



Covenant & Conversation



Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

MISHPATIM • משפטים

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

Doing and Hearing

● This summary is adapted from the main essay by Rabbi Sacks, available at RabbiSacks.org/covenant-conversation/mishpatim/doing-and-hearing/

One of the most famous phrases in the whole Torah makes its appearance in this *parsha*, and it has often been used to characterise Jewish faith as a whole. It consists of two words: *na'aseh venishma*, which can be translated literally as, "we will do and we will hear" (Shemot 24:7). What does this mean and why does it matter?

The Israelites are described by the Torah as accepting the Jewish covenant three times: once before they heard the commandments at Sinai, and twice afterwards. There is a fascinating difference between the way the Torah describes their response the first two times, in contrast to the third:

The people all responded together, "We will do [*na'aseh*] everything the Lord has said." (Shemot 19:8)

When Moshe went and told the people all the Lord's words and laws, **they responded with one voice**, "Everything the Lord has said we will do [*na'aseh*]." (Shemot 24:3)

Then he [Moshe] took the Book of the Covenant and read it to the people. **They responded**, "We will do and hear [*na'aseh venishma*] everything the Lord has said." (Shemot 24:7)

The first two responses, which refer only to action (*na'aseh*), are given unanimously. The people respond "together". They do so "with one voice". The third, which mentions not only doing but also to hearing (*nishma*), involves no unanimity.

"Hearing" can mean many things: listening, paying attention, understanding, absorbing, internalising, responding, and obeying. It refers, in other words, to the *spiritual, inward dimension of Judaism*.

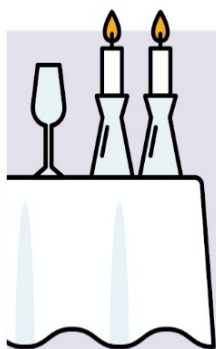
From this, we learn something very important, and it is this: **Judaism is a community of doing rather than of "hearing."**

There is a shared code of Jewish action. When it comes to *halachah* (the way of Jewish doing) we hope that everyone will follow these same laws of action. By contrast, although there are shared principles of Jewish faith, **when it comes to spirituality there are many Jewish approaches**. Judaism is full of different kinds of people. We have doctors and musicians, priests and prophets, rationalists and mystics, philosophers and poets. Tanach (the Hebrew Bible) speaks through the voices of many different leaders. Moshe, Amos, Hoshea and Yechezkel had different styles, attitudes, and voices. **The Torah itself is a mix of law and story, history and mystic vision, ritual and prayer. There are norms about how to act as Jews. But there are few about how to think and feel as Jews.**

We experience God in different ways. Some find Him in nature. Others find Him in interpersonal emotion, in the experience of loving and being loved. Some find God in the prophetic call, others find Him in study. Yet others find Him in prayer, discovering that God is close to all who call on Him in truth.

There are those who find God in joy, dancing and singing as did King David when he brought the Holy Ark into Jerusalem. Others – or the same people at different points in their life – find Him in the depths, in tears and remorse, and a broken heart. Albert Einstein found God by studying the scientific wonder of the universe. Rav Kook found Him in the harmony of diversity on earth. Rav Soloveitchik found Him in the loneliness of being as it reaches out to the soul of Being itself.

That is the difference between *na'aseh* and *nishma*. We do the Godly deed "together." We respond to His commands "with one voice." But **we hear God's presence in many ways, for though God is one, we are all different, and we encounter Him each in our own way.**



Around the Shabbat Table

1. Why is it important that, as a community, we all follow the same behaviours and actions, for instance by following *halachah*?
2. Why can't there be one sure way to connecting God and to spirituality?
3. Rabbi Sacks mentions several paths to God in this essay. Which of these speak to you? Are there any other routes you have found to God?



A STORY FOR SHABBAT



A Lesson from Lunch

as told by Jonny Lipczer

I'd like to tell you a story about Rabbi Sacks.

Soon after he became Chief Rabbi, he and his wife Elaine were invited, together with the President of the State of Israel who was visiting the UK, to have lunch at 10 Downing Street, the home of the British Prime Minister. They were very excited to go! A few days before the lunch, the Chief Rabbi's office got a call from the Prime Minister's office inviting Rabbi Sacks to say grace – a prayer of thanks for the food – at the meal, an invitation he gladly accepted.

On the day of the lunch, the guests sat down at the big, fancy table. The Prime Minister asked the Chief Rabbi to say grace, and everyone stood up, waiting for him to begin. At that moment, the Chief Rabbi realised that he had forgotten to inform the Prime Minister's staff of something important. In Jewish law, you need to hold something over which you are making a blessing – and the table was still empty. Lunch had not yet been served. No one was around to help, and the Chief Rabbi was stuck.

Just then, he noticed a bunch of grapes on a gold ornament halfway down the table. He made a blessing over the grapes and ate one. He was saved!

Rabbi Sacks learned a lesson that day. He realised that making a blessing means seeing the beauty in simple things and appreciating God's gifts. Even something as simple as a grape can be special and show God's glory, if we just say a blessing for it.

● Jonny Lipczer is Director of Communications at The Rabbi Sacks Legacy.



A CLOSER LOOK

● Jonny Lipczer now shares his reflections on Rabbi Sacks and his writings on Mishpatim.

Can you share something you learnt from Rabbi Sacks himself?

Rabbi Sacks embodied the word *Na'aseh*, which means "We will do". The word is expressed in the plural, highlighting the importance of doing something *together*. Rabbi Sacks taught us that what we do together is greater than what any of us could do alone, and he was a role-model for that message.

I learned this from him by watching how he would seek advice from others in his own leadership, and how he was always empowering others to become involved in communal activity in their own way, drawing on their individual strengths.

What was your main takeaway from 'Doing and Hearing' (this week's piece on parshat Mishpatim)?

There are different paths to God and different ways to experience His presence. People from diverse backgrounds throughout history, including King David, Albert Einstein, and Rav Kook, discovered their own path to God through nature, science, and emotion.

Einstein once said: "The more I study science, the more I believe in God", highlighting the compatibility of science and religion. Rabbi Sacks himself said: "Science takes things apart to see how they work. Religion puts things together to see what they mean." We each find meaning in our own, individual way.



TORAH TRIVIA

Q: There is a law in the giving of tzedakah called "*aniyei ircha kodmim*" which means, the poor in your own city take precedence over the poor in other cities. Can you identify the source of this *halachah* in this week's parsha?

A: Shemot 22:24: "If you lend money to one of My people among you who is poor, do not act toward them as a harsh creditor, and do not charge them interest."
Rashi quotes a *mechilta*, cited in the Gemara (Bava Metzia 71a) which says that because the Torah specifies "among you" – *imach* – we can learn that we should each prioritise helping our own local community.

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