



Educator's Guide

(MIDDLE SCHOOL · AGES 11–14)

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From Optimism to Hope

Introduction

Thank you for participating in the inaugural Rabbi Sacks Global Day of Learning in Schools. Jewish communities and day schools around the world will be learning some of the Torah of Rabbi Sacks in his memory during the week of his second yahrzeit (the anniversary of his passing) and we are thrilled you will be one of them.

The theme of this year's initiative is *From Optimism to Hope*. It is powerful to know that people of all ages across the world will be exploring the same ideas from Rabbi Sacks, something you may wish to point out to your students.

This is a suggested outline of what you may wish to explore with your students, but feel free to adapt, pick and choose, or learn something completely different. Parts 1 and 2 are designed to introduce the day's learning to your students. If you are limited by time, or feel these are not relevant, you may wish to skip or shorten your allotted time on these parts.

Aims

- To introduce your students to Rabbi Sacks as a person, a Rabbi, and Jewish leader.
- To encourage them to learn some of his Torah in his memory.
- To explore two approaches to hope:
 - The idea that having hope shows you have faith in Hashem.
 - The difference between optimism and hope.

Part 1: Who was Rabbi Sacks? (APPROX. 10 MINS)

Show this short video about the life of Rabbi Sacks, entitled A Teacher, a Leader, and a Moral Voice: rabbisacks.org/videos/a-teacher-a-leader-and-a-moral-voice

Discuss the video. Select some general questions for discussion:

- What are your general impressions of Rabbi Sacks from this video?
- What did you learn about Rabbi Sacks?
- Share something you noticed in the video that interested you.
- Share something you noticed in the video that surprised you.

Choose some more analytical questions for discussion:

- What do the following descriptions of Rabbi Sacks mean:
 - Teacher
 - Leader
 - Moral Voice
- Who did Rabbi Sacks impact in each of these three roles?
- Which locations (countries and places) did you notice in the video? What can we learn about Rabbi Sacks from these?
- Which famous people did you notice in the video? What does that tell you about Rabbi Sacks?
- What titles did Rabbi Sacks have, and what do they mean?
- How many books do you think you saw in the video (give a guess)? What does that tell us about Rabbi Sacks?

Optional activity

Ask your students to research online stories about Rabbi Sacks to share with the class (or to share stories they have heard from people they know).

They might wish to use the Reflections section from the website: rabbisacks.org/life-of-rabbi-jonathan-sacks/reflections.

Part 2: Why are we learning in Rabbi Sacks' memory? (APPROX. 5 MINS)

Explain that when someone we hold dear passes away, there is a special mitzvah to learn Torah in their memory.

This is a way to always remember them, and to show Hashem how much we miss them, and ask him to look after them in heaven.

There is also a belief in Judaism that if we do mitzvot and learn Torah in the name of a deceased person, their *neshamah* (soul) will have an *aliyah* in *shamayim* (will ascend higher in heaven from the merit of our mitzvot). This is a very abstract idea which you may wish to consider with your students, if you feel it appropriate.

Show the first 56 seconds of the video (rabbisacks.org/yahrzeit) of Gila Sacks, the daughter of Rabbi Sacks, from the launch of *Communities in Conversation* on his first yahrzeit, who explains that Rabbi Sacks was always looking to learn from every person he met, and he would do this through conversation. Today, we will have conversations in our class to learn from each other and to learn together an idea that Rabbi Sacks taught.

Discuss how they can learn something from every person (you may wish to share with them the Mishna in [Pirkei Avot \(4:1\)](#) where a wise person is defined as someone who learns from all people) and help them to take in the fact that they can learn from every single one of their classmates using the following questions:

- Can you learn something from every single person?
- What can you learn from your classmates today?
- Why is conversation a good way to learn from other people?

Optional activity

Ask every student to find a partner and ask them to share with each other something they have learned from them. This can be repeated with different partners.

Part 3: How having hope shows you have faith in Hashem (APPROX. 20 MINS)

Learn the biblical passage where Yaakov is told that Yosef had died, and he refuses to be comforted, because deep down he cannot give up hope that perhaps Yosef is still alive.

This appears in [Bereishit 37](#). You could ask your students to learn this in *chavruta* (study partners) or together as a whole class. If you have less time, you could also retell the story in your own words. (For your own reference, Rabbi Sacks' approach to this story can be found in his essay *Refusing Comfort, Keeping Hope*, from Covenant & Conversation on Vayeshev: rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/vayeshev/refusing-comfort-keeping-hope).

Discuss why Yaakov refused to be comforted. You may find these questions helpful for this:

- Rabbi Sacks teaches that Yaakov “refused to be comforted” after he learned about the death of his son Yosef – what exactly does he mean?
- Why do you think Yaakov refused to be comforted?
- Do you remember how the story ends? Do you think this is connected to Yaakov’s refusal to be comforted? How?

Read this quote from Rabbi Sacks, and discuss it using the questions which follow:

“There are laws in Judaism about the limits of grief – *shiva, shloshim, a year*. There is no such thing as a bereavement for which grief is endless. And yet Yaakov 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, Yaakov refused to be comforted because he had not yet given up hope that Yosef 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.”

Comfort, Keeping Hope (Vayeshev), Covenant & Conversation – Genesis (Maggid 2009), p. 253.

- How does Rabbi Sacks explain Yaakov’s refusal of comfort?
- What did Yaakov refuse to give up hope on?
- How did having hope show Yaakov’s faith in Hashem

Optional activity

Ask your students to write a short article (for a local or national newspaper) entitled “I refuse to give up hope!”

Conclusion: From Optimism to Hope (APPROX. 10 MINS)

Show this short video from Rabbi Sacks: 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.”

Discuss the difference between being an optimist and being some who is hopeful:

- Why is being hopeful better than being an optimist?
- Where in your life are you an optimist?
- Where in your life do you have hope?
- Was Yaakov an optimist, or did he have hope?
- Why do you think Rabbi Sacks believed that being a Jew means having hope?
- Can you think of examples from Jewish history when Jews showed they had hope?
- How will you show this week that you have hope?

Optional activity

Ask your students to create scenarios where one could react with optimism or with hope. Ask for volunteers to act out the two types of response to these scenarios.

Project Hope

An optional project/assignment inspired by this idea:

You may wish to encourage your students to collectively plan a way to improve something in their community, and ask them to put this plan into action, thereby showing that they have hope that things can and will get better. For example, this could be a *chessed* initiative, or an environmental project.