



Covenant & Conversation



Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

BESHALLACH • בשלח

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

Renewable Energy

● This summary is adapted from this week's main essay by Rabbi Sacks, available at www.RabbiSacks.org/covenant-conversation/beshallah/renewable-energy/

Shabbat, which we encounter for the first time in this week's parsha, is one of the greatest traditions the world has ever known.

Shabbat creates space within our lives – and within society as a whole – in which we are truly free. Free from the pressures of work; free from the demands of school; free from social media; free from advertisers constantly urging us to spend our way to happiness; instead we are free to be ourselves in the company of those we love. Somehow this one day has renewed its meaning in generation after generation, despite the most profound economic and industrial change. In Moshe's day it meant freedom from slavery to Pharaoh. In the nineteenth and early twentieth century it meant freedom from exhausting working conditions of long hours for little pay. In ours, it means freedom from phones, social media, and the demands of 24/7 availability.

Not only was Shabbat culturally ground-breaking. Conceptually, it was so as well. Throughout history people have dreamed of an ideal world. We call such visions 'utopias', from the Greek *ou* meaning "no" and *topos* meaning "place". They are called that because no such dream has ever come true, except in one instance, namely Shabbat. Shabbat is "utopia now," because on it we create, for 25 hours a week, a world in which there are no hierarchies, no employers and employees, no buyers and sellers, no inequalities of wealth or power, no production, no traffic, no din of the factory or clamour of the marketplace. Shabbat is utopia, not as it will be at the end of time but rather, as we rehearse for it now in the midst of time.

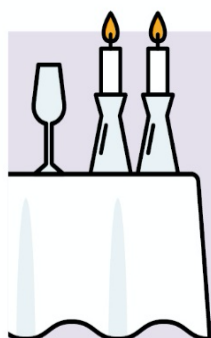
So God gave the people Shabbat in this week's parsha. He

wanted Bnai Yisrael to begin their one-day-in-seven rehearsal of freedom almost as soon as they left Egypt, because real freedom, of the seven-days-in-seven kind, takes time, centuries, millennia.

The Torah regards slavery as wrong, but it did not abolish it immediately. Why? Because people were not yet ready for this. Neither Britain nor America abolished it until the nineteenth century, and even then not without a struggle. Yet the outcome was inevitable once Shabbat had been set in motion, because slaves who know freedom one day in seven will eventually rise against their chains.

Shabbat is the time for things that are important but not urgent: family, friends, community, a sense of sanctity, prayer in which we thank God for the good things in our life, and Torah reading in which we retell the long, dramatic story of our people and our journey. Shabbat is when we celebrate *shalom bayit* – the peace that comes from love and lives in the home blessed by the *Shechinah*, the presence of God you can almost feel in the candlelight, the wine, and the challah. A serene island of time in the midst of the often-raging sea of a restless world.

Without rest for the body, peace for the mind, silence for the soul, and a renewal of our bonds of identity and love, the creative process eventually withers and dies. It suffers entropy, the principle that all systems lose energy over time. **The Jewish people did not lose energy over time, and they remain as vital and creative as they ever were. The reason is Shabbat: humanity's greatest source of renewable energy, the day that gives us the strength to keep on creating.**



Around the Shabbat Table

1. What is your favourite aspect of Shabbat?
2. How do you think the Jewish idea of Shabbat has changed the world for the better?
3. Is it hard to sort the urgent from the important? What things in your life are more important than the urgent things you usually find yourself worrying about?



A STORY FOR SHABBAT

Sacred Time

as told by Rabbi Joseph Beyda



When I consider the idea of Renewable Energy, I am immediately drawn to a story Rabbi Sacks used to share.

Rabbi Sacks once took a childcare expert, Dr Penelope Leach, to a Jewish primary school, and showed her the five-year-old children rehearsing for the Shabbat dinner table. She asked one of the children what he most liked about Shabbat. He replied, "It's the only time of the week when daddy doesn't have to rush off." As they left the school, she turned to Rabbi Sacks and said, "That Sabbath of yours (Penelope isn't Jewish) is saving their parents' marriages." He agreed with her. As he mentions in one of his books, "Families need time, and Shabbat is sacred, dedicated time." (*The Home We Build Together*, pp. 213–214)

As someone who worked in both a Jewish Day School and in a pulpit position at the same time, the idea of the stress of work taking away from family time really resonated with me. Both of my jobs could seem all-consuming at times. There's no doubt that some of the time I could and should have spent with my family was compromised. I am thankful to Shabbat for making sacred time for my family. I am likewise grateful to Rabbi Sacks for emphasising to me the importance of family, and the need to carve out time for them no matter how busy my schedule might get.

● Rabbi Joseph Beyda is the Head of School of the Yeshiva of Flatbush Joel Braverman High School in Brooklyn, where he lives with his wife and six children.



A CLOSER LOOK

● Rabbi Beyda now shares his reflections on Rabbi Sacks' essay for Beshallah.

What will be your main takeaway from 'Renewable Energy'?

Shabbat is not just any *mitzvah*, it is the centre-piece of our faith. The Torah opens with a story which builds up to the Shabbat. The Ten Commandments prominently feature it, as well. The *Parashat haShavua* cycle revolves around it. We even evaluate a person's connection to their Judaism by their Shabbat observance ("Are you *Shomer Shabbat*?").

I think Rabbi Sacks does a wonderful job of getting to the heart of why Shabbat merits this place in our religion. Through the medium of Shabbat, God created sacred time for the Jewish people – individually, as families, and collectively. Time to focus on what truly matters.

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

Learning to find the difference between urgent and important. So much of our time and energy is grabbed by what needs to be done in the here and now; how much remains for the lasting and meaningful?

A story is told of a Chassidic Master who went out to the town square and observed the tremendous hustle and bustle of daily life. He called over one person and asked, "Why are you running?" The townspeople replied, "I am running to catch up to life's blessings." He was just about to rush away again when the Rabbi sighed, "Yes, but what if the blessings are trying to catch up with you?"



TORAH TRIVIA

Q: Why do we read the weekly Torah portion on the Monday and Thursday of each week, as well as on Shabbat?

A: In this week's parsha we read that Bnai Yisrael travelled for three days without being able to find water. Then their thirst became unbearable and so, in a miraculous act, Moshe turned the salty waters of *Marah* sweet and drinkable (*Shemot* 15:22–25).

Water is often compared to the Torah, as it is said, "*ain mayim elah Torah*" – for the Jewish People, the Torah is as important as water. Knowing that Bnai Yisrael could not survive for more than three days without water, or for more than three days without Torah, the *Neviim* established the routine of reading from the Torah every Monday, every Thursday, and every Shabbat (see *Rambam, Hilchot Tefillah* 12:1).

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