



Covenant & Conversation



Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

CHAYEI SARAH • חיי שרה

STUDIES IN SPIRITUALITY

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

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

A Call from the Future

● This summary is adapted from this week's main Covenant & Conversation essay by Rabbi Sacks, available at

www.RabbiSacks.org/covenant-conversation/chayei-sarah/a-call-from-the-future/

Avraham had been through two traumatic events involving the people most precious in the world to him. The first was when Hashem told him to offer his son Yitzchak as a sacrifice, after he had waited for a lifetime to have a son with Sarah, and only at the last moment did the command come from Heaven saying, "Stop!" How does a father, or a son, survive a trauma like that?

Then came grief. Sarah, Avraham's beloved wife, died. She had been his constant companion, sharing the journey with him as they left behind all they knew, their land, their birthplace, and their families. **What does a man of 137 years do after such a trauma and such a loss?** He had done everything God had asked of him. Yet he could hardly say that God's promises had been fulfilled. Seven times he had been promised the land of Canaan, yet he owned not one square inch of it, not even a place in which to bury his wife. God had promised him many children, a great nation, many nations, as many as the grains of sand on the shore and the stars in the sky. Yet he had only one son of the covenant, Yitzchak, whom he had almost lost, and who had no wife or children. Avraham had every reason to spend the rest of his days in sadness and memory.

Yet he did not. In one of the most extraordinary sequences of words in the Torah, his grief is described in a mere five Hebrew words: in English, "Avraham mourned for Sarah and wept for her" (Ber. 23:2). Next we read, "Then Avraham rose from his grief."

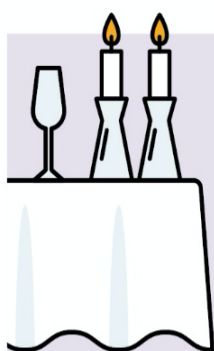
From then on, he engaged in a flurry of activity with two aims in mind: first, buy a plot of land for Sarah; second,

find a wife for his son. These actions precisely match the two Divine promises: of land and descendants. **Avraham did not wait for God to act.** He understood one of the profoundest truths of Judaism: that **God is waiting for us to act.** How did he have the energy to keep going, after almost losing his child and then losing his wife? What gave Avraham his resilience, his ability to survive, spirit intact?

I learned the answer from the Holocaust survivors I had the privilege to know. They became my mentors in moral courage. Most of them did not talk about the past. Instead, they set about creating a new life in a new land. They looked forward, not back. First they built a future. Only then – sometimes forty or fifty years later – did they speak about the past. That was when they told their story, first to their families, then to the world. **First you have to build a future. Only then can you mourn the past.**

Avraham heard the future calling to him, saying: **The next step depends on you.** That is how Avraham survived the shock and grief.

God enters our lives as a call from the future. If we listen closely enough, we can hear Him beckoning to us from the far horizon of time, urging us to undertake a journey and a task that we were created for. We are not here by accident. We are here because God wants us to be, and because there is a task we were meant to fulfil. Discovering that task is not easy, and often takes many years and false starts. But **for each of us there is something God is calling on us to do, a future not yet made that awaits our making.**



Around the Shabbat Table

1. Why would building the future help with your grief of the past?
2. Can you think of examples of Jews who have been inspired by Avraham in this way, to build for the future despite the trauma of the past?
3. What do you think God is calling on you from the future to do?



A STORY FOR SHABBAT



How to Build a Family

by Dr. Mijal Bitton

My father-in-law, whom we call Nono Nessim, grew up in a warm family in Cairo's vibrant Jewish community. He still remembers the juicy mangos he'd buy in Cairo's noisy streets. My mother-in-law, Nona Toni, is also from Cairo, where she studied chemistry at the public university. Unfortunately, by that time the situation for Jews had worsened and she had to hide her Jewish identity from her classmates. In the 1960's they both fled the country, along with thousands of other Egyptian Jews. Their journey towards safety was hard. Nona spent a year travelling in boats, trains, and planes to reach Italy, then France, then Belgium, until finally she arrived in America. Even the safe harbour they found was not easy, navigating a new language, a foreign community, and foods quite different from those in their native land.

Our young children are only now beginning to learn their grandparents' story. To them, Nono and Nona's home simply represents joy – perfumed jasmines from the garden, freshly baked Mandel-bread, loving blessings, and a constant and joyful “*hamdulillah*,” Thank God. That's because their grandparents focused all their strength on building their family. While they miss and mourn their past, there is nothing more important to them than giving their children and grandchildren a thriving future. Their journey reminds me of Avraham and Sarah's, and to me they embody the message I found at the heart of this week's commentary: “First build a future. Only then can you mourn the past.”

● Dr. Mijal Bitton is Scholar in Residence at the Shalom Hartman Institute, and Rosh Kehilla of the Downtown Minyan in NYC.



A CLOSER LOOK

● Delving deeper into the thoughts shared by Rabbi Sacks on Chayei Sarah, Dr. Bitton now shares her own reflections on the main piece.

What was your main takeaway from ‘A Call from the Future’?

The key idea is that one of the most powerful ways to confront a tragic and painful past is to focus on building a meaningful future. Avraham's life was not easy, and he lost so much. But he channelled his energies into constructing a better tomorrow for his son. As Rabbi Sacks noted, this wasn't unique to Avraham. Countless people across history, including Holocaust survivors, have modelled for us what it means to embody resilience and perseverance. Their stories have much to teach us.

Which idea expressed in this week's piece do you think is the most important message for the next generation?

Across the world, we are all living in a time of great political, economic, and social uncertainty. Whenever I read about some new challenge in the news, I ask myself: how would Rabbi Sacks respond? I don't know how he would address any particular event, but I believe he would remind us that it takes just one individual or one family to change the entire course of history. He would insist that we must take up the mantle of responsibility for our broken world, and find allies and fellow travellers to endure the path ahead. He loved talking about Avraham and Sarah's journey as our classic example – two individuals who heeded the call of God and had the strength and courage to stand up against the world and insist on the possibility of radical hope. This is a message the next generation must internalise to lead us forwards.



TORAH TRIVIA

Q: This week we have discussed going on personal journeys to find our own roles, tasks, and jobs in life. Which two men started new jobs in this and last week's parshiyot, and what were their jobs?

A: This week sees Ephron begin his job as a police officer (*shotar*) – see Rashi, Bereishit 23:10 – and in parshat Vayera it was Lot's first day as a judge (*shofet*) – see Rashi Bereishit 19:1. In both cases, Rashi comments that the word “*yoshav*” is written without a “*vav*”, so it could be read as “*yashav*”, indicating that they were not just sitting, but serving in an official capacity.

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