



# Covenant & Conversation



Jonathan Sacks  
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

BEREISHIT • בראשית

STUDIES IN SPIRITUALITY

BASED ON THE TEACHINGS AND WRITINGS OF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS זצ"ל

With thanks to the Schimmel Family for their generous sponsorship of Covenant & Conversation, dedicated in loving memory of Harry (Chaim) Schimmel.

*"I have loved the Torah of R' Chaim Schimmel ever since I first encountered it. It strives to be not just about truth on the surface but also its connection to a deeper truth beneath. Together with Anna, his remarkable wife of 60 years, they built a life dedicated to love of family, community, and Torah.*

*An extraordinary couple who have moved me beyond measure by the example of their lives." — Rabbi Sacks*

## The Art of Listening

● This summary is adapted from this week's main Covenant & Conversation essay by Rabbi Sacks, available at [www.rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/bereshit/the-art-of-listening](http://www.rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/bereshit/the-art-of-listening)

There are two types of cultures, shame cultures and guilt cultures. In shame cultures the highest value is honour. In guilt cultures it is righteousness. Shame means feeling bad that we have failed to live up to the expectations others have of us. Whereas guilt is what we feel when we fail to live up to what our own conscience demands of us. Shame cultures are usually visual. Shame itself has to do with how you appear in other people's eyes. Guilt is much more internal. You cannot escape it by becoming invisible. Your conscience accompanies you wherever you go, regardless of whether you are seen by others. Guilt cultures are cultures of the ear, not the eye.

The story of the first sin in the Garden of Eden is all about appearances, shame, vision, and the eye. The serpent says to the woman, "God knows that on the day you eat from it, **your eyes will be opened**, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (Bereishit 3:5). It was the appearance of the tree that the Torah emphasises: "The woman **saw** that the tree was good to eat and **desirable to the eyes**, and that **the tree was attractive** as a means to gain intelligence" (3:6). The key emotion in the story is shame. Before eating the fruit, the couple were "naked... but unashamed" (2:25). After eating it they feel shame and seek to hide. The sin of the first humans in the Garden of Eden was that they followed their eyes, not their ears. Their actions were determined by what they saw, the beauty of the tree, not by what they heard, namely the word of God commanding them not to eat from it.

Judaism is a religion of listening, not seeing. Listening is the sacred task. The most famous command in Judaism is *Shema Yisrael*, "Listen, Israel." What made Avraham, Moshe, and all the prophets different from their contemporaries was that they heard the Voice that to others was inaudible. In one of the great dramatic scenes of the Bible, God teaches Eliyahu that He is not to be found in the whirlwind, the earthquake, or the fire, but in the "still, small voice" (Melachim I 19:12). It takes training, focus, and the ability to create silence in the soul to learn how to listen, whether to God or to a fellow human being. Seeing shows us the beauty of the created world, but listening connects us to the soul of another, and sometimes to God as He speaks to us, calls to us, summoning us to our task in the world.

If I were asked how to find God, I would say: Learn to listen. Listen to the song of the universe in the call of birds, the rustle of trees, the crash and heave of the waves. Listen to the poetry of prayer, the music of the Tehillim. Listen deeply to those you love and who love you. Listen to the words of God in the Torah and hear them speak to you. Listen to the debates of the Sages through the centuries as they tried to hear the texts' intimations and inflections. Don't worry about how you or others look. The world of appearances is a false world of masks, disguises, and concealments.

**Listening is not easy. I confess I find it formidably hard. But listening alone bridges the abyss between soul and soul, self and other, I and the Divine.**



### Around the Shabbat Table

1. Can you think of some examples of Jews in history who demonstrated how Judaism is a guilt culture, not a shame culture?
2. How is listening an important Jewish value?
3. What lessons can you learn for your life from the difference between shame and guilt?



## A STORY FOR SHABBAT



### Just Listen

as told by Gila Sacks

I remember as a child hearing my father, Rabbi Sacks, tell the following anecdote. A journalist once interviewed Mother Teresa.

“When you pray,” he asked, “what do you say to God?”

“I don’t say anything,” she replied. “I listen.”

“Well, okay... when God speaks to you, then, what does He say?”

“He doesn’t say anything. He listens.”

“And if you don’t understand that,” Mother Teresa added, “I can’t explain it to you.”

This stuck in my mind more than almost any other story he told. And from then until now, whenever I find prayer hard – which I often do – I try to stop trying, and instead just listen.

● Gila Sacks is a senior civil servant in the UK government, in the Department for Health and Social Care.



## A CLOSER LOOK

● Delving deeper into the thoughts shared by Rabbi Sacks on Bereishit, **Gila Sacks** shares her own reflections on the main piece.

### What was your main takeaway from The Art of Listening?

We live very social lives. Almost everything we do – and think, feel, know – is shaped by other people. We learn how to behave by watching and communicating with others – our parents, our friends, but also the people we see in the news and the people we follow on social media. And that means that often, the choices we make about how to behave are shaped by other people’s expectations – we want to look good to others, we want to fit in, we don’t want to let people down.

That can be a good thing in many ways. But it is not enough. To live a good life, a moral life, means sometimes we will need to be different, not just fit in. Sometimes, the choices we make will need to be shaped not by what we see around us, but by what we hear inside ourselves – our own conscience, our own voice. It takes work to dial down the noise of life so that we can hear our inner voice.

### How would you implement Rabbi Sacks’ message on learning to listen into real-life practice?

Remember that listening is a skill like any other, and it takes practice. Rabbi Sacks found it hard, so he practiced being a better listener his whole life. If I want to learn to listen to God, or to my own inner voice, I should start by trying to be a better listener to the people around me. That probably starts by talking a little less.



## TORAH TRIVIA

Q: Can you name three people in the Torah who were asked a rhetorical question by Hashem?

Hashem already knew the answers.  
listened, they would have realised that  
in Hashem, because if they had really  
All three answers indicate a lack of trust  
to him. (Bam. 22:29)  
and he answers that Balak had sent them  
people who came to visit you tonight?”  
3. Hashem asks Bilaam, “Who are the  
brother’s keeper?” (Ber. 4:9)  
Hevel?” and Kayin answers, “Am I my  
asked by Hashem, “Where is your brother  
2. After killing his brother, Kayin was  
3:9)  
afraid because I was naked. So I hid.” (Ber.  
heard Your Voice in the garden and I was  
“Where are you?” and Adam answers, “I  
1. After he eats from the tree, God asks,  
A: Adam, Kayin, and Bilaam:

● Adapted from Torah IQ by David Woolf, a collection of 1500 Torah riddles, available worldwide on Amazon.