ask permission to dwell on the east side of the River Jordan where the land is ideal pasture for their cattle. Moses is disappointed that they are choosing to live outside of the Land of Israel, but eventually he says yes, as long as they first join in all the battles for the Promised Land, west of the Jordan, helping the rest of the Israelites.

Parshat Masei gives us a list of the 42 stopping-points of the Israelites' forty-year journey through the wilderness. Their final stop is on the plains of Moab, where they will stay until the death of Moses. Then the parsha sets out the borders of the Promised Land, as well as highlighting which places will become cities of refuge (where people guilty of accidental murder can live safely, protected from the relatives of the person who has died).

Matot and Masei, often read together, are the final parshiot in the book of Bamidbar. This book is full of the stories of what happened while the people lived in the desert, as well as the laws that the people were taught during this time. Moses taught them, (and us), about: the laws of purity, of the Mishkan, Lashon Hara, and future laws for the Land. Sometimes the people rebelled against Moses and against God Himself, sometimes they complained or broke the laws. Every time they made a mistake, God forgave them and Moses tried to show them a better way to behave.

#### QUESTION TO PONDER:

Moses was a leader, a Judge and a Prophet. Why do you think we call him "Moshe Rabbeinu" (meaning, Moses, our teacher) and not by a different title?



### THE CORE IDEA

The cities of refuge were set aside for the protection of those found guilty of manslaughter, that is, of killing someone accidentally, without hatred or intention. Because of the once universal practice of blood vengeance (where the family of the victim would get their revenge by killing those responsible), these places of protection were very necessary.

As Shoftim puts it: "And he shall flee to one of these cities and live" (Devarim 19:5). This apparently simple concept was given a remarkable interpretation by the Talmud: The Sages taught that *if a student was exiled, his teacher was exiled with him*, as it is said: "And he shall flee to one of these cities

and live," so we must do the things for him that will enable him to live. (Makkot 10a)

Rambam explains: "Life without study is like death for scholars who seek wisdom."

In Judaism, study is seen as life itself, and students need a teacher to guide them. So, as Rambam explains, our teachers give us more than knowledge; they give us life.

Note that this is a halachic ruling, containing an important message. Judaism appreciates its teachers, like it appreciates parents, and in one way they are even more important. Parents give us physical life; teachers give us *spiritual life*.

And when our parents teach us, we are doubly blessed. Physical life is mortal, transient. Spiritual life is eternal. Therefore, we owe our teachers our life in the very deepest sense.



## IT ONCE HAPPENED...

Rabbi Nachum Rabinovitch achieved much in the world of Torah education. He was a community Rabbi in South Carolina, and Toronto; Principal of Jews' College in London; and Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivat Birkat Moshe in Israel. He was also a world-renowned posek of halacha and wrote many responsa. His knowledge of the entire rabbinic literature was comprehensive, and yet he was also well known for his mastery over almost every secular discipline, especially the sciences.

While he was a community Rabbi in Charleston, he also established a Jewish school there, demonstrating his passion for Jewish education. He believed Jewish educational institutions should be at the core of every Jewish community.

Once, a friend of his came to visit, and was invited to see the school. When the friend saw Rav Rabinovitch teaching the

## QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. Why is life without Torah study like death for scholars?
2. Think of a teacher who is really important to you. How have they made an impact on your life?

youngest children in the school how to read the Aleph Bet, he asked, "Is it fitting for such a scholar as yourself to be doing such a menial task?" Rav Rabinovitch responded: "I see nothing menial or undignified in this – it is an honour and a pleasure to be teaching the Aleph Bet to Jewish children."

More than anything, Rav Rabinovitch was a teacher.

## QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. Why do you think Rav Rabinovitch was happy teaching young children the Aleph-Bet when he knew so much more?
2. How did he "give life" (see *The Core Idea*) to all his students (young and old alike)?



## THINKING MORE DEEPLY

There are moments when Divine Providence touches you on the shoulder and makes you see a certain truth with blazing clarity. Let me share with you such a moment that happened to me this morning.

For technical reasons, I have to write my essays for the *Covenant & Conversation* series many weeks in advance. I had come to Matot-Masei, and had decided to write about the cities of refuge, but I wasn't sure which aspect to focus on. Suddenly, overwhelmingly, I felt an instinct to write about one very unusual law: *If a student was exiled to a city of refuge, his teacher was exiled with him* (see *The Core Idea*).

I had just written out the text, when the phone rang. It was my brother in Jerusalem to tell me that my teacher, Rabbi Nachum Eliezer Rabinovitch, *zecher tzaddik livracha*, had just died. Only rarely in this "world of concealment" do we feel the touch of Providence, but this timing was unmistakable.

For me, and I suspect everyone who had the privilege of studying with him, he was the greatest teacher of our generation. He was a master *posek*, as those who have read his Responsa will know. He knew the entire rabbinic literature, Bavli, Yerushalmi, Midrash Halachah and Aggadah, biblical commentaries, philosophy, codes and responsa. His creativity, halachic and aggadic, knew no bounds. He was a master of almost every secular discipline, especially the sciences. He had been a Professor of Mathematics at the University of Toronto and had written a book about probability and statistical inference. His supreme passion was the Rambam in all his

guises, particularly the Mishneh Torah, to which he devoted some fifty years of his life to writing the multi-volume commentary *Yad Peshutah*.

By the time I came to study with the Rav I had already studied at Cambridge and Oxford with some of the greatest intellects of the time, among them Sir Roger Scruton and Sir Bernard Williams. Rabbi Rabinovitch was more demanding than either of them. Only when I became his student did I learn the true meaning of intellectual rigour, *shetihyu amelim ba-Torah*, "labouring" in the Torah. To survive his scrutiny, you had to do three things: first to read everything ever written on the subject; second to analyse it with complete lucidity, searching for *omek ha-peshat*, the deep plain sense; and third, to think independently and critically. I remember writing an essay for him in which I quoted one of the most famous of 19<sup>th</sup> century Talmudic scholars. He turned to me and said, "But you didn't criticise what he wrote!" He thought that in this case the scholar had not given the correct interpretation, and I should have seen and said this. For him, intellectual honesty and independence of mind were inseparable from the quest for truth which is what Talmud Torah must always be.

Some of the most important lessons I learned from him were almost accidental. I remember on one occasion his car was being serviced, so I had the privilege of driving him home. It was a hot day, and at a busy junction in Hampstead, my car broke down and would not start up again. Unfazed, Rabbi Rabinovitch said to me, "Let's use the time to learn Torah." He

then proceeded to give me a shiur on Rambam's *Hilchot Shemittah ve-Yovel*. Around us, cars were hooting their horns. We were holding up traffic and a considerable queue had developed. The Rav remained completely calm, came to the end of his exposition, turned to me and said, "Now turn the key." I turned the key, the car started, and we went on our way.

On another occasion, I told him about my problem getting to sleep. I had become an insomniac. He said to me, joyfully, "Could you teach me how to do that?" He quoted the Rambam who ruled that one gains most of one's wisdom at night, based on the Talmudic statement that the night was created for study.

He and the late Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein zt"l were the *Gedolei ha-Dor*, the leaders and role models of their generation. They were very different, one scientific, the other artistic, one direct, the other oblique, one bold, the other cautious, but they were giants, intellectually, morally and spiritually. Happy the generation that is blessed by people like these.

It is hard to convey what having a teacher like Rabbi Rabinovitch meant. He knew, for example, that I had to learn fast because I was coming to the rabbinate late, after a career in academic philosophy. What he did was very bold. He explained to me that the fastest and best way of learning anything is to teach it. So the day I entered Jews' College as a student, I also entered it as a lecturer. How many people would have had that idea and taken that risk?

He also understood how lonely it could be if you lived by the principles of intellectual integrity and independence. Early on, he said to me, "Don't be surprised if only six people in the world understand what you are trying to do." When I asked him whether I should accept the position of Chief Rabbi, he said, in his laconic way: "Why not? After all, maybe you can teach some Torah."

He himself, in his early thirties, had been offered the job of Chief Rabbi of Johannesburg, but turned it down on the grounds that he refused to live in an apartheid state. He told me

how he was visited in Toronto by R. Louis Rabinowitz who had held the Johannesburg position until then. Looking at the Rav's modest home and thinking of his more palatial accommodation in South Africa, he said, "You turned down that for *this*?" But the Rav would never compromise his integrity and never cared for material things.

In the end, he found great happiness in the 37 years he served as head of Yeshivat Birkat Moshe in Maale Adumim. The yeshiva had been founded six years earlier by Rabbi Haim Sabato and Yitzhak Sheilat. It is said that when R. Sabato heard the Rav give a shiur, he immediately asked him to become the Rosh Yeshiva. It is hard to describe the pride with which he spoke to me about his students, all of whom served in the Israel Defense Force. Likewise it is hard to describe the awe in which his students held him. Not everyone heard of his greatness, but every person who studied with him knew his worth.

**I believe that Judaism made an extraordinarily wise decision when it made teachers its heroes and lifelong education its passion. We don't worship power or wealth. These things have their place, but not at the top of the hierarchy of values. Power forces us. Wealth induces us. But teachers develop us. They open us to the wisdom of the ages, helping us to see the world more clearly, think more deeply, argue more cogently and decide more wisely.**

"Let the reverence for your teacher be like the reverence for Heaven," said the Sages. In other words: if you want to come close to Heaven, don't search for royalty, saints, Priests or even Prophets. They may be great, but a fine teacher helps *you* to become great, and that is a different thing altogether. I was blessed by having one of the greatest teachers of our generation. The best advice I can give anyone is: find a teacher, then make yourself a disciple.

#### QUESTION TO PONDER:

How has Judaism's emphasis on education impacted Jews over the generations of Jewish history?



#### FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

*The word Torah means "teaching." God reveals Himself to humankind not in the storm, the wind, the sun, the rain, but in the voice that teaches, the words that instruct. The Torah is a text meant for every member of the nation. We must each give our consent before the covenant is binding. The heroes of Israel – Abraham, Moses, the Prophets, Scribes and Sages – are not kings, emperors or warriors but educators; and we must all be teachers to the next generations. The central institutions of the Jewish people – the family, the Temple, the Sabbath, festival rituals, and later the synagogue – are all educational in character, contexts of learning.*

**'Radical Then, Radical Now', p. 108 (Published as 'A Letter in the Scroll' in North America)**



#### AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. Why does the law force a person's teacher to relocate to a city of refuge whenever their student moves there?
2. What do you think were the most important lessons Rabbi Sacks learned from Rav Rabinovitch?
3. Why does Judaism "make teachers its heroes and lifelong education its passion"?



## 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 based on 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. Moses plays many roles when leading the Jewish people. Over the course of his life, the Torah shows him to be as a shepherd, a military leader, a Prophet, and a judge. Yet he is known as *Moshe Rabbeinu* – Moses our teacher. That is because this is the very greatest honour we can pay him. The role of teacher is the most highly respected one in Jewish society, because education is the highest of our values.

### THE CORE IDEA

1. For a Torah scholar who dedicates their entire life to the pursuit of learning Torah, this becomes life itself to them. Without Torah learning, life has no meaning. To some extent, this is the case for all Jews, and the Talmud expresses this by comparing the Torah in various places to water and air – the basic physical necessities to live in this world.
2. For younger children this may be a more challenging activity. They probably can name teachers they have a close relationship to, and feel enriched by, but it is harder for them to see the bigger picture of how teachers can change lives, sometimes through the small things. Older children and adults may be able to see this very clearly. It could be through one specific conversation, or an ongoing sense that this teacher believed in them, or a time when the teacher went above and beyond their duty as a teacher to care for them. Teachers have the power to change lives, and sometimes it takes the hindsight of many years to see how we have been impacted by them.

### IT ONCE HAPPENED...

1. Teaching young children *aleph-bet* is not any less important than teaching Talmud in an advanced academy or yeshiva. Clearly the Rav felt it was just as important. He was teaching the children the fundamental letters of the Hebrew language, the very foundation of all their future Torah learning.
2. By dedicating his life to teaching Torah, Rav Rabinovitch “gave life” to hundreds of students. He helped them to live a full Jewish life, and he spoke to their souls through the wisdom of the Torah, helping them to actualise their lives as Jews. This is why the Sages ruled that a teacher must be exiled with his student – as Rambam explained, because a teacher “gives life” through teaching Torah, and this is a basic human necessity.

### THINKING MORE DEEPLY

1. Jewish education as a central value has been essential in ensuring the survival of the Jewish people through generations of exile and persecution. It has been an important factor in limiting assimilation, and due to universal Jewish literacy, it has also helped Jews thrive economically in challenging times. Without education as our priority, would Jews have made the same impact in all the fields of wisdom throughout the ages, such as science, philosophy, and the arts, (well beyond what could be expected by their small numbers)? And would we have been able to pass down our story throughout the ages, keeping our hope, traditions and beliefs alive, if parents hadn’t taught their children, and communities hadn’t constantly worked to ensure that we had Jewish schools?

### AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. Learning Torah is a basic requirement for every Jew. Rambam says that a teacher “gives life” to their students. This suggests that life without Torah learning is not, in essence, life. So we make sure that someone who is forced to be exiled to a city of refuge has a teacher to learn from, so they can have a full life even during exile.
2. Rabbi Sacks shares with us many things that he learned from his teacher in this week’s *Covenant & Conversation*. These include the breadth of his Torah and secular knowledge, intellectual rigour, utilising every moment life offers us, practical rabbinical skills, ethical values, and perhaps most critical was that he taught him the importance of teachers, and of teaching Torah whenever you can.
3. Judaism values education above almost everything else. It therefore respects and values its teachers, and elevates them to the status of hero. Judaism believes that every Jew should have equal access to Jewish wisdom. We must all know, and live by, the Jewish values, and we have a national mission and destiny to model them by building and living in a Jewish society that places these values at its core and foundation. This can only happen if they have equal access to a Jewish education.