

COMMUNITIES IN CONVERSATION

A GLOBAL DAY OF LEARNING IN MEMORY OF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ז"צ



From Optimism to Hope

To launch the inaugural *Communities in Conversation*, Gila Sacks spoke of how her late father viewed conversation as a key vehicle for learning: “[My father] learned from books, from text, from laws, from history, and from world events. But mainly, he learned from people. He would seek out people to learn from, from every possible path of life, and he would do this through conversation – through talking and listening. For him, conversation was a defining and spiritual act, a way of opening ourselves up to something beyond ourselves. A training, perhaps, for opening ourselves up to God.”

It is our pleasure to provide resources to generate conversation and learning in memory of Rabbi Sacks. This year’s theme is **From Optimism to Hope**, an idea that was important to Rabbi Sacks. This resource begins with a link to a one-minute video, and the transcript, of Rabbi Sacks explaining his definition of the distinction between optimism and hope (page 1). The remainder of the sources include texts from Tanach and Talmud (pages 2-4), and the writings of Rabbi Sacks (pages 4-6). Each text is followed by guiding questions to inspire discussion, whether in *chavrutot* (study pairs), small groups, or with a larger audience. You are welcome to choose which sections to study, according to your preferred style of learning.



Opening Video: “Optimism vs. Hope”

View the video at rabbisacks.info/optimismvshope

TRANSCRIPT

People often confuse optimism and hope. They sound similar. But in fact, they’re very different. Optimism is the belief that things are going to get better. Hope is the belief that if we work hard enough together, we can make things better. It needs no courage, just a certain naivety to be an optimist. It needs a great deal of courage to have hope.

No Jew, knowing what we do about history and our own past so often written in tears, can be an optimist. But no Jew, who is a true Jew, can ever give up hope. And that is why Judaism is for me the voice of hope in the conversation of humankind.

And hope is what transforms the human situation.



Questions to Consider

1. Is there value in being an optimist? Why is it better to have hope, according to Rabbi Sacks?
2. How has hope impacted Jewish history?
3. What does Rabbi Sacks mean when he says that “Judaism is the voice of hope in the conversation of humankind”?

Jacob as a Model of Hope

GENESIS 37:31-35

וַיִּקְחוּ אֶת כְּתֹנֶת יוֹסֵף וַיִּשְׁחֲטוּ שְׂעִיר עִזִּים וַיִּטְבְּלוּ אֶת הַכְּתֹנֶת בַּדָּם. וַיִּשְׁלְחוּ אֶת כְּתֹנֶת הַפְּסִים וַיָּבִיאוּ אֶל אָבִיהֶם וַיֹּאמְרוּ זֹאת מִצְאָנוּ הַכֹּהֵן נָא הַכְּתֹנֶת בְּנֵךְ הוּא אִם לֹא. וַיִּכְיֶרְהָ וַיֹּאמֶר כְּתֹנֶת בְּנֵי חַיִּיהָ רָעָה אֲכַלְתָּהּוּ טֹרֵף טֹרֵף יוֹסֵף. וַיִּקְרַע יַעֲקֹב שְׂמֹלֶתוֹ וַיִּשֹׁם שָׁק בְּמַתְנָיו וַיִּתְאַבֵּל עַל בְּנוֹ יָמִים רַבִּים. וַיִּקְמוּ כָל בְּנָיו וְכָל בְּנֹתָיו לִנְחָמוֹ וַיִּמָּאֵן לְהִתְנַחֵם וַיֹּאמֶר כִּי אֶרְדָּ אֶל בְּנֵי אָבִי לְשָׂאֵלָה וַיִּבֶךְ אֹתוֹ אָבִיו.

They took Joseph's robe, slaughtered a goat, and dipped the robe in the blood. They had the ornately colored robe brought to their father, and they said, "We found this. **Try to identify it. Is it your son's robe or not?**" He recognised it and said, "It is my son's robe! A wild animal must have eaten him! Joseph has been torn **limb from limb!**" Jacob tore his clothes, put sackcloth on his loins, and mourned for his son for many days. All his sons and daughters tried to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted and said, "I will go down to Sheol mourning for my son." His father wept for him.

TALMUD BAVLI, MOED KATAN 27B

"אל תבכו למת ואל תנודו לו." "אל תבכו למת" – יותר מדאי, "ואל תנודו לו" – יותר מכשיעור. הא כיצד? שלשה ימים לבכי, ושבעה להספד, ושלשים לגיהוץ ולתספורת. מכאן ואילף – אמר הקדוש ברוך הוא: אי אתם רחמנים בו יותר ממני.

The Sages taught in a *baraita* (Talmudic-era teaching not from Mishnah) with regard to the verse that states: "Weep not for the dead, neither bemoan him" (Jeremiah 22:10): "Weep not for the dead" is referring to excessive mourning; "neither bemoan him" more than the appropriate measure of time. How so? What is the appropriate measure? Three days for weeping, and seven for eulogising, and thirty for the prohibition against ironing clothing and for the prohibition against cutting hair. From this point forward the Holy One, Blessed be He, says: Do not be more merciful with the deceased than I am. If the Torah commands one to mourn for a certain period of time, then that suffices.

RABBI SACKS

Refusing Comfort, Keeping Hope (Vayeshev),
Covenant & Conversation – Genesis: The Book of Beginnings (Maggid 2009), p. 253

There are laws in Judaism about the limits of grief – *shiva*, *sheloshim*, a year. There is no such thing as a bereavement for which grief is endless. And yet Jacob refuses to be comforted. A Midrash gives a remarkable explanation. "One can be comforted for one who is dead, but not for one who is still living," it says. In other words, Jacob refused to be comforted *because he had not yet given up hope that Joseph was still alive*. That, tragically, is the fate of those who have lost members of their family (the parents of soldiers missing in action, for example), but have as yet no proof that they are dead. They cannot go through the normal stages of mourning because they cannot abandon the possibility that the missing person is still capable of being rescued. Their continuing anguish is a form of loyalty; to give up, to mourn, to be reconciled to loss, is a kind of betrayal. In such cases, grief lacks closure. To refuse to be comforted is to refuse to give up hope.



Questions to Consider

1. Why did Jacob refuse to be comforted?
2. Why does Jewish law have a clear framework, including a timeline, for mourning a loved one?
3. Was Jacob right to ignore these conventions and continue to grieve for his son?

Understanding Jacob's Response from the Laws of Guardians (*shomerim*)

RABBI SACKS

Ibid, p. 254

On what basis did Jacob continue to hope? Surely he had recognised Joseph's blood-stained coat – he said explicitly, “A wild beast has devoured him. **Joseph has been torn to pieces.**” Do these words not mean that he had accepted that Joseph was dead?

The late David Daube made a suggestion that I find convincing. The words the sons say to Jacob – *haker na*, literally “**identify please**” – have a quasi-legal connotation. Daube relates this passage to another, with which it has close linguistic parallels:

שְׁבַעַת ה' תְּהִיָּה בֵּין שְׁנֵיהֶם אִם לֹא שָׁלַח יָדוֹ בְּמִלְאֲכַת רֵעֵהוּ וְלִקַּח בְּעַלְיוֹ וְלֹא יִשְׁלֵם. וְאִם גָּנַב יִגְנַב מֵעֲמוֹ יִשְׁלֵם לְבַעְלָיו. אִם טָרַף יִטְרַף יִבְאֵהוּ עַד הַטְּרִפָּה לֹא יִשְׁלֵם. וְכִי יִשְׁאֵל אִישׁ מֵעַם רֵעֵהוּ וְנִשְׁבַּר אוֹ מֵת בְּעַלְיוֹ אִין עֲמוֹ שְׁלֵם יִשְׁלֵם.

If a man gives a donkey, an ox, a sheep or any other animal to his neighbour for safekeeping and it dies or is injured or is taken away while no one is looking, the issue between them will be settled by the taking of an oath before the Lord that the neighbour did not lay hands on the other person's property... If it [the animal] was torn to pieces by a wild animal, he shall bring the remains as evidence and he will not be required to pay for the torn animal. (Exodus 22:10–13)

RABBI SACKS

Ibid, p. 255

We now understand a series of nuances in the encounter between Jacob and his sons upon their return without Joseph. Normally they would be held responsible for their younger brother's disappearance. To avoid this, as in the case of later biblical law, they “bring the remains as evidence.” If those remains show signs of an attack by a wild animal, they must – by virtue of the law then operative – be held innocent. Their request to Jacob, *haker na*, must be construed as a legal request, meaning, “Examine the evidence.” Jacob has no alternative but to do so, and by virtue of what he has seen, to acquit them. A judge, however, may be forced to acquit someone accused of a crime because the evidence is insufficient to justify a conviction, while still retaining lingering private doubts. So Jacob was forced to find his sons innocent, without necessarily trusting what they said. In fact Jacob did not believe it, and his refusal to be comforted shows that he was unconvinced. He continued to hope that Joseph was still alive. That hope was eventually justified: Joseph was still alive, and father and son were ultimately reunited.

Jews are the people who refused to be comforted because they never gave up hope. Jacob did eventually see Joseph again. Rachel's children did return to the land. Jerusalem is once again the Jewish home. All the evidence may suggest otherwise: it may seem to signify irretrievable loss, a decree of history that cannot be overturned, a fate that must be accepted. Jews never believed the evidence because they had something else to set against it – a faith, a trust, an unbreakable hope that proved stronger than historical inevitability. It is not too much to say that Jewish survival was sustained in that hope. And that hope came from a simple – or perhaps not so simple – phrase in the life of Jacob. He refused to be comforted. And so – while we live in a world still scarred by violence, poverty, and injustice – must we.

The Prophets Refused Comfort

RABBI SACKS

The Great Partnership (Hodder & Stoughton, 2019) p. 242

Hope is not costless in the way that optimism is. It carries with it a considerable price. Those who hope *refuse to be comforted* while the hoped-for outcome is not yet reached. Given their history of suffering, Jews were rarely optimists. But they never gave up hope. That is why, when the prophets saw evil in the world, they refused to be comforted.



Questions to Consider

1. What important parallel does Rabbi Sacks find between the narrative in Genesis (37:31-35) and the laws of being a guardian (Exodus 22:10-13)?
2. Was Jacob an optimist or was he hopeful?
3. How has Jacob's model of refusing to give up hope provided an inspiration to Jews throughout Jewish history?
4. Why did the Prophets refuse to be comforted? How is this connected to Jacob's refusal to be comforted?
5. What lesson for today can we learn from Jacob's - and the Prophets' - refusal to be comforted?

Hope and Covenantal Time

RABBI SACKS

Time as a Narrative of Hope, The Jonathan Sacks Haggada (Maggid, 2013), p. 102

Jewish time is not linear but something more profound. I call it *covenantal time*. This is time not as continuous advance, but as a narrative with a beginning and a distant end, in whose midst we are and whose twists and turns continue to surprise us. The terms of the drama are set. There are two characters, God and humankind. There are continuing themes: exile and redemption, wanderings in the wilderness, backslidings and lapses, atonement and forgiveness, returns and rededications, epiphanies and moments when humanity looks for God and fails to find Him. Nothing in this narrative is as simple as linear time. There is no guarantee of progress. There are constant digressions, false turns, wanderings in the wilderness. There is no "historical inevitability"...

The deepest difference between linear and covenantal time is that whereas the first gives rise to *optimism*, the later leads to *hope*. These two concepts, often confused, are in fact utterly different. Optimism is the belief that things will get better. Hope is the belief that, together, we can make things better. Optimism is a passive virtue, hope an active one. It takes no courage – only a certain naivety – to be an optimist. It takes great courage to sustain hope. No Jew – knowing what we do of the past, of hatred, bloodshed, persecution in the name of God, suppression of human rights in the name of freedom – can be an optimist. But Jews have never given up hope. "Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall," says Isaiah, "but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength" (Isaiah 40:30). "Hold back your voice from weeping," urges Jeremiah, "there is hope for your future" (Jeremiah 31:15). To be a Prophet is to find a vestige of hope in the wreckage of despair. Jewish time is the secret of the influence of the Pesach story on the Western imagination. It is the supreme narrative of hope.



Questions to Consider

1. How does optimism lead to a linear approach to time?
2. How does this differ to hope, which leads to the covenantal time approach?
3. Which of these two approaches do you think is more prevalent in secular society? Which approach is more apparent in Jewish history?

Hope as a Statement of Faith

RABBI SACKS

To Heal a Fractured World (Continuum, 2005), p. 166

The sociologist Peter Berger called hope a signal of transcendence. There are no logical grounds to believe that tomorrow will be better than today. The alternative – the tragic sense of life – is equally coherent and consistent with the facts of human history. Nonetheless, Judaism is a religion of hope. Even after the early narratives of failure – Adam, Cain, the generation of the Flood, the Tower of Babel – God does not give up. And because of that, neither do we. I find it astonishing that after all the catastrophes of the past, even after the Holocaust itself, Jews did not despair.

Where does hope come from? Unlike pleasure, pain, aggression, and fear, hope is not a mere feeling, something we share with non-human forms of life. Nor does it exist in every possible culture. It comes from a specific set of beliefs: that the universe is not blind to our dreams, deaf to our prayers; that we are not alone; that we are here because someone willed us to be and that our very existence is testament to the creative force of love. We are not wrong to strive for justice, nor are we without help in our strivings. There is nothing written into the structure of the universe that dictates that hate, violence, war, and bloodshed are constitutive features of the human situation. Nor are these views plucked from the void. The history of Israel begins with the liberation of an enslaved people from an enslaving power. It exists in virtue of a covenant between the people and God in which both sides pledge themselves to mutual loyalty and to the task of constructing a society and set of communities in which the human person as such – regardless of rank, power, or privilege – is honoured as the bearer of the Divine image...

Hope and tragedy do not differ about facts but about interpretation and expectation... [And] they make a moral difference. Those who hope, strive. Those who are disillusioned, accept. In that respect, they are self-fulfilling prophecies. A morality of hope lives in the belief that we can change the world for the better, and without certain theological beliefs it is hard to see where hope could come from, if not from optimism. The Hebrew Bible is ... one of the great literatures of hope.



Questions to Consider

1. Where in the Tanach can we see examples of hope?
2. What statement of faith are we making when we continue to hope?
3. In a practical sense, what does hope demand from us (as opposed to optimism)?

The Voice of Hope in the Conversation of Humankind

RABBI SACKS

Future Tense (Hodder & Stoughton, 2019) pp. 249-252

This was perhaps the greatest contribution of Judaism – via the Judaic roots of Christianity – to the West. The idea that time is an arena of change, and that freedom and creativity are God’s gift to humanity, resulted in astonishing advances in science and our understanding of the world, technology and our ability to control the human environment, economics and our ability to lift people out of poverty and starvation, medicine and our ability to cure disease. It led to the abolition of slavery, the growth of a more egalitarian society, the enhanced position of women, and the emergence of democracy and liberalism...

To be a Jew is to be an agent of hope. Every ritual, every command, every syllable of the Jewish story is a protest against escapism, resignation and the blind acceptance of fate. Judaism, the religion of the free God, is a religion of freedom. Jewish faith is written in the future tense. It is belief in a future that is not yet but could be, if we heed God’s call, obey His will and act together as a covenantal community. The name of the Jewish future is hope... Jews were and are still called on to be the voice of hope in the conversation of humankind.



Questions to Consider

1. What beliefs are necessary for time to be an arena of change (and therefore a narrative of hope)?
2. How are the Jewish People called on to be “the voice of hope in the conversation of humankind”?
3. Do you think Jews are fulfilling this calling today?

Conclusion

RABBI SACKS

The Politics of Hope (Vintage, 2000), p. 268

The Hebrew word for hope – *Hatikvah* – gave its name to the national anthem of the reborn Jewish state. The fact that Jews and Judaism survive today is sufficient testimony to the strength of the human spirit, for what Jews can do, so can others.

Final Questions to Consider



1. From everything you have learned today about Rabbi Sacks’ approach to hope, what can we understand from the fact that Israel’s national anthem is called *Hatikvah*?
2. What does “keeping hope” mean to you?
3. How can we ensure the lessons we have learned from Rabbi Sacks today can be applied to our own lives, as individuals and as a nation, in the future?