



Covenant & Conversation



Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

KI TISSA • כִּי תִּשָּׂא

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

The Closeness of God

● This summary is adapted from this week's main essay by Rabbi Sacks, available at www.RabbiSacks.org/covenant-conversation/ki-tissa/the-closeness-of-God/

Moshe took his tent and pitched it *outside the camp*. What has this to do with the relationship between God and the Jewish People after the Golden Calf? At times of collective distress, **a leader has to be close to the people, not distant**. So it was surely the worst possible thing for Moshe to do at that time, under those circumstances.

The truth is, Moshe was saying to God: What the people need is not for *me* to be close to them. I am just a human, here today, gone tomorrow. But You are eternal. You are their God. They need *You* to be close to them. Until now, they have experienced You as a terrifying, elemental force, delivering plague after plague to the Egyptians, bringing the world's greatest empire to its knees, dividing the sea, overturning the very order of nature itself. At Mount Sinai, merely hearing Your voice, they were so overwhelmed that they said, if we continue to hear the voice, "we will die" (Shemot 20:16).

The people needed, decided Moshe, to experience not the greatness of God but the closeness of God, not God heard in thunder and lightning at the top of the mountain, but as a perpetual Presence in the valley below.

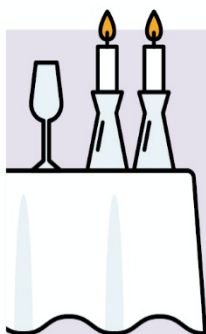
That is why Moshe removed his tent and pitched it outside the camp, as if to say to God: It is not my presence the people need in their midst, but Yours.

Moshe pleaded with God to come closer to the people, so that they would encounter Him, not only at unrepeatable moments in the form of miracles, but regularly, on a daily basis, and not only as a force that threatens to obliterate all it touches, but as a presence that can be sensed in the heart of the camp. **That is why God commanded Moshe to instruct**

the people to build the Mishkan. It is what He meant when He said: "Let them make Me a sanctuary and I will dwell (*veshakhanti*) among them" (Shemot 25:8). It is from this verb that we get the word *Mishkan*, "Tabernacle," and the post-biblical word *Shekhina*, meaning the Divine Presence. Applied to God, as we discussed in parshat *Terumah*, it means "the Presence that is close."

That is the ongoing miracle of Jewish spirituality. No one before the birth of Judaism ever envisaged God in such abstract and awe-inspiring ways: **God is more distant than the furthest star and more eternal than time itself. Yet no religion has ever felt God to be closer**. In Tanach the prophets argue with God. In the book of Tehillim, King David speaks to Him in terms of utmost intimacy. In the Talmud God listens to the debates between the Sages and accepts their rulings even when they go against a Heavenly Voice. God's relationship with Israel, said the prophets, is like that between a parent and a child, or between a husband and a wife. In Shir Hashirim, it is like that between two infatuated lovers. The Zohar, key text of Jewish mysticism, uses the most daring language of passion, as does *Yedid Nefesh*, the poem attributed to the sixteenth-century Safed kabbalist, Rabbi Elazar Azikri.

That is one of the striking differences between the synagogues and the cathedrals of the Middle Ages. In a cathedral you sense the vastness of God and the smallness of humankind. But if you visit any original shul from the same time, like the Altneushul in Prague or the synagogues of the Ari and Rabbi Yosef Karo in Tzfat, you will notice that **they are modest buildings in which you can sense the closeness of God, and the potential greatness of humankind**.



Around the Shabbat Table

1. What do you think of the idea that Moshe had to convince God of what the people needed?
2. Is your synagogue a big, magnificent house of worship, or small and intimate? Which kind of setting do you think best leads us to a closeness with Hashem?
3. When you think of Hashem, do you think of a mighty all-powerful distant God, or an intimate and close God, with whom you can have a direct relationship?



A STORY FOR SHABBAT

Individual Expression

by Marcus J Freed



Have you ever been told off by a teacher or your parents, even though you felt you weren't doing anything wrong? Deep inside you knew you were acting for the right reasons, but you also knew that they just didn't understand, and you had to pay the consequence, perhaps by getting sent to school detention, or being grounded at home, or having your phone confiscated for a while... and it was very frustrating.

Not everyone has always approved of my innovative approach to Jewish education – such as performing Biblical comic plays, or Jewish creating comedy music videos – but Rabbi Sacks always found a way to show encouragement. He believed in me, and promoted the idea that Judaism needs our individual expression, and that God has a place for all of us.

When standing by Rabbi Sacks' grave at his Stone Setting, I cried from the depths of my heart. Why? Because I realised he saw me. A great teacher is able to see who you are, and speaks to every student in a way that will suit their individual personalities. King Shlomo wrote, "where there is no vision, people perish" (Mishlei 29:18), and Rabbi Sacks had that vision to help people thrive.

● Marcus J Freed is an actor, author, filmmaker, and marketing consultant. He recently launched the Jewish Filmmakers Network at the Sundance Film Festival.



A CLOSER LOOK

● Marcus J Freed now reflects on the messages within Rabbi Sacks' essay for Ki Tissa.

What stood out for you in this week's piece by Rabbi Sacks?

Rabbi Sacks mentions two verses: "Show me now Your ways" (Shemot 33:13), and "Show me now Your glory" (Shemot 33:18). It is fascinating that Moshe is asking for visual proof of God, wanting to experience God through his eyes rather than his ears.

Why is this unusual?

Over the years Rabbi Sacks would often compare Ancient Greece to Ancient Israel. The Greeks tended to focus on *visuals* – architecture and art – while the Torah almost always focused *sound*, emphasising listening and words. The Greeks made statues of their gods, but our central prayer is the Shema, where we *listen* to the word of God.

I once asked Rabbi Sacks about this, wanting to better understand the role of visual culture in Judaism, since the Talmud speaks about beautiful people, and we have visual traditions like the *Purimspiel*. He acknowledged the importance of modern culture, and even said "What I think Judaism misses most right now is a first-rate religious film director." In other words, *today we need both sight and sound*. While listening is still key, Moshe teaches us this week that to understand God, we must also look for Him. And to teach others, visual tools can be incredibly powerful.

How can young people take this idea forward?

The idea of "showing" God's ways is something we can all participate in. We live in a visual culture, where TikTok is the #1 app, and Instagram is #2. Back in 2008, Rabbi Sacks told me how he was looking forward to utilising social media, and he had a lot of plans for the coming years.

How can you do your part? By continuing this work and using social media for the good, to find your personal form of expression and share positive Jewish messages on a regular basis. Find ways to express Jewish spirituality through TikTok, Instagram reels, YouTube shorts, and Snapchat videos. The choice is yours, but as the Mishnah says, "it's not the talking that counts, but the doing" (Pirkei Avot 1:18). Good luck!



TORAH TRIVIA

Q: How was the artist Betzalel, who designed the Mishkan, related to Moshe Rabbeinu?

A: Betzalel was the grandson of Chur (as shown in Shemot 31:2). We know from Rashi (see Shemot 24:14) that Chur's parents were Calev and Miriam, and Miriam was Moshe's sister. Therefore, Moshe was Betzalel's great-great-uncle, as he was his great-grandmother Miriam's brother.

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