

COMMUNITIES IN CONVERSATION

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



Family

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 resource was developed for the 2021 *Communities in Conversation*. May the soul of Rabbi Sacks be elevated in merit of the learning we will do today in his memory.



Opening Video: “Rabbi Sacks on Family and Marriage”

View the video at rabbisacks.info/familyvideo

TRANSCRIPT

Think of this paradox. In the 21st century, we can do things that no human beings have ever been able to do since homo sapiens first set foot on Earth. We can photograph the birth of galaxies, we can look at the human genome, we can communicate instantly across the globe. And yet, certain things that our ancestors found so simple, we find difficult to the point of impossibility. One of those is sustaining marriage and a family. Believe me, that is not an optional extra when it comes to human happiness. It is not good, as the Bible said, to live alone. Therefore, the importance of marriage and the family. I call marriage the love that becomes loyalty. That is the essential of human emotional literacy.

How do you keep the family going? All I know is that you must, because today in Britain, 44% of children are born outside marriage. Today in Britain and America, 50% of marriages end in divorce. And there are cities in Britain where there are almost no marriages anymore. The end result, of course, is that children suffer. Children are the most vulnerable in the world and we must not let children suffer.

How then do you create a marriage and sustain it? Well, I think it takes a great deal of support from friends, from community, from tradition, to keep a marriage going. Here is our faith as Jews, in which faith itself is a marriage. God says to the Children of Israel, in words Jewish men say every weekday whilst putting on tefillin, “I will betroth you to Me forever. I will betroth with you to Me in righteousness and justice, kindness and compassion. I will betroth you to Me in love, and you shall know the Lord.”

Somehow Judaism, the Shabbat table, sitting together, telling the Jewish story, singing the Jewish songs, celebrating the fact that the Divine Presence is to be found between

man and woman when they are joined in love, that is what helps us sustain a marriage. And a marriage is what gives us the sense of happiness, of joy, and of a life that brings new life into the world.



Questions to Consider

1. Why have marriage and family become hard to sustain in the 21st century?
2. Why is family so important to Judaism?
3. What messages can we learn from seeing marriage as a metaphor for our relationship with God?
4. What values must be at the heart of a family unit for it to be a force for good in the world?
5. How does Judaism help sustain marriage and families, according to Rabbi Sacks?

The Family Is Where We Learn Who We Are and How to Be Human

RABBI SACKS

Celebrating Life, pp. 100–101

The family is where the world acquires a human face, where vast metaphysical themes take on the recognisable contours of people we know. I am born into a world that has already existed for billions of years. I will die knowing that it will continue without me. I exist without having willed myself into being. These facts mock our modern conceit that choice is all and that I am precisely what I will myself to be. But without some human connection to the world—that-is-not-me, I become a random accident of evolution, the latest product of the selfish gene, chemical dust on the surface of eternity.

Through my parents, I have a history. Through my children, I have posterity. In the family I learn the complex choreography of love – what it means to give and take and share, to grow from obedience to responsibility, to learn, challenge, rebel, make mistakes, to forgive and be forgiven, to argue and make up, to win without triumph and know when graciously to lose. It's where we acquire emotional intelligence, that delicate negotiation between the given and the chosen, the things I will and the things resistant to my will.

G. K. Chesterton was right when he said that “the family is a good institution because it is uncongenial... Aunt Elizabeth is unreasonable, like mankind. Papa is excitable like mankind. Our youngest brother is mischievous, like mankind.”

James Q. Wilson put it more eloquently: “We learn to cope with the people of this world because we learn to cope with the members of our family. Those who flee the family flee the world; bereft of the former's affection, tutelage, and challenges, they are unprepared for the latter's tests, judgements and demands.”

Families are not ideal worlds. They're significant precisely because they are real worlds with people we know and trust. Working out our tensions with them, we learn how to resolve our tensions with society. They're where we count, where we make a difference, where we first find that others are there for us and we must be there for them. And yes, they have their share of pain. It is the pain of life lived in relationship. Without it we could not learn to love.

The family is the crucible of much that matters in later life, the growth of sympathy and trust and sociability. It is where we acquire our identity, self-confidence, responsibility, attachment, fellow-feeling, the moral sentiment itself. It is where we learn who we are, where we came from, and where we belong. It is where we become, in Michael Sandel's phrase, 'situated selves'. Above all, it is the matrix of the belief that lies at the heart of hope itself, namely that love given is not given in vain, that in the sharing of vulnerabilities we discover strength.



Questions to Consider

1. What do we learn about life within the 'safe-space' of family before venturing into the outside world?
2. How is the family a critical source of identity formation?

The Impact of Family on Jewish History and Civilisation

Almost all civilisations have developed ways of consecrating marriage and the family. What makes immigrant communities significant is the additional strain they face in adjusting to a new country and culture. Historically, the strength of Jewish families was the source of the resilience of Jewish communities that allowed them to survive the enforced exiles and expulsions, the ghettos, and pogroms, of a thousand years of European history.

Family in Judaism is a supreme value. It's how we celebrate our festivals and sabbaths. A Jewish child always has a starring role at the Seder table on Passover night, where we are inducted into our people's history, and where our parents fulfil their first duty, namely to teach children to ask questions.

Strong families create adaptive communities... The Jews became an intensely family-oriented people, and it was this that saved us from tragedy. After the destruction of the Second Temple in the year 70, Jews were scattered throughout the world, everywhere a minority, everywhere without rights, suffering some of the worst persecutions ever known by a people, and yet Jews survived because they never lost three things: their sense of family, their sense of community, and their faith.



Questions to Consider

1. Why do you think Jews became 'an intensely family-oriented people'?
2. How has this focus on family helped Jews throughout Jewish history?
3. Do you think the three concepts of family, community, and faith are interconnected at all? How?

The Family as an Educational Institution

RABBI SACKS

The Home We Build Together, p. 213

Marriage is the most personal and intimate of all forms of human association, and the deepest matrix of faith. We can face any future without fear if we know we will not face it alone. There is no redemption of solitude deeper than to share a life with someone we love and trust, who we know will never desert us, who lifts us when we fall and believes in us even when we fail.

Yet at most times and places, couples could rely on the support of a culture. In Judaism, for example, many of the most important rituals, like the Sabbath and Passover, take place primarily in the home. The Prophets saw marriage as the supreme metaphor of the relationship between God and His people.

RABBI SACKS

Morality, p. 73

And these values were renewed every week on Shabbat, the day of rest when we give our marriages and families what they most need and are most starved of in the contemporary world, namely, time. While making a television documentary for the BBC on the state of family life in Britain, I took the person who was then Britain's leading expert on childcare, Penelope Leach, to a Jewish primary school on a Friday morning.

There she saw the children enacting in advance what they would see that evening around the family table. There were the five-year-old mother and father blessing the five-year-old children with the five-year-old grandparents looking on. She was fascinated by this whole institution, and she asked the children what they most enjoyed about the Sabbath. One five-year-old boy turned to her and said, 'It's the only night of the week when Daddy doesn't have to rush off.' As we walked away from the school when the filming was over, she turned to me and said, 'Chief Rabbi, that Sabbath of yours is saving their parents' marriages.'

RABBI SACKS

Lessons in Leadership: A Weekly Reading of the Jewish Bible, pp. 74–75

It is one of the most counterintuitive acts in the history of leadership. Moses does not speak about today or tomorrow. He speaks about the distant future and the duty of parents to educate their children. He even hints – and this is engrained in Jewish tradition – that we should encourage our children to ask questions, so that the handing on of the Jewish heritage would be not a matter of rote learning but of active dialogue between parents and children.

So Jews became the only people in history to predicate their very survival on education. The most sacred duty of parents was to teach their children. Passover itself became an ongoing seminar in the handing on of memory. Judaism became the religion whose heroes were teachers and whose passion was study and the life of the mind. The Mesopotamians built ziggurats. The Egyptians built pyramids. The Greeks built the Parthenon. The Romans built the Colosseum. Jews built schools. That is why they alone, of all the civilisations of the ancient world, are still alive and strong, still continuing their ancestors' vocation, their heritage intact and undiminished.

Moses' insight was profound. He knew that you cannot change the world by externalities alone – by monumental architecture, or armies and empires, or the use of force and power. How many empires have come and gone while the human condition remains untransformed and unredeemed?

There is only one way to change the world, and that is through education. Children must be taught the importance of justice, righteousness, kindness, and compassion. They must learn that freedom can only be sustained by the laws and habits of self-restraint. They must be continually reminded of the lessons of history, “We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt,” because those who forget the bitterness of slavery eventually lose the commitment and courage to fight for freedom. And they must be empowered to ask, challenge, and argue. Children must be respected if they are to respect the values we wish them to embrace.



Questions to Consider

1. What can we learn about marriage from our relationship with God?
2. What can we learn about our relationship with God from marriage?
3. Why is *emunah* (faith) central to both?

Parenting

RABBI SACKS

Celebrating Life, pp. 100–101

The Prophets used many metaphors for our relationship with God. They called Him King, Ruler, Creator, Master, Man of War, Shepherd of the flock, a Potter making man of clay. But the image to which they constantly returned was of a parent. *Avinu Malkeinu*. God is “Our Father”. Isaiah even describes God as a mother. “Can a woman forget her baby or disown the child of her womb? Though she might forget, I will not forget you.” There is no mistaking God’s cry when His people are enslaved. It is the voice of an anguished parent. “My child, My firstborn, Israel.”

Our most profound religious knowledge comes not from science but from the experience of being a parent. As one new parent put it, “Since having a child I can relate better to God. Now I know what it feels like to create something you can’t control!”

Conversely, our most intimate sense of connection with God comes from reflection on what it is to be a child. If we’re ever to find peace of mind, however long it takes we have to make our peace with our parents. And however long it takes we have to make our peace with God.

Faith is rehearsed and becomes real in the family. Without it, we wouldn’t know what its most basic concepts mean. Through love as the bond between parents and children we understand the love of God for humankind. Through the trust that grows in families, we discover what it is to have trust in God and His world.

RABBI SACKS

To Bless the Space Between Us (Vayera 5776), Covenant & Conversation

Our relationship with God is deeply connected with our relationship with our parents, and our understanding of God is deepened if we have had the blessing of children... All of which makes the story of Avraham very hard to understand for two reasons. The first is that *Avraham was the son told by God to leave his father*: “Leave your land, your birthplace and your father’s house.”

The second is that *Avraham was the father told by God to sacrifice his son*: “Then God said: Take your son, your only son, whom you love – Isaac – and go to the land of Moriah, and there sacrifice him as a burnt offering on the mountain I will show you.”

How can this make sense? It is hard enough to understand God commanding these things of anyone. How much more so given that God chose Avraham specifically to become a role model of the parent-child, father-son relationship.

The Torah is teaching us something fundamental and counter-intuitive. *There has to be separation before there can be connection.* We have to have the space to be ourselves if we are to be good children to our parents, and we have to allow our children the space to be themselves if we are to be good parents...

First separate, then join. First individuate, then relate. That is one of the fundamentals of Jewish spirituality. We are not God. God is not us. It is the clarity of the boundaries between heaven and earth that allow us to have a healthy relationship with God... What is so striking about the heroes and heroines of the Hebrew Bible is that when they speak to God, they remain themselves. God does not overwhelm us. That is the principle the kabbalists called *tzimtzum*, God's self-limitation. God makes space for us to be ourselves.

Avraham had to separate himself from his father before he, and we, could understand how much he owed his father. He had to separate from his son so that Yitzchak could be Yitzchak and not simply a clone of Avraham. Rabbi Menahem Mendel, the Rebbe of Kotzk, put this inimitably when he said, "If I am I because I am I, and you are you because you are you, then I am I and you are you. But if I am I because you are you and you are you because I am I, then I am not I and you are not you!"

God loves us as a parent loves a child – *but a parent who truly loves their child makes space for the child to develop his or her own identity.* It is the space we create for one another that allows love to be like sunlight to a flower, not like a tree to the plants that grow beneath. The role of love, human and Divine, is, in the lovely phrase of Irish poet John O'Donohue, "to bless the space between us."



Questions to Consider

1. Why do we often use the terminology of parent when describing God?
2. How can our relationships with our parents help us develop our relationship with God?
3. What can we learn about faith from the family?

Other Family Relationships

RABBI SACKS

Brothers: A Drama in Five Acts, Covenant & Conversation: Exodus, pp. 234–238

Siblings

One of the recurring themes of Genesis is sibling rivalry, hostility between brothers. This story is told, at ever-increasing length, four times: between Cain and Abel, Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, and Joseph and his brothers... Genesis is telling us a story of great consequence. Fraternity – one of the key words of the French revolution – is not simple or straightforward. It is often fraught with conflict and contention. Yet, slowly, brothers can learn that there is another way. They can forgive. On this note the Book of Genesis ends. But it is not the end of the story.

The drama has a fifth act: the relationship between Moses and Aaron. Here, for the first time, there is no hint of sibling rivalry. The brothers work together from the very outset of the mission to lead the Israelites to freedom. They address the people together. They stand together when confronting Pharaoh. They perform signs and wonders together. They share leadership of the people in the wilderness together. For the first time, brothers function as a team, with different gifts, different

talents, different roles, but without hostility, each complementing the other...

It was precisely the fact that Aaron did not envy his younger brother but instead rejoiced in his greatness that made him worthy to be High Priest. So it came to pass – measure for measure – that just as Aaron made space for his younger brother to lead, so the Torah makes space for Aaron to lead. That is why Aaron is the hero of parshat Tetzaveh: for once, not overshadowed by Moses...

The story of Aaron and Moses, the fifth act in the biblical drama of brotherhood, is where, finally, fraternity reaches the heights. And that surely is the meaning of Psalm 133, with its explicit reference to Aaron and his sacred garments: “How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity! It is like precious oil poured on the head, running down on the beard, running down on Aaron’s beard, down upon the collar of his robes.” It was thanks to Aaron, and the honour he showed Moses, that at last brothers learned to live together in unity.

RABBI SACKS

Grandparents (Vayechi 5771), Covenant & Conversation

Grandparents

Every Friday night we re-enact one of the most moving scenes in the book of Bereishit. Jacob, reunited with Joseph, is ill. Joseph brings his two sons, Menashe and Ephraim, to visit him. Jacob, with deep emotion, says: “I never even hoped to see your face, but now God has even let me see your children.” (Bereishit 48:11).

He blesses Joseph. Then he places his hands on the heads of the two boys. “He blessed them that day and said, “[In time to come] Israel will use you as a blessing. They will say, ‘May God make you like Ephraim and Menashe.’” (Bereishit 48:20)

So we do to this day. Why this blessing above all others? I heard a most lovely explanation, based on the Zohar, from my revered predecessor Lord Jakobovits of blessed memory. He said that though there are many instances in Torah and Tanach in which parents bless their children, this is the only example of a grandparent blessing grandchildren. Between parents and children there are often tensions. Parents worry about their children. Children sometimes rebel against their parents. The relationship is not always smooth.

Not so with grandchildren. There the relationship is one of love untroubled by tension or anxiety. When a grandparent blesses a grandchild, they do so with a full heart. That is why this blessing by Jacob of his grandchildren became the model of blessing across the generations. Anyone who has had the privilege of having grandchildren will immediately understand the truth and depth of this explanation. To bless grandchildren and be blessed by them, to teach them and to be taught by them – these are the highest Jewish privilege.



Questions to Consider

1. Why are sibling relationships often fraught?
2. What can the Torah teach us about how to navigate tense sibling relationships?
3. How is grandparenting a model for all relationships?