



# Covenant & Conversation



Jonathan Sacks  
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

EMOR • אָמֹר

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*

## Holy Times

● This summary is adapted from this week's main essay by Rabbi Sacks, available at [www.RabbiSacks.org/covenant-conversation/emor/holy-times/](http://www.RabbiSacks.org/covenant-conversation/emor/holy-times/)

**Emor contains a chapter dedicated to the *chaggim* of the Jewish calendar which is distinctive from the other accounts of the festivals in the Torah.** Unlike the Shemot and Devarim passages, this chapter includes Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and Shabbat in the list of the festivals. Strangely, the Torah here seems to be calling Shabbat both a *moed*, an appointed time, and a *mikra kodesh*, a sacred assembly, which it does nowhere else.

The list of the *chaggim* in Vayikra emphasises not the *social* dimension we find in Devarim, or the *sacrificial* dimension we find in Bamidbar, but rather **the spiritual dimension of encounter, closeness, the meeting of the human and the Divine.** This explains why we find in this chapter, more than in any other, two key words. One is *moed*, the other is *mikra kodesh*, and both are deeper than they seem.

The word *moed* does not just mean "appointed time." We find the same word in the phrase *Ohel Moed* meaning "Tent of Meeting." If the *Ohel Moed* was the *place* where God met the people, then the *mo'adim* in our chapter are the *times* when God meets His people. This idea is given beautiful expression in the last line of the mystical song we sing on Shabbat, *Yedid Nefesh*, "Hurry, beloved, for the appointed time [*moed*] has come." *Moed* here means a tryst – an appointment made between lovers to meet at a certain time and place.

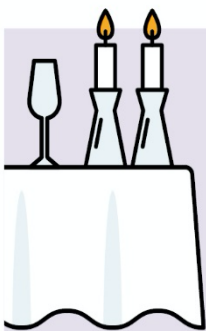
As for the phrase *mikra kodesh*, it comes from the same root as the word that gives the entire book its name:

*vayikra*, meaning "to be summoned in love." **A *mikra kodesh* is not just a holy day. It is a meeting to which we have been called in affection by One who holds us close.**

Much of the book of Vayikra is about the holiness of place, the Mishkan. Some of it is about the holiness of people, the *Kohanim*, the Priests, and Israel as a whole, as "a kingdom of priests." In our parsha, in chapter 23, **the Torah turns to the holiness of time and the times of holiness.**

We are spiritual beings, but we are also physical beings. **We cannot be spiritual, close to God, all the time.** That is why there is secular time as well as holy time. But one day in seven we stop working, stop creating, and enter the presence of the God of creation. On certain days of the year, the festivals, we celebrate the God of history. The holiness of Shabbat is determined by God alone because He alone created the universe. The holiness of the festivals is partially determined by us (i.e., by the fixing of the calendar), because history is a partnership between us and God. But in two respects they are the same. They are both times of meeting (*moed*), and they are both times when we feel ourselves called, summoned, invited as God's guests (*mikra kodesh*).

**We can't always be spiritual. God has given us a material world with which to engage. But on the seventh day of the week, (and originally seven days in the year), God gives us dedicated time in which we feel the closeness of the *Shechinah* and are bathed in the radiance of God's love.**



## Around the Shabbat Table

1. Why do we need to have specific times when we will be in the presence of God?
2. Why can we not be spiritual and close to God all of the time?
3. How do the *chaggim*, and Shabbat, help us to be close to God?



## Our Priorities

by Rabbi Dr. Seth Grauer

Almost 13 years ago, I was privileged to share the stage with Rabbi Sacks at the Yeshivat Har Etzion (Gush) annual dinner. I asked Gush for one favour: “Can I spend an hour alone with the Rabbi I admire and respect so much?” They granted my wish and told me to meet Rabbi Sacks at Princeton University before a lecture he was about to give. I remember driving there, nervously rehearsing and memorizing all my questions. The hour flew by far too quickly and I realized I should have asked for two!

During that meeting, I asked Rabbi Sacks many questions, including: “What should our priorities be for tzedakah and for communal volunteer work?” Without hesitation, he replied, “Jewish Education!”

“For both?” I asked.

“Yes!” He then shared his view that we needed to do everything we could to allow as many children into formal Jewish day schools as possible, and that working in Jewish education, especially as a teacher and a Rabbi, was the best and most important job I could do! Rabbi Sacks then gave me his personal contact information and told me I could feel comfortable reaching out. I gratefully and regularly did so over the next decade.

Many years later, I wanted to launch an endowment fund for our schools in Toronto and he gave me the inspiration and some critical guidance on how to get it started and ensure it was successful. He later followed up, asked me several times how it was going.

We all know how incredibly busy Rabbi Sacks was, yet he always made time for me and countless others. Rabbi Sacks was always eager to discuss Jewish education, the rabbinate, and any other questions I had, and I will be eternally grateful.

● Rabbi Dr. Seth Grauer is Rosh Yeshiva and Head of School of the Bnei Akiva Schools of Toronto. He is also a Sacks Scholar.



## A CLOSER LOOK

● Rabbi Seth Grauer reflects on some of the deeper lessons he learnt from Rabbi Sacks.

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

*“We are spiritual beings but we are also physical beings. We cannot be spiritual, close to God, all the time. That is why there is a secular time as well as a holy time. But one day in seven, we stop working and enter the presence of the God of creation.”*

This is very comforting in our lifelong drive to develop a close connection with God. Connecting spiritually with Him all day and every day is impossible, but recognizing that there are special days and specific times in which our focus and attention should be heightened makes this goal more attainable.

### Which of these ideas is the most important message for the next generation?

The recognition that we are both spiritual and physical beings. It is so incredibly essential we appreciate that there is far more to life than just its physical and material aspects. Yet we must realize, too, that “we cannot be spiritual, close to God, all the time.” Of course we know that the ideal would be to connect our physical beings and physical world to our spiritual selves such that we look for a higher purpose in everything we do, but in the absence of that, from a mental health and self-concept perspective, it is important to recognize that it is indeed normal to be simply unable to connect spiritually to God all day every day.

### How could we put Rabbi Sacks’ message about Shabbat into real-life practice?

If each of us took the time to contemplate our lives on Shabbat – to really think about what we have, what we are and who we want to be – it would have an immediate impact on our week. By using Shabbat properly, we can add meaning and power to both our physical and spiritual lives.

Adam HaRishon observed the first ever Shabbat moments after his creation. Rather than being exhausted or tired, he was likely excited for the week ahead. A lesson for us all.

Shabbat is a day set aside for the purpose of connecting to God. By being close to Him on Shabbat, we will be more likely to be closer to Him more of the time.



## TORAH TRIVIA

Q: Mr Cohen is praying with a *minyan* in a shul in Israel. He is not behind on his davening, and his level of Torah study has equal status with all the other men present. His father is a *kohen*, and his grandfather before him, so Mr Cohen is halachically a *kohen* too. Yet when it is time to call up the first person to the Torah for an *aliya*, a *yisrael* is called up instead of Mr Cohen. Can you explain why?

A: The reason is “*darkhei shalom*”. Mr Cohen is not the only *kohen* at shul that day. In fact, he is praying with a *minyan* full of *kohanim*, and only one *yisrael*.  
The *yisrael* is therefore called up first, so that no one *kohen* will be made to feel superior or inferior to his fellow *kohanim* (Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim 135:12).

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