



Covenant & Conversation



Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

SHEMINI • שמ"י

STUDIES IN SPIRITUALITY

BASED ON THE TEACHINGS AND WRITINGS OF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ל"א

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 Dangers of Enthusiasm

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

We usually view the word "enthusiasm" as something positive. People with enthusiasm have passion, zest, and excitement, and it can even be contagious. One person's enthusiasm can inspire others to greater excitement too. It is one of the gifts of a great teacher or leader. People follow people of passion. If we want to influence others, we project enthusiasm.

But the word did not always have this association. Originally it referred to someone possessed by a spirit or demon. In the seventeenth century in England, it came to refer to extreme and revolutionary Protestant groups, and to the Puritans fighting the English Civil War. It became a word used for religious fanatics who were looked upon as irrational and dangerous.

Enthusiasm can come from over-confidence. An enthusiast in a state of high religious ecstasy can come to believe that they are being inspired by God Himself, so they forget the rules. Rules and regulations, thinks the enthusiast, are for ordinary people, whereas those who are inspired by God know better.

We now have a precise description of the sin for which Nadav and Avihu, the two elder sons of Aaron, died. It was a shocking tragedy which occurred on the first ever day of *Mishkan* service, a moment that should have been one of the great celebrations in Jewish history. The Sages themselves were puzzled by the episode. The text itself merely says this:

"They offered unauthorised fire before the Lord: fire He had not commanded. And fire came forth before the Lord and consumed them. They died before the Lord." (Vayikra 10:1–2)

The Sages felt that there must have been something else, some further sin or character flaw, to justify so dire and

drastic a punishment. But in the text itself, on each of the three occasions where their death is mentioned, the Torah says merely that they offered "unauthorised fire" – *esh zara*. The sin was that they did something that had not been commanded. Although they had the best of intentions, they were priests who did something that was not permitted.

The history of the word "enthusiasm" helps us to understand the episode of Nadav and Avihu. They were "enthusiasts," not in today's sense but in the sense in which the word was originally used. They were people who, full of religious passion, believed that God was inspiring them to do deeds beyond law and convention. They were very holy but they were also potentially very dangerous. Bringing unauthorised fire to the *Mishkan* might seem a small offence, but a single unauthorised act in the realm of the holy causes a breach in the laws around the sacred that can grow in time to a gaping hole.

Enthusiasm, harmless though it might often be, has the potential to lead quickly to extremism, fanaticism, and religiously-motivated violence. That is what happened in Europe during the wars of religion in the 16th and 17th centuries, and it is still happening in some religions today.

Precisely because it gives rise to such intense passions, religious life needs the constraints of law and ritual, so that the fire of faith is contained, giving light and a glimpse of the glory of God. Otherwise it can eventually become a raging inferno which spreads destruction and claims lives. After many centuries, we have tamed enthusiasm to the point where we can think of it as a positive force. We should never forget, however, that it was not always so. **That is why Judaism contains so many laws and so much attention to detail – and the closer we come to God, the more we need.**



Around the Shabbat Table

1. Have you ever seen enthusiasm taken too far?
2. How do the laws of Judaism contain and regulate religious enthusiasm?
3. Is there room in Judaism, beyond *halachah*, for religious enthusiasm?



A Balancing Act

by Rabbi Dr. Stuart Halpern

Enthusiasm is a value, but so is balance. Rabbi Sacks taught me this while he was teetering high up on a plastic chair.

I was terrified. Having arranged for him to be a scholar-in-residence in our shul in Englewood, New Jersey, he was enthusiastically leading hundreds of members of the congregation in singing during *seudah shlishit*. He roused the crowd from his perch to “sing so loud they can hear you in Teaneck!” (the next town over, our neighbourhood’s friendly rival).

Rabbi Sacks’ visit as scholar-in-residence in our shul instantly left a legendary imprint upon our community’s collective memory, recalled to this day by so many, despite having taken place over nine years ago. His Friday night lecture had drawn such a large crowd, notwithstanding the late hour, that a friend quipped to me before the shiur started that we might as well take out the Sifrei Torah and start saying Kol Nidrei. After all, the crowd in attendance that night matched that of the holiest day of the year. The enthusiasm of his singing, as if he was a teenage counsellor at summer camp was matched by the enthusiasm of the overflow crowd, there to learn from his teaching.

Don’t worry, he didn’t fall off his chair. And it wasn’t exactly his chair—conducting that taught me balance that Shabbat. It was the balance between emotion and intellect, enthusiasm and steadiness, in which, in Rabbi Sacks’ words, “the fire of faith is contained.”

● Rabbi Dr. Stuart Halpern is Senior Advisor to the Provost and Deputy Director of the Straus Center for Torah & Western Thought at Yeshiva University.



A CLOSER LOOK

● Rabbi Halpern now reflects on some of the deeper ideas of Rabbi Sacks’ teachings.

What is your favourite quote from Rabbi Sacks’ essay this week, and why?

“Enthusiasm can come from over-confidence” is a key lesson in today’s social media age. It is so easy to be convinced that the most confident, most enthusiastic TikTok star or YouTuber holds the key towards wisdom and spiritual guidance. “They look so sure of their opinion,” we think. “They must know how the world works.” Yet, as Rabbi Sacks reminds us, faith is to be found not in fiery fanaticism but in balance and restraint. A covenantal community, after all, thrives on conversation and the dynamics of collaboration, not the loud pontificating of self-appointed prophets.

What impact did Rabbi Sacks have on your own spiritual journey?

Traveling from New York to Philadelphia with Rabbi Sacks once on the way to one of his speaking engagements, I had the priceless opportunity to share with him some notes I was preparing for a shiur.

While he so easily could have used the time to prepare for his own lecture, coordinate many of the projects he was working on with his staff, or even just take a breather from his round-the-clock schedule, he took the time to mentor me and work through the ideas I was developing.

One of the many ways Rabbi Sacks modelled leadership was his investment in the next generation. A peerless thought-leader, he valued helping others think through what was on their own minds. Part of his calling, he felt, and I will always remember, was private conversation, between the stops on a train and between public moments, which would leave an immeasurably inspiring imprint.



TORAH TRIVIA

Q: Can you find four pairs of brothers who appear in *parshat Shemini*?

1. Moshe and Aharon (Vayikra 9:1)
2. Nadav and Avihu (Vayikra 10:1)
3. Mishael and Elitzafon (Vayikra 10:4)
4. Elazar and Itamar (Vayikra 10:6)

A: The four pairs of brothers are:

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