



Covenant & Conversation



Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

BEHAR-BECHUKOTAI • בהר־בְּחֻקָּתַי

STUDIES IN SPIRITUALITY

BASED ON THE TEACHINGS AND WRITINGS OF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS 7"צ

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

Family Feeling

● This summary is adapted from this week's main essay by Rabbi Sacks, available at www.RabbiSacks.org/covenant-conversation/behar/family-feeling/

In this week's *parsha*, we repeatedly read of social *halacha* that is couched in the language of **family**. For example, "When you buy or sell to your neighbour, let no one wrong his *brother*." (Vayikra. 25:14)

"**Brother**" in these verses is not meant literally. At times it means a relative, but mostly it means your fellow Jew. This is a distinctive way of thinking about society and our obligations to others. Jews are not just citizens of the same nation or followers of the same faith. We are all members of the same extended **family**. We are all – biologically or electively – **children** of Avraham and Sarah. For the most part, we share the same history. On the *chaggim* we re-live the same memories. We were forged in the same crucible of suffering. **We are more than friends. We are mishpacha, family.**

The concept of **family** is absolutely fundamental to Judaism. Consider the book of Bereishit, the Torah's starting point. It is not chiefly about theology, doctrine, dogma. It is not an argument against idolatry. It is about families: **husbands and wives, parents and children, brothers and sisters**. At key moments in the Torah, God Himself defines His relationship with the Israelites in terms of family. He tells Moshe to say to Pharaoh in His name: "My **child**, My **firstborn**, Yisrael" (Shemot 4:22). When Moshe wants to explain to Bnai Yisrael why they have a duty to be holy, He says, "You are **children** of the Lord your God" (Devarim 14:1). **If God is our Parent, then we are all siblings. We are related by family bonds that go to the very heart of who we are.**

This sense of kinship, and the family bond, is at the heart of the idea of *kol Yisrael arevim zeh bazeh*, "All Jews are

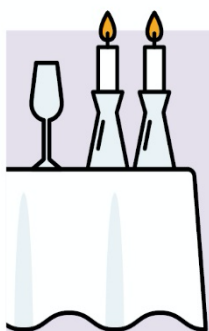
responsible for one another." Or as Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai put it, "When one Jew is injured, all Jews feel the pain."

Why is Judaism built on this model of the family? Partly to tell us that God did not choose an elite of the righteous or a sect of the likeminded. He chose a **family** – Avraham and Sarah's descendants – extended through time. The family is the most powerful vehicle of continuity, and the kinds of changes Jews were expected to make to the world could not be achieved in a single generation. Hence the importance of the family as a place of education – "You shall teach these things repeatedly to your **children**" (Devarim 6:7) – and of handing the story on, especially on Pesach through the Seder service.

It was this sense of family that kept Jews linked in a web of mutual obligation even when they were scattered across the world. Does it still exist? Sometimes the divisions in the Jewish world go so deep, and the insults hurled by one group against another are so brutal that one could almost be persuaded that it does not.

Yet that conclusion is premature for precisely the reason that makes family so elemental a bond. Argue with your friend and tomorrow they may no longer be your friend, but argue with your sibling, and tomorrow they are still your **family**.

The Jewish people remains a family, often divided, always argumentative, but bound in a common bond of fate nonetheless. As our *parsha* reminds us, that person who has fallen is our brother or sister, and ours must be the hand that helps them rise again.



Around the Shabbat Table

1. Why do you think families so often argue?
2. Can you join a family you are not born into? Can you join the Jewish people even if you were not born a Jew?
3. Do you feel related to Jews from other parts of the world?



Acheinu

by Rabbi Aviad Tabory

Reb Aryeh Levin, the great tzaddik of Yerushalayim, was once walking along with his son when they were stopped by a man who asked, “Reb Aryeh, how is your relative in hospital doing?” The son later asked his father, “Which relative do we have in the hospital?” and Reb Aryeh Levin explained to his son as follows:

“While I was visiting the sick, I heard of a man who was in a bad condition. I sat with him and asked him about family members and friends who might be visiting him soon to help him out. The man sadly replied that he had no one like that. That man is now in hospital, and I wanted to ensure that he was never lonely, so I planned to visit him regularly, but the hospital has a rule that only family members are allowed onto his ward. So, I decided to become his family.”

This is a beautiful story which reminds us that all Jews are a part of one big family, and we must support one another whenever we can. This idea is portrayed by the prayer said every Monday and Thursday, when each Jew prays for the safety and well-being of their brothers and sisters, the Jewish people:

Acheinu kol beit yisrael, han'tunim b'tzara, b'tzara uvashivyah, haomdim bein bayam uvein bayabasha. Hamakom Y'racheim, Y'racheim Aleihem v'yotziem mitzara lirvacha um'afaila l'orah umishiabud lig'ulah, hashta ba'agala uvizman kariv.

As for our brothers, the whole House of Israel, who are given over to trouble or captivity, whether they abide on the sea or on the dry land: May the All-Present have mercy upon them, and bring them forth from trouble to relief, from darkness to light, and from oppression to redemption, now, speedily and soon.

● Rabbi Aviad Tabory teaches at Yeshivat Eretz Hatzvi in Jerusalem. He served as Bnei Akiva UK's Rav Shaliach when Rabbi Sacks was Chief Rabbi, and he is also a Sacks Scholar.



A CLOSER LOOK

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

Where else did Rabbi Sacks mention the importance of family in Jewish life?

Regarding the Four Children who appear in our Haggadah at Seder night, Rabbi Sacks explains that there is a message in this family portrait of four VERY different children who, though they disagree, sit around the same table, telling the same story. Though they differ, they stay together. They are part of a single family, and the Jewish people is an extended family. We all argue, we differ... yet we are part of the same story. Each child draws strength from the others, as we draw strength from belonging to a people.

What is the significance of Rabbi Sacks' message this week for us today?

The past year here in Israel has been fraught with tension between political parties, leading to mass demonstrations and protests. The language and conduct have sometimes become aggressive. If only all parties would implement this week's message: that we, the Jewish people, are essentially one big family, which means that even when we disagree, argue, and even fight, we are connected to one another like all families!

Can you share something personal that you learnt from Rabbi Sacks?

Years ago, Rabbi Sacks visited Yeshivat Eretz Hatzvi, in which I teach, and I asked him in front of all my students about the future of modern Judaism. Amongst other things, he passionately explained how he understood his own personal duty as a Jew in the modern world in which we live, and that we must all serve as role-models to the entire world by teaching and living the ethics and morality of our Torah. To this day, I try to implement this message in my classes to my students.



TORAH TRIVIA

Q: Can you find the two places in the Torah where there are six words in a row that have all the same first letter?

Hint: Only one of these two places is in this week's parsha.

Second Hint: The letter used in one of the six-word phrases is an *aleph*, and in the other it is a *shin*.

▲ In parshat Behar, when the mitzva of Yovel is commanded, it says: *sheva shabbatot shanim sheva shanim sheva* (Vayikra 25:8). All 6 words begin with the letter *shin*.
In the story of the sons of Yaacov standing before their brother Yosef in Egypt, they say: *ish el achiv aval asheimim anachnu* (Bereishit 42:21). In this case the six consecutive words begin with the letter *alef*.

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