



Covenant & Conversation



Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

VAYIKRA • ויקרא

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 Pursuit of Meaning

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

The precise meaning of the word that gives our *parsha*, and the third book of the Torah, its name - *Vayikra* - is difficult to understand. Literally translated, the book of *Vayikra* begins like this: "And He called to Moshe (*Vayikra el Moshe*) and God spoke to him from the Tent of Meeting, saying..." The first phrase seems to be unnecessary. If we are about to be told that God spoke to Moshe, why say in addition, "And He called"? Rashi explains as follows:

Every [time God communicated with Moshe, whether signalled by the expression] "And He spoke," or "and He said," or "and He commanded," it was always preceded by [God] calling [to Moshe by name].

"Calling" is an expression of endearment. *Vayikra*, Rashi is telling us, means to be called to a task in love. This is the source of one of the key ideas of Western thought, namely the concept of a *vocation* or a *calling*, that is, the choice of a career or way of life not just because you want to do it, or because it offers certain benefits, but because you feel *summoned* to it. You feel this is your meaning and mission in life. **This is what you were born to do.**

There are many such calls in Tanach. There was the call Abraham heard to leave his land and family (Bereishit 12:1). There was the call to Moshe at the Burning Bush (Shemot 3:4). There was the one experienced by Yeshayahu when he saw, in a mystical vision, God enthroned and surrounded by angels: "Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send? And who

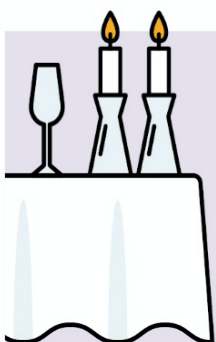
will go for us?" And I said, "Here I am. Send me!" (Yesh. 6:8)

When we see a wrong to be righted, a sickness to be healed, a need to be met, and we feel it speaking to us, that is when we come as close as we can in a post-prophetic age to hearing *Vayikra*, God's call. And why does the word appear here, at the beginning of the third and central book of the Torah? Because the book of *Vayikra* is about sacrifices, and a vocation is about sacrifices. **We are willing to make sacrifices when we feel they are part of the task we are called on to do.**

From the perspective of eternity, we may sometimes be overwhelmed by a sense of our own insignificance. We are no more than a wave in the ocean, a grain of sand on the sea shore, a speck of dust on the surface of infinity. *Yet we are here because God wanted us to be, because there is a task He wants us to perform.* The search for meaning is the quest for this task.

Each of us is unique. Even genetically identical twins are different. There are things only we can do, we who are what we are, in this time, this place, and these circumstances. For each of us God has a task: work to perform, a kindness to show, a gift to give, love to share, loneliness to ease, pain to heal, or broken lives to help mend. Discerning that task, hearing *Vayikra*, God's call, is one of the great spiritual challenges for each of us.

How do we know what it is? **Where what we want to do meets what needs to be done, that is where God wants us to be.**



Around the Shabbat Table

1. Who decides on what your calling is?
2. Do you know what your calling is? How do you know?
3. Can you think of other key times in the Tanach when God called on someone to a task?



The World is Waiting for You

as told by Rabbi Alex Israel

Our parsha, Vayikra, speaks of God issuing a “call” to Moshe. Rabbi Sacks says that all of humanity can feel our “calling”. He writes, “We are here because God wanted us to be, because there is a task He wants us to perform.”

Rabbi Sacks tells a wonderful story in this regard, about a Chabad Rabbi who had travelled to a small town in Alaska, wondering whether there were any Jews there who he could teach. There were no identifying Jewish families. At the local school he found just one young girl who knew that her mother was Jewish, which meant that she was Jewish. But what could this *shaliach* tell this Jewish girl, isolated from all other Jews, that might inspire her? This is what he said:

“Do you know, we Jews have a special day called Shabbat. We mark the start of that day by lighting two candles at sunset, to bring light and peace to the world. First Jews light candles in New Zealand, then Australia, then India, then Israel, then New York. And, do you know?” he continued, “This town, your town, is the most westerly location in the entire globe! If you light candles every Friday night, you will be the last Jew on Planet Earth to usher in the Shabbat! And the whole world will be waiting for you to complete the Sabbath!”

Rabbi Sacks commented: “Can you imagine what that did for that child? He made her feel important. She had a task to perform for the whole Jewish people, for the whole world. That is how you change lives! By showing people what they can become.”

● Rabbi Alex Israel is an international lecturer, writer, and podcaster. He teaches at Midreshet Lindenbaum and Yeshivat Eretz Hatzvi.



A CLOSER LOOK

● Rabbi Israel now reflects on some of the deeper ideas he learnt from Rabbi Sacks.

Why did this week's C&C speak to you?

I see many people who pursue happiness by purchasing the latest technology, buying new clothes, or taking expensive holidays. But still they aren't happy! Rabbi Sacks teaches us that even animals can satisfy their desires, but as human beings we need more; we need meaning. Even though we have endless choices nowadays, sometimes it is hard to find that meaning.

So how do we find meaning in life?

Rabbi Sacks says that we find meaning in something that is larger than ourselves. It is by taking the talents and gifts that we have, and contributing to a higher cause, that we find fulfilment. Ironically, we find meaning not by taking or receiving but by contributing and giving. It is all about responding to a “calling” to a higher purpose, dedication to a cause. “Meaning is made, it is not discovered,” wrote Rabbi Sacks.

What is your favourite part of this week's Dvar Torah?

I love this quote: "When we see a wrong to be righted, a sickness to be healed, a need to be met, and we feel it speaking to us, that is when we come as close as we can in a post-prophetic age to hearing *Vayikra*, God's call." Rabbi Sacks teaches that we can all hear the call; the same way that Moshe heard it at the Burning Bush.

Did Rabbi Sacks guide you to find meaning?

Rabbi Sacks certainly helped me understand my world through his brilliant lectures and books. But more than that, when I was a young youth leader, he encouraged me to lead and to teach. I wasn't so confident, and he told me that I could succeed as a Rabbi and a guide for other young people. And because he believed in me, I began to believe in myself.



TORAH TRIVIA

Riddle: We both appear in the Tanach in the first. But he is the first of the first of the last, and the I am the last of the first of the third. We are identical in one way, yet different in another way. Neither of us is normal and he is much bigger than the me. We are not people. Who are we?

We are letters, not people.
tiny *alef*, smaller than the normal font size.
other *alefs*, and I am always written as a
always written in a large size compared to
letters in Tanach, or as each other. He is
of us is the same size font as the other
“*alefs*” but we are different because neither
We are identical in one respect, i.e., both

Tanach (*Vayikra*).
of the first word of the third book of
(*Divrei Hayamim*), and I am the last letter
of the first word of the last book in Tanach
word of a book, but he is in the first letter
Hayamim 1:1:1). We both appear in the first
the large *alef* in the word *Adam* (*Divrei*
small *alef* in the word *Vayikra* (1:1) and he is
Answer: We are both unusual *alefs*. I am the

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