

COMMUNITIES IN CONVERSATION

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



Israel, the Land of 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 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: “Israel 70: The Home of Hope”

View the video at rabbisacks.info/israelvideo

This video, made to celebrate Israel's 70th anniversary, gives us some insight into why Rabbi Sacks often spoke of Israel as an everlasting symbol of hope over despair.

TRANSCRIPT

The story of Israel is one without parallel in history, the story of the love of a people for a land, the love of Jews for Israel. There in ancient times our people was born, and there in modern times our people was reborn. The day will come when the story of Israel in modern times will speak not just to Jews, but to all who believe in the power of the human spirit as it reaches out to God as an everlasting symbol of the victory of life over death, hope over despair.

Because Israel has achieved great things. It has taken a barren land and made it bloom. It's taken an ancient language, the Hebrew of the Bible, and made it speak. It's taken the West's oldest faith and made it young. It's taken a tattered, shattered nation, and made it live. Israel is the country whose national anthem, ‘Hatikvah’, means ‘hope’. Israel is the home of hope. Yom Ha'atzmaut Sameach.



Questions to Consider

1. How has the love of Jews for Israel manifested itself in history?
2. How has the story of the modern State of Israel been a story of ‘the power of the human spirit’ and ‘the victory of life over death and hope over despair’?
3. What impact has the story of the modern State of Israel had on you?
4. What role does the Land of Israel play in Judaism?
5. What role does Israel play in your life?

Why a Land?

RABBI SACKS

Future Tense, pp. 135–136

[Jewish] destiny was to create a society that would honour the proposition that we are all created in the image and likeness of God. It would be a place in which the freedom of some would not lead to the enslavement of others. It would be the opposite of Egypt, whose bread of affliction and bitter herbs of slavery they were to eat every year on the festival of Pesach to remind them of what they were to avoid... *Judaism is the code of a self-governing society*. We tend to forget this, since Jews have lived in dispersion for two thousand years, without the sovereign power to govern themselves, and because modern Israel is a secular state. Judaism is a religion of redemption rather than salvation. It is about the shared spaces of our collective lives, not an interior drama of the soul...

Because Judaism is also the code of a society, it is also about the social virtues: righteousness (*tzedek/tzedakah*), justice (*mishpat*), loving-kindness (*chesed*) and compassion (*rachamim*). These structure the template of biblical law, which covers all aspects of the life of society, its economy, its welfare systems, its education, family life, employer–employee relations, the protection of the environment and so on.

The broad principles driving this elaborate structure, traditionally enumerated as 613 commands, are clear. No one should be left in dire poverty. No one should lack access to justice and the courts. No family should be without its share of the land. One day in seven, everyone should be free. One year in seven, all debts should be cancelled. One year in fifty, all land that had been sold was to revert to its original owners. It was the nearest thing the ancient world had ever seen to an egalitarian society.

None of this was possible without a land... Judaism is the constitution of a self-governing nation, the architectonics of a society dedicated to the service of God in freedom and dignity. Without a land and state, Judaism is a shadow of itself. In exile, God might still live in the hearts of Jews but not in the public square, in the justice of the courts, the morality of the economy and the humanitarianism of everyday life.

Jews have lived in almost every country under the sun. In four thousand years, only in Israel have they been a free, self-governing people. Only in Israel are they able, if they so choose, to construct an agriculture, a medical system, an economic infrastructure in the spirit of the Torah and its concern for freedom, justice and the sanctity of life. Only in Israel can Jews today speak the Hebrew of the Bible as the language of everyday speech. Only there can they live Jewish time within a calendar structured according to the rhythms of the Jewish year. Only in Israel can Jews live Judaism in anything other than an edited edition. In Israel, and only there, Jews can walk where the Prophets walked, climb the mountains Avraham climbed, lift their eyes to the hills that David saw, and continue the story their ancestors began.



Questions to Consider

1. According to this text, how is Judaism different from other religions?
2. Do you think Judaism is different in Israel?
3. Do you see the modern State of Israel as a fulfilment of the vision described in this text?

Why This Land?

RABBI SACKS

Future Tense, pp. 137–140



Why there? The Bible doesn't say. We can only speculate. But implicit in the biblical narrative is an answer. Israel is a place from which it is impossible to build an empire. The geography is wrong. The Judean hills in one direction, the Sinai desert in the other, block easy access to surrounding lands. The coastal plain is narrow and, in ancient times, open to easy attack from the sea.

The cradle of civilisation was not there. It was in the alluvial plains of the Tigris-Euphrates valley and the rich, well-watered lands of the lower Nile. It was in

Mesopotamia that the first city-states were built, and in Egypt that the greatest and longest-lived of ancient empires had its base. So Israel would almost invariably be a small country at the juncture of powerful empires, in a simultaneously strategic and vulnerable location on major trade routes.

Israel is not the Nile delta or the Tigris-Euphrates valley. It is a land dependent on rain, and rain in that part of the world is not predictable... But the passage intimates a correlation between geography and spirituality. Israel is a place where people look up to heaven in search of rain, not down to earth and its natural water supply. It is a place where you have to pray, not one in which nature and its seasons are predictable.

That is part of a larger narrative. Because the terrain of Israel is such that it cannot become the base of an empire, it will constantly be at threat from larger and stronger neighbouring powers. Israel will always find itself outnumbered. It will need to rely on exceptional courage from its soldiers, and ingenuity in battle. That will take high national morale, which in turn will require from the people a sense of belonging to a just and inclusive society.

Commitment will be needed from every individual. They will need to feel that their cause is justified and that they are fighting for something worth preserving. So the entire configuration of the Torah's social ethics, whose guardians were the Prophets, is already implicit in the kind of geo-political entity Israel is and will be. It would always be a small and highly vulnerable country, set in a strategic location at the junction of three continents, Europe, Africa and Asia... as with its agriculture, so with its battles: Israel is a people that must lift its eyes to heaven.



Questions to Consider

1. What lessons can we learn from the geography of the Land of Israel?
2. How can these lessons impact the way we live and build a state in Israel today?
3. Is Israel today still a country where its people must "lift their eyes to heaven"?

Once Israel Saved Jews; Now It Will Save Judaism

RABBI SACKS

Will We Have Jewish Grandchildren?, pp. 98–99

Jewish life cannot be sustained without Israel at its core. That was true for nineteen hundred years when there was no Jewish state. It is no less true now that the state exists...

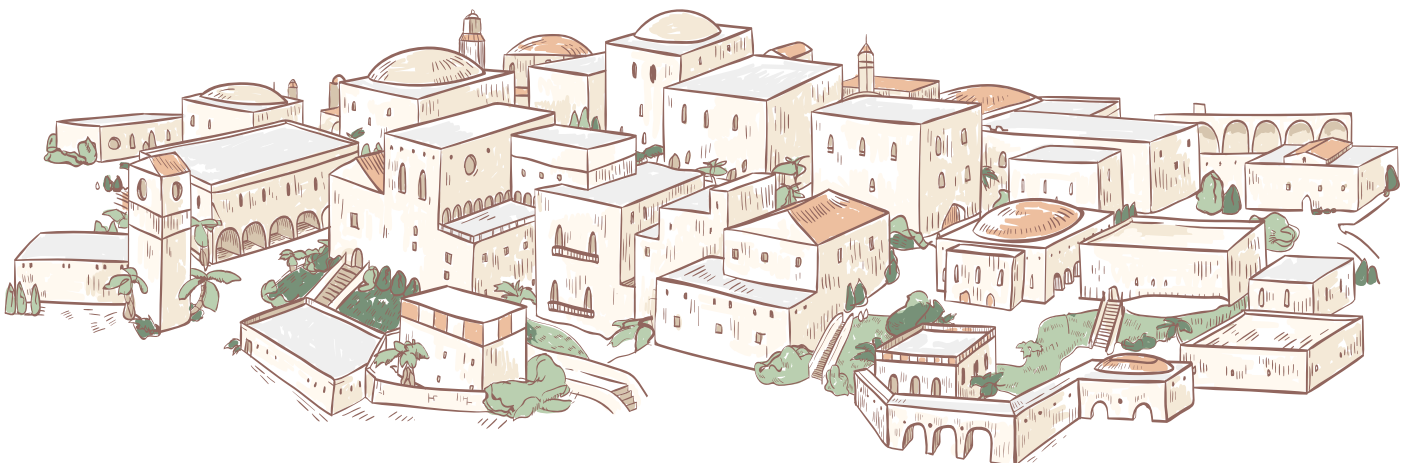
Israel is now the only place in which a total Jewish experience is possible. It is the one country where Jews constitute a majority of the population. It is the only context in which they exercise political sovereignty. It is the sole place where Judaism belongs to the public domain, where Hebrew is the language of everyday life and where Shabbat and the festivals form the rhythm of the calendar. It is the land of our origins, the terrain on which Joshua and David fought and Amos and Isaiah delivered prophecies. It is the birthplace of Jewish memory and the home of Jewish destiny.

It is impossible to overestimate the impact of Israel on the formation of Jewish identity. Jewish existence, which in today's diaspora may appear random, arbitrary, and disconnected, in Israel takes on coherence. There the Bible comes alive against the backdrop of its own landscape and its own language, once again a living tongue. There, too, the concept of the Jewish people becomes vivid in the visible drama of a society gathered together – as Moses said it would be – “from the ends of the heavens.” Above all, it is in Jerusalem that the mystery of Israel becomes tangible. Here is the old–new heart of the old–new people, the place from which, said Maimonides, the Divine Presence never moved.



Questions to Consider

1. How did Israel “sustain Jewish life” during the exile?
2. Does Israel do this today?
3. What impact does Israel have on your Jewish identity and the Jewish identity of your family?



Israel, the Land of Hope

RABBI SACKS

Future Tense, pp. 152–153

Twenty-six centuries ago, in exile in Babylon, the Prophet Yechezkel (Ezekiel) had the most haunting of all prophetic visions. He saw a valley of dry bones, a heap of skeletons. God asked him, “Son of man, can these bones live?” Yechezkel replied, “God, You alone know.” Then the bones came together, and grew flesh and skin, and began to breathe, and live again. Then God said: “Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up, our hope is lost [*avdah tikvateinu*].’ Therefore prophesy and say to them: ‘This is what the God says: My people, I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them; I will bring you back to the land of Israel’” (Yechezkel 37:1–14).

It was this passage that Naftali Herz Imber was alluding to in 1877, when he wrote, in the song that became Israel’s national anthem, Hatikvah, the phrase *od lo avdah tikvateinu*, ‘Our hope is not yet lost.’ Little could he have known that seventy years later one third of the Jewish people would have become, in Auschwitz and Treblinka, a valley of dry bones. Who could have been blamed for saying ‘Our bones are dried up, our hope is lost’?

Yet, a mere three years after standing face-to-face with the Angel of Death, the Jewish people, by proclaiming the State of Israel, made a momentous affirmation of life, as if it had heard across the centuries the echo of God’s words to Yechezkel: ‘I will bring you back to the land of Israel.’

And a day will one day come when the story of Israel in modern times will speak not just to Jews, but to all who believe in the power of the human spirit as it reaches out to God, as an everlasting symbol of the victory of life over death, hope over despair. That remains the Jewish dream. Israel is the land of hope.



Questions to Consider

1. How does Yechezkel’s prophecy represent the story of the Jews?
2. How did it inspire Jewish history in the future?
3. Rabbi Sacks describes Jews as ‘the voice of hope in the conversation of humankind’. How then is it fitting that their land is the ‘Land of Hope’? What is the correlation between the two?