



# Covenant & Conversation



Jonathan Sacks  
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

VA'ERA • אָרָא

STUDIES IN SPIRITUALITY

BASED ON THE TEACHINGS AND WRITINGS OF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS 7"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*

## Spirits in a Material World

● This summary is adapted from this week's main essay by Rabbi Sacks, available at [www.RabbiSacks.org/covenant-conversation/vaera/spirits-in-a-material-world/](http://www.RabbiSacks.org/covenant-conversation/vaera/spirits-in-a-material-world/)

At the beginning of this week's *parsha*, God tells Moshe that He bring the Israelites to freedom, and then tells him to announce this to the people. Then we read this: *"So Moshe told this to the Israelites but they did not listen to him, because their spirit was broken and because the labour was harsh."* (Shemot 6:9)

The italicised phrase seems simple enough. The people did not listen to Moshe because they were busy trying to survive day by day. They had no time for hope, or for promises that seemed to have no grounding in reality. Moshe had failed to deliver in the past. He had brought them messages from God before which had done nothing to improve their situation. So they had no reason to think he would do so in the future. So far, so straightforward.

But there is something more subtle going on beneath the surface. When Moshe first met God at the Burning Bush, God told him to lead, and Moshe kept refusing on the grounds that the people would not listen to him. He was not a man of words. He was slow of speech and tongue. He lacked eloquence. He could not sway crowds. He was not an inspirational leader.

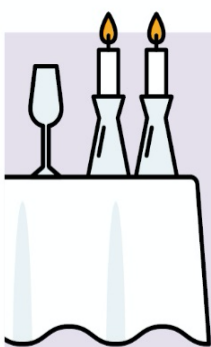
It turned out, though, that Moshe was both right and wrong, right that they did not listen to him, but wrong about why. It had nothing to do with his failures as a leader or a public speaker. In fact, it had nothing to do with Moshe at all. They did not listen "because their spirit was broken and because the labour was harsh." In other words: **If you want to improve people's spiritual**

**situation, first improve their physical situation.** That is one of the most humanising aspects of Judaism.

Rambam emphasises this in his book, *The Guide for the Perplexed*. The Torah, he says, has two aims: the well-being of the soul and the well-being of the body. The well-being of the soul is something inward and spiritual, but the well-being of the body requires a strong society and economy, where there are fair laws, and where poverty can be addressed. We have physical well-being when all our physical needs are supplied, but none of us can do this on our own. We specialise and exchange. That is why we need a good, strong, just society.

Spiritual achievement, says Rambam, is higher than material achievement, but we need to ensure the latter first, because "a person suffering from great hunger, thirst, heat, or cold, cannot grasp an idea even if it is communicated by others, much less can he arrive at it by his own reasoning." In other words, if we lack basic physical needs, there is no way we can reach spiritual heights. When people's spirits are broken by harsh labour they cannot listen to a Moshe. If you want to improve people's spiritual situation, first improve their physical conditions.

**Alleviating poverty, curing disease, ensuring the rule of law, and respect for human rights: these are spiritual tasks no less than prayer and Torah study.** To be sure, the latter are higher, but the former are prior. People cannot hear God's message if their spirit is broken and their labour harsh.



### Around the Shabbat Table

1. What is more important to you, your physical wellbeing, or your mental, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing?
2. Does Judaism focus equally on the physical as the spiritual? Why?
3. How can we be activists who help people with both their physical and spiritual wellbeing?



## The Gift

by Rachel Fink

My daughter's 17th birthday coincided with her being away at camp. I wondered what small gift I could send her, a budding scientist and thoughtfully religious young woman. Rabbi Sacks had recently published *The Great Partnership* and, knowing she already enjoyed and found inspiration in his books, I decided to buy it and send it to her. As I exited the bookshop, gift in hand, I bumped into Joanna, the Director of the Chief Rabbi's office, and on the spur of the moment asked her if Rabbi Sacks would sign the book for my daughter.

The book duly arrived at camp and my daughter called excitedly, having unwrapped the gift. As she opened the inside cover, she laughed. She thought that I must have forged a message with Rabbi Sacks' signature! Surely, he wouldn't bother to write a message for some random teenager. When I told her it was in fact a genuine inscription, she didn't ask me how I had managed to get the book signed, but she did wonder why Rabbi Sacks, the Chief Rabbi, would have taken the time to sign this for her.

Knowing that the central theme of the book is how Science and Religion have different purposes in the world, with science focusing on how the world works and Religion giving the world meaning, Rabbi Sacks understood that at the age of 17, my daughter was at a point in her life where she might feel the need to choose between Science and Religion. I believe that signing the book was his way of telling her that she did not need to choose.

Over 10 years later, my daughter now works in the field of Science and lives a meaningful religious life. *The Great Partnership* continues to sit, pride-of-place on my daughter's special bookshelf, which she reserves for what she describes as 'her most cherished books'.

● Rachel Fink is the CEO of the S&P Sephardi Community, and a Jewish Educator.



## A CLOSER LOOK

● Rachel Fink now shares her reflections on Rabbi Sacks' essay for Va'era.

### Which quote is your main takeaway from 'Spirits in a Material World'?

'God is to be found in this world, not just the next.'

### What do these words mean to you?

The concepts of spirituality are often difficult to grasp. It is easy to think that spirituality is something that only deeply religious people can experience. But Rabbi Sacks is teaching us something very different. Reflecting on the harsh experience of Bnei Yisrael as slaves, and how this blocked them from hearing the word of God, Rabbi Sacks draws out two equally important sides to human wellbeing – physical and spiritual. The latter is much harder to reach if the former is not in place. Even the Kohen Gadol requested material comfort for Bnei Yisrael first, knowing that without the basics of food and shelter, the people could not aspire to loftier goals, nor could they cope with the challenges that life brings.

We live in a society where the 'I' is prioritised over the 'We.' Thoughts of 'me' often go before thoughts of the 'other.' The individual is put before the collective good. Rabbi Sacks reminds us that Judaism has always been about bettering the world around us. As we play our part in attending to the needs of others, we too can become spiritual beings and encounter God through acts of *chessed*.

### How can we take this idea forward in a practical way?

A spiritual life brings satisfaction and meaning and is distinct from a religious life. By taking on one small act of *chessed* we can enhance our own lives and the lives of others and make the world we live in a Godlier place.



## TORAH TRIVIA

**Q:** At what point in our history did light, sound, and gravity all travel at the same speed?

**A:** This week we see the first seven of the Ten Plagues brought upon the Egyptians. The seventh is *barad*, usually translated as "hail".

In Shemot 9:23 the *passuk* describes the *barad* as thunder, hail, and fire all transpiring at the exact same second. This was a rare and truly miraculous event, for scientists have discovered that the speed of gravity is 32 feet per second; the speed of sound is 1100 feet per second; and the speed of light is 186,000 miles per second.

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