



Covenant & Conversation



Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

VAYAKHEL-PEKUDEI • ויקהל־פקודי

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 Social Animal

● This summary is adapted from this week's main essay by Rabbi Sacks, available at rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/vayakhel/the-social-animal/

At the beginning of this week's *parsha*, Moshe performs a *tikkun*, repairing a past mistake, namely the sin of the Golden Calf. The Torah signals this by using almost the same word at the beginning of both episodes. The word used eventually became a key word in Jewish spirituality: *k-h-l*, meaning "to gather together". From this root we get the words *kahal* and *kehillah*, meaning "community." The importance of this word continues to this day. In fact, recent scientific research confirms the extraordinary power of communities and social networks to shape our lives.

The episode of the Golden Calf began with these words:

"When the people saw that Moshe was so long in coming down from the mountain, they gathered themselves [*vayikahel*] around Aharon" (Shemot 32:1).

At the beginning of this *parsha*, having won God's forgiveness and brought down a second set of Tablets, Moshe begins the work of redirecting the people:

"Moshe assembled [*vayak'hel*] the entire Israelite congregation" (Shemot 35:1).

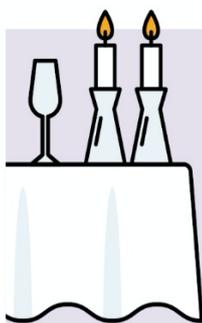
They had sinned as a community. Now they were about to be reconstituted as a community. Jewish spirituality is first and foremost a communal spirituality.

Notice what Moshe does next. He directs their attention to the two great centres of community in Judaism, one in space, the other in time. The one in time is Shabbat. The one in space was the *Mishkan*, the Tabernacle, that led eventually to the Temple and then to the synagogue. These are where the *kehillah* lives most powerfully: **on Shabbat** when we lay aside our private devices and desires and come together as a community; **and in the synagogue**, where our community has its home.

Judaism attaches immense significance to the individual. We are taught that every life is like a universe. Each one of us, though we are all in God's image, is different, therefore unique and irreplaceable. Yet the first time the words "not good" appear in the Torah are in the verse, "It is not good for man to be alone" (Bereishit 2:18). This is significant. It indicates how much of Judaism is about the shape and structure of our togetherness. **We value the individual, but we do not endorse individualism. Ours is a religion of community.** This is why our holiest prayers can only be said in the presence of a *minyan*, the minimum definition of a community. **When we pray, we do so as a community.** Hence, to atone for the sin the Israelites committed as a community, Moshe sought to consecrate community in time and place.

This is arguably one of the most important functions of religion in a secular age, namely, keeping community alive. **Most of us need community. We are social animals.** Evolutionary biologists have suggested recently that the huge increase in brain size represented by *Homo sapiens* was specifically to allow us to form greater social networks. It is the human capacity to co-operate in large teams – rather than the power of reason – that makes us different from other animals. As the Torah says, it is not good to be alone.

By placing community at the heart of the religious life and by giving it a home in space and time – in the synagogue and in Shabbat – Moshe was showing us community's potential to do good, just as the episode of the Golden Calf had shown its power for bad. **We should always strive to remember that Jewish spirituality is not about solitude. It is, for the most part, profoundly communal. Hence my definition of Jewish faith: the redemption of our solitude.**



Around the Shabbat Table

1. Can you think of times when crowds can be used for the good and for the bad?
2. Do you think it is important to be part of a community? Why?
3. Is community an important part of the way you celebrate Shabbat?



Gathering Together

by Nicky Goldman

My overarching memories of Rabbi Sacks involve conversations around his dining room table with a range of different groups. He gathered people together in his home to get to know them, to discuss key topics of Jewish communal life, to share his thoughts and to learn from them. For me this exemplifies the notion of 'Vayakhel' - 'and he gathered' - the name and first word of this week's *parsha*. Rabbi Sacks was interested in hearing from all individuals but he was especially keen to hear from groups and from people who played integral roles within communities, and listening to what was important to them. This demonstrates his innate belief in 'the extraordinary power of communities and social networks to shape our lives.'

The place and time where Jewish people gather today are at the 'two great centres of community in Judaism, one in space, the other in time', Shabbat and the Mishkan (today the synagogue), which help restore 'the subtle ties that bind human beings to one another.' In the wider essay for Vayakhel, Rabbi Sacks quotes Robert Putnam whose 2010 research found that regular attendees at a place of worship were more likely to help others, such as giving money to charity, engaging in voluntary work, donating blood, helping find someone a job, and other similar acts of kindness to others. This is what Rabbi Sacks saw as truly being part of a community.

● Nicky Goldman is the Jewish Volunteering Network's Chief Executive, and she is proud to be part of the inaugural cohort of Sacks Scholars.



A CLOSER LOOK

● Nicky Goldman now reflects on some of the deeper messages she learnt from Rabbi Sacks.

Can you share something you learnt from Rabbi Sacks himself?

Rabbi Sacks was an early adopter of technology. He saw very early on the power of the internet, specifically the power of utilising podcasts to share messages more widely. When I first heard him talk about it, I didn't understand the significance. He had the vision to see its potential, how it could be harnessed for good and used to share his and others' wisdom.

What is your favourite quote from the main essay by Rabbi Sacks this week, and why?

'This is arguably one of the most important functions of religion in a secular age, namely keeping community alive. We are social animals.' This resonates for me because my career in the Jewish community over forty years has been about bringing people into community life, enabling them to find their unique place, and keeping them engaged in community.

How would you summarise this week's piece as a 'call-to-action' for the next generation?

Find the part that you can play in your community where you give to others and share your unique talents. Encourage others to do so too. Communities need young people (and their parents) to be involved. Your actions will help to shape your communities for your own generation, and for those to follow.



TORAH TRIVIA

Q: Who in the Torah became a great-grandfather at the age of 26?

A: When Betzalel, the artist who designed the Mishkan, was born, Kaleb became a 26 year old great-grandfather. Last week we learnt that Moshe was Betzalel's great-uncle, as Betzalel's great-grandparents were Miriam and Kaleb. The construction of the Mishkan happened in the first year after Bnei Yisrael left Egypt, and we are taught that Betzalel was 13 at the time, from the Torah's description of him as *ish* (Shemot 36:4; Sanhedrin 69b). Kaleb was 40 years old in the second year of the Exodus, when he was one of the 12 spies (see Yehoshua 14:7). So if Betzalel was 14 when the *meraglim* went to visit the Land of Israel, and Kaleb was 40, this means that there is only a 26 year age-gap between great-grandfather and great-grandson!

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