



# Covenant & Conversation



Jonathan Sacks  
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

SHEMOT • שמות

STUDIES IN SPIRITUALITY

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

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*

## Turning Curses into Blessings

● This summary is adapted from this week's main essay by Rabbi Sacks, available at [www.RabbiSacks.org/covenant-conversation/shemot/turning-curses-into-blessings/](http://www.RabbiSacks.org/covenant-conversation/shemot/turning-curses-into-blessings/)

The book of Bereishit ended on an almost serene note. The family reunited. Yaacov's long-lost son was returned to him. Yosef forgave his brothers. Under his protection and influence, the family settled in Goshen, one of the most thriving regions of Egypt. They had homes, property, food, the protection of Yosef, and the favour of Pharaoh. It must have seemed like one of the golden moments of Avraham's family history.

Then, as has happened so often since, "There arose a new Pharaoh who did not know Yosef." (Shemot 1:8) As we begin the book of Shemot, there is a political climate change. The family falls out of favour. Pharaoh tells his advisers: "The Israelite people are many and more powerful than we. Come, let us deal wisely with them, so that they may not increase..." (Shemot 1:9-10) And so begins the forced labour that turns into slavery that becomes attempted genocide.

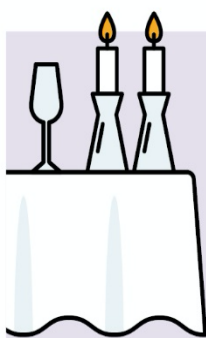
The story is engraved in our memory. We tell it every Pesach, and we summarise it in our prayers, every day. It is a key part of our Jewish identity. Yet there is one phrase that shines out from the narrative of our ancestors' slavery: "The more they were oppressed, the more they increased and the more they spread." That, no less than oppression itself, is part of what it means to be a Jew. **The worse things get, the stronger we become. Jews are the people who not only survive but thrive in adversity.**

Jewish history is not merely a story of Jews enduring catastrophes that might have wiped out less tenacious groups. It is also the message that, **after every disaster, Jews renewed themselves.** Just as the Maccabees uncovered some lost oil, our people has always been able

to discover some hitherto hidden reservoir of spirit that fuels new forms of collective self-expression as we continue on, the carriers of God's message to the world.

**Where did it come from, this Jewish ability to turn weakness into strength, adversity into advantage, darkness into light?** It goes back to the moment in which our people received its name, Yisrael - Israel. Yaacov wrestled alone at night with an angel, until dawn broke, when his adversary begged to be let go. "I will not let you go until you bless me," said Yaacov (Bereishit 32:26). That is the source of our peculiar, distinctive obstinacy. We may have fought all night. We may be tired and on the brink of exhaustion. We may find ourselves limping, as did Yaacov. Yet we will not let our enemy leave until we have extracted a blessing from the encounter. This turned out to be not a minor and temporary concession. It became the basis of his new name and our identity. Yisrael, the people who "wrestled with God and man and prevailed" (Bereishit 32:28) is the nation that grows stronger with each conflict and catastrophe.

There is something profoundly spiritual as well as incredibly practical about our ability to transform the bad moments of life into a spur to creativity. It is as if, deep within us, a voice is saying, **"You are in this situation, bad though it is, because there is a task to perform, a skill to acquire, a strength to develop, a lesson to learn, an evil to redeem, a shard of light to be rescued, a blessing to be uncovered, for I have chosen you to give testimony to humankind that out of suffering can come great blessings - if you wrestle with it for long enough, and with unshakeable faith."**



## Around the Shabbat Table

1. What examples of this Jewish resilience can you find in Jewish history?
2. Why do you think tragedy can lead to creativity?
3. Have you ever experienced this in your own life, or seen it in people you know?



## A STORY FOR SHABBAT



### A Fool's Hope

by Rabbi Dr Raphael Zarum

A favourite novel of mine is Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. It tells the story of how four simple little creatures, hobbits, changed their world by standing up to darkness and evil.

After a long and perilous journey, there is a moment when all seems lost. It is the night before the final battle and one of the hobbits, Pippin by name, is standing next to the great wizard Gandalf as they both look out onto the wicked realm of Mordor, where all manner of vile and terrible beasts are gathering, ready to destroy them. Our heroes are tired, afraid, and completely outnumbered.

Trembling, Pippin turns to Gandalf and asks, "Is there any hope?" The wizard's response is brutally frank: "There never was any hope." But then, seeing the terror on the little hobbit's face, Gandalf breaks into a smile and adds, "Well, maybe a fool's hope." And then the two turn back, to stare again at the menacing Mordor.

After centuries of slavery in Egypt, the Israelites had almost given up. They could not imagine how they might ever be free. Even when Moshe arrived with a message from God, most thought it was a fool's hope. And yet, with God's help, the slavery came to an end, and they emerged from Egypt, victorious. It is never foolish to have hope, even when you think there is none.

● Rabbi Dr Raphael Zarum is the Dean of the London School of Jewish Studies, and the Rabbi Sacks Chair of Modern Jewish Thought.



## A CLOSER LOOK

● Rabbi Zarum now shares his reflections on Rabbi Sacks' essay for Shemot.

### What was your main takeaway from 'Turning Curses into Blessings'?

The notion that being a Jew means never giving up. It means looking for a way to make things better, even when everything is going wrong. We come from a long line of people who never gave up, and that is why we're still here.

### What inspired you in this week's essay?

Rabbi Sacks highlights the most surprising sentence in the opening chapter of the book of Shemot: "The more they were oppressed, the more they increased and the more they spread." (Shemot 1:12) This is surprising because it should have been the other way around. When things get too tough, a lot of people give up! In fact, the Midrash teaches that many of the Israelite men *did* give up. They didn't want any more children because they would be dooming them to a life of slavery, full of pain and hardship. Even Moshe's father felt this way.

It was the women who turned things around. They were committed to bringing new life into the world, no matter what. They convinced their husbands and fathers to carry on going, and to build their families. They understood that life is precious, and it is always worth fighting for. Their commitment surprised the Egyptians, and it showed God what the Israelites were capable of.

### What influence did Rabbi Sacks have on your faith?

As part of my job - teaching Torah to adults and training teachers for Jewish schools - I was fortunate to meet Rabbi Sacks regularly for almost ten years. Occasionally, when things were not going well, when programmes failed or there was not enough money, I would get sad and upset.

Rabbi Sacks understood. He would share with me some of his own challenges. We spoke about how hard it must have been for Moshe, for King David, and for Queen Esther. This energised him, and inspired me. He taught me that we were all in it together, all of us, every Jew, going all the way back to Avraham. And I would always leave his office feeling excited, ready to take on the next challenge.



## TORAH TRIVIA

Q: The first four words of the book of Shemot are "ve'eyleh shemot Bnei Yisrael", meaning, "and these are the names of the sons of Israel". What do these four words hint at?

▲: The Ba'al Haturim (on Shemot 1:1) quotes the Gemara in Berachot 8b, and says that the letters of these four words stand for the tradition of reading each parsha twice a week in the original text, and once in the translation of Onkeles. Ve'eyleh - Ve'adam Asher Lomed Haseider Shemot - Shnayim Mikra Ve'echad Targum Bnei - B'kol Na'im Yashir Yisrael - Yichyeh Shanin Rabot Aruchim L'olam Meaning, "and one who reads the weekly parsha twice in the text, and once in the targum, singing it pleasantly, will merit many long years".

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