



# 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

ויקהל תש"ף  
Vayakhel- 5780

**Communities  
and Crowds**



## PARSHAT VAYAKHEL IN A NUTSHELL

After the sin of the Golden Calf, Moshe gathers the people together and teaches them two mitzvot. First he tells them about Shabbat, and then about the making of the Mishkan.

A few weeks ago in parshat Terumah we read the instructions for building the Mishkan, and now in parshat Vayakhel the people follow the instructions and the Mishkan is actually built. The people give generous donations for the making of it, and we read about Betzalel

and Oholiav, the chief architects and craftsmen, creating its various parts and making them beautiful.

### QUESTION TO PONDER:

Can you think of any connections between these two mitzvot – Shabbat and the Mishkan?



## THE CORE IDEA

Vayakhel is the Torah's guidebook on how to build community. It does so in a subtle way. The Torah uses a single verb, *k-h-l*, to describe two very different activities. The first appears in last week's parsha at the beginning of the story of the Golden Calf: "When the people saw that Moshe was long delayed in coming down the mountain, they gathered (*vayikahel*) around Aharon and they said to him: Get up, make us gods to go before us. This man Moshe who brought us out of Egypt – we have no idea what has become of him" (Shemot 32:1). The second time this verb is used is in the opening verse of this week's parsha: "Moshe assembled (*vayakhel*) all the community of Israel and said to them: these are the things the Lord has commanded you to do" (Shemot 35:1).

These sound similar. Both verbs could be translated as "gathered" or "assembled". But there is a fundamental difference between them. The first gathering was leaderless; the second had a leader, Moshe. The first was a *crowd*, the second a *community*. In a crowd, individuals lose their individuality. A kind of collective mentality takes over, and people find themselves doing what they would never consider doing on their own.

Charles Mackay was a Scottish poet, journalist, author, anthologist, novelist, and songwriter from the 1800s. He famously spoke of the madness of crowds. People, he said, "go mad in herds, while they only recover their senses slowly, one by one." Together, they act in a frenzy. Normal rational thought is suspended. Sometimes this results in violence, at other times in impulsive economic behaviour giving rise to unsustainable financial booms and subsequent crashes. Crowds lack the inhibitions and restraints that form our inner controls as individuals.

It was a crowd that demanded a Golden Calf to worship God, but it was a community that came together to build the Mishkan and worship God there.

### QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. Why do humans need leaders?
2. Have you ever experienced a "crowd" or a "community" as described here?



## IT ONCE HAPPENED...

Melanie Reid is a journalist who writes a regular column for *The (London) Times*. On 4 January 2020, she wrote the story of how she, her husband, and most of their Scottish village clubbed together to buy an ancient inn, and convert it into a pub.

She describes an extraordinary atmosphere of community spirit that developed. A large number of locals began volunteering their services to help open and run it. "We've got well-known classical musicians cleaning the toilets and sanding down tables. Behind the bar there are sculptors, building workers, humanist ministers, Merchant Navy officers, grandmothers, HR executives and estate agents... Retired CEOs chop wood for the fires; septuagenarians wait at tables; surveyors eye up internal walls to be knocked down and can-doers fix blocked gutters."

It has become more than a community centre; it has dramatically energised the local community. People of all ages come there to regularly play games, drink, eat, and attend

special events together. A rich variety of communal facilities and activities are building up.

She describes what happened as "the alchemy of what can be achieved in a village when everyone comes together for a common aim." This is the magic of "I" becoming "we". When you build a home together you create something far greater than anything anyone could do alone.

It's "one of the most crazy, left-field, heart-warming ventures I've ever been involved in," Melanie wrote, and it seems all of their community members, and visitors, agree.

### QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. Is there anything similar to this in your Jewish community?
2. How is this story connected to the parsha?



## THINKING MORE DEEPLY

Elias Canetti, whose book *Crowds and Power* is a classic on the subject, writes that "The crowd is the same everywhere, in all periods and cultures; it remains essentially the same among men of the most diverse origin, education and language. Once in being, it spreads with the utmost violence. Few can resist its contagion; it always wants to go on growing and there are no inherent limits to its growth. It can arise wherever people are together, and its spontaneity and suddenness are uncanny."

The crowd that gathered around Aharon was in the grip of panic. Moshe was their one contact with God, and thus he was the one who taught them, guided them, and led them to see God's miracle and power. Now he was no longer there and they did not know what had happened to him. Their request for "gods to go before us" was ill-considered and regressive. Their behaviour once the Calf was made – "the people sat down to eat and drink and then stood up to engage in revelry" – was undisciplined and dissolute. When Moshe came down the mountain at God's command, he "saw that the people were running wild for Aharon had let them run beyond control and become a laughing-stock to their enemies." What Moshe saw exemplified Carl Jung's description: "The psychology of a large crowd inevitably sinks to the level of mob psychology." Moshe saw a crowd.

The Vayakhel of this week's parsha was quite different. Moshe sought to create a community by getting the people to make personal contributions to a collective project, the Mishkan, the

Sanctuary. In a community, individuals remain individuals. Their participation is essentially voluntary: "Let everyone whose heart moves them bring an offering." Their differences are valued because they mean that each has something distinctive to contribute. Some gave gold, other silver, others bronze. Some brought wool or animal skins. Others gave precious stones. Yet others gave their labour and skills.

What united them was not the dynamic of the crowd, where we may become caught up in a collective frenzy, but rather a sense of common purpose, of helping to bring something into being that is greater than anyone could achieve alone. Communities build; they do not destroy. They bring out the best in us, not the worst. They speak not to our baser emotions such as fear but to higher aspirations, like this common goal of building a symbolic home for the Divine Presence in their midst.

By its subtle use of the verb *k-h-l*, the Torah focuses our attention not only on the product but also the process; not only on what the people made but on what they became through making it. This is how I put it in *The Home We Build Together*:

"A nation – at least, the kind of nation the Israelites were called on to become – is *created through the act of creation itself*. Not all the miracles of Exodus combined, not the plagues, the division of the sea, manna from heaven or water from a rock, not even the revelation at Sinai itself, turned the Israelites into a nation. In commanding Moshe to get the people to make the Mishkan, God was in effect saying: *To turn a group of individuals into a covenantal nation, they must build something together.*

“Freedom cannot be conferred by an outside force, not even by God Himself. It can be achieved only by collective, collaborative effort on the part of the people themselves. Hence the construction of the Tabernacle. A people is made by making. A nation is built by building.” (p. 137)

This distinction between community and crowd has become ever more significant in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The classic example is the Arab Spring of 2011. Massive protests took place throughout much of the Arab world, in Tunisia, Algeria, Jordan, Oman, Egypt, Yemen, Sudan, Iraq, Bahrain, Libya, Kuwait, Syria and elsewhere. Yet it turned rapidly into what has been called the Arab Winter. The protests still continue in a number of these countries, yet only in Tunisia has it led to constitutional democracy. Protests, in and of themselves, are never enough to generate free societies. They belong to the logic of crowd, not community.

The same is true of social media even in free societies. They are great enhancements of existing communities, but they do not in and of themselves create communities. That takes face-to-face interaction and a willingness to make sacrifices for the sake of the group. Without this, however, as Mark Zuckerberg said in 2017, “social media can contribute to divisiveness and isolation.” Indeed, when used for virtue signalling, shaming or aggressive confrontation, they can create a new form of crowd behaviour, the electronic herd.

In his new book *A Time to Build*, Yuval Levin argues that social media have undermined our social lives. “They plainly encourage the vices most dangerous to a free society. They drive us to speak without listening, to approach others confrontationally rather than graciously, to spread conspiracies and rumours, to dismiss and ignore what we would rather not hear, to make the private public, to oversimplify a complex world, to react to one another much too quickly and curtly. They eat away at our capacity for patient toleration, our decorum, our forbearance, our restraint.” These are crowd behaviours, not community ones.

The downsides of crowds are still with us. So too are the upsides of community, as Melanie Reid’s Scottish pub demonstrates.

**I believe that creating community takes hard work, and that few things in life are more worthwhile. Building something with others, we discover the joy of becoming part of something greater than we could ever achieve alone.**

#### QUESTION TO PONDER:

What communities have you experienced through being part of a team that builds something together?



#### FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

*A covenantal society is a moral community, future-oriented, goal-directed, whose citizens are on a journey toward a destination. That does not mean that people must always agree. On the contrary... what they share, though, is their emphasis on responsibility, personal, mutual, reciprocal and collective.*

*It is this combination of personal and collective responsibility that gives covenantal societies their energy. They enlist citizens. They generate ideals. They see us all as co-builders... covenant democratises responsibility. It creates active citizens. It is a politics of empowerment. It sees society as the home we build together.*

***The Home We Build Together, p.125***



#### AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. Where do Jews go to "build together" and become a community? What do they build?
2. Are crowds always negative and communities always positive?
3. Why do you think these two phenomena have the same Hebrew root (*k-h-l*)? Is there a message in that?



### IN A NUTSHELL

1. In next week's parsha, Pekudei, Rabbi Sacks connects Shabbat and the Mishkan as holy time (Shabbat) and holy space (the Mishkan or the Synagogue today) both institutions where we can rest and take respite from the chaos of the world and connect to Hashem. The rabbis in the Talmud connect Shabbat and the Mishkan and learn the categories of 'work' (*melachah*) forbidden on Shabbat from the creative acts of work that contributed to the building of the Mishkan. But in this Covenant & Conversation, Rabbi Sacks speaks about community and working as a team. The Mishkan was a project that brought the people together in teamwork, and Shabbat brings families and communities together each week also.

### THE CORE IDEA

1. Without leadership, humans are prone to herd-like behaviour. In a large crowd they may suspend their own independent thought. Therefore, if crowds are not led by strong and virtuous leaders, their behaviour can lead to negative outcomes (such as violence or mob-like behaviour).
2. Crowds can be experienced in everyday life at music concerts, and at sporting or other cultural events, for example. They are not negative by definition, but can lead to negative outcomes if not managed (for example football crowds in England in the 1980s had a disturbing reputation of violence). The same group of people coming together for a values-based initiative (for example a gathering for worship or social activism) can be considered a community. The best example of community most people have experienced is a community of worship such as a synagogue, where people come together for a shared ideal or value, and then create social action initiatives together as spin-off communities from these larger groups.

### IT ONCE HAPPENED...

1. Every Jewish community (and equally other faith communities) operates in a similar way (even if they aren't renovating and running a pub or a community centre). A Jewish community has a whole army of volunteers who make things happen week in week out. They give of their free time (while often having very demanding professional and family lives) to make sure all aspects of their shul, and their community life, run smoothly. A Jewish community is far more than just prayer services after all.
2. In the parsha we see the list of all the people's contributions to the Tabernacle. Rabbi Sacks suggests "Moshe sought to create community by getting the people to make personal contributions to a collective project, the Mishkan." Each person brought something different and each person's contribution was valued individually. Through these efforts they became united in a positive way, for a common purpose.

### THINKING MORE DEEPLY

A community based around a building project of some sort for young people could include being a counsellor at a youth movement or camp, being part of a sports team, a school club, a youth service, a play or group performance, a band, or even a school project.

### AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. The most common example of this would be a synagogue community. Many different things are "built" in a synagogue community, such as educational projects, social programmes, welfare and social activism initiatives. A school community is another example of a group of people (lay leaders/parents as well as professionals), who come together to build something (a school) and a community is a bi-product.
2. Crowds are not necessarily negative groups, although they are more likely to descend into negative behaviour than a community. A crowd found at a sporting or music event does not usually become negative and destructive (although it can) but without leadership it normally does not transition into a community either. A community that comes together to build something based on values and ideals can also become destructive in its vision (humans are a tribal species and this can result in communities that are inward looking and do not work for the betterment of humanity). It certainly helps to have the right leaders, guiding us towards positive actions.
3. The similar root of these words tells us they are two sides of the same phenomenon. When people come together, it can become a force for good (with the right leadership and values) or a force for bad (with no leadership, or the wrong leadership, and the wrong values). Like everything in this world, it can be used for the good or for the bad, and only we can determine the ultimate result.