



Covenant & Conversation



Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

BAMIDBAR • במדבר

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 Sound of Silence

● This summary is adapted from this week's main essay by Rabbi Sacks, available at RabbiSacks.org/covenant-conversation/bamidbar/the-sound-of-silence/

Bamidbar is usually read on the Shabbat before Shavuot. Shavuot is the time of the Giving of the Torah, and *Bamidbar* means, "in the desert". What is the connection between the desert and the Torah, the wilderness and God's word? The Sages found a beautiful link.

The desert is a place of silence. There is nothing visual to distract you, and there is no noise to muffle sound. Of course, when the Israelites received the Torah there was thunder and lightning and the sound of a shofar. The earth felt as if it were shaking at its foundations. But in a later age, when the prophet Eliyahu stood at the same mountain after his confrontation with the prophets of Baal, he encountered God not in the whirlwind, or the fire, or the earthquake, but in the *Kol demama daka*, the still, small voice, literally "the sound of a slender silence" (I Melachim 19:9–12). I define this as **the sound you can only hear if you are listening**. In the silence of the *midbar*, the desert, you can hear the *Medaber*, the Speaker, and the *medubar*, that which is spoken. To hear the voice of God you need a listening silence in the soul.

Judaism is a very verbal culture, a religion of holy words. Through words, God created the universe. According to the Targum, it is our unique ability to speak that makes us human. Words create. Words communicate. Our relationships are shaped, for good or bad, by language. *Much of Judaism is about the power of words to make or break worlds.*

But **listening is the supreme religious art**. Listening means making space for others to speak and be heard. As I point out in my Commentary to the Siddur, there is no English word that remotely equals the Hebrew verb *sh-m-a* in its wide range of senses: to listen, to hear, to

pay attention, to understand, to internalise, and to respond in deed.

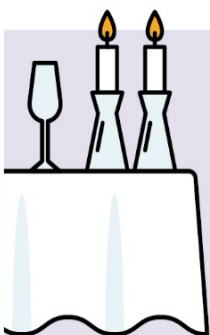
This was one of the key elements in the Sinai covenant, when the Israelites, having already said twice, "All that God says, we will do," then said, "All that God says, we will do and we will hear [*venishma*]" (Shemot 24:7). It is the *nishma* – listening, hearing, heeding, responding – that is the key religious act. Thus Judaism is not only a religion of doing and speaking; it is also a religion of listening. **Faith is the ability to hear the music beneath the noise.**

Is there enough listening in the Jewish world today? Do we, in marriage, really listen to our spouses? Do we as parents truly listen to our children? Do we, as leaders, hear the unspoken fears of those we seek to lead? Do we, as members of a *kehillah*, internalise the sense of hurt of the people who feel excluded from the community? Can we really claim to be listening to the voice of God if we fail to listen to the voices of our fellow humans?

In his poem "In memory of W B Yeats", W H Auden wrote:

In the deserts of the heart
Let the healing fountain start.

From time to time we need to step back from the noise and hubbub of the social world and create in our hearts the stillness of the desert where, within the silence, we can hear the *kol demama daka*, the still, small voice of God, telling us we are loved, we are heard, we are embraced by God's everlasting arms, we are not alone.



Around the Shabbat Table

1. Where else could God have chosen to give the Torah to the Children of Israel? Why do you think He chose the desert instead?
2. Why is listening important? Why is it "supreme religious art"?
3. Do you find it hard to listen? How can you improve this skill? Do we need to "see God" to strengthen this relationship also?



Storms and Silences

by Abi Keene

Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel was once discussing Torah with a group of scholars when he said something that his colleagues disagreed with. Rather than argue with him, they remained silent.

Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel was surprised by their lack of response, and he asked why they had reacted in this way. They told him the story of a ship that was tossed around in a stormy sea. The captain of the ship asked a sailor to climb to the top of the mast and tell him what he saw. Reaching the top, the sailor shouted down that he could see nothing but darkness and chaos. The captain asked the sailor to wait a little while longer and then tell him what he could see. After a while, the sailor shouted to the captain that he could now see a light on the horizon. The sailors were then able to steer the ship safely home.

Rabbi Gamliel's colleagues explained they were using the same strategy. They remained silent because they did not want to argue amid a stormy discussion. Instead, they were waiting until they could see through the storm to a distant light of understanding before responding.

Sometimes, silence can be more powerful than words, especially during a heated or contentious discussion. The Midrash reminds us that we should choose our words carefully and be mindful of their impact on others. Staying silent at these key moments creates space for understanding and insight to emerge, and this is how we build stronger and more meaningful relationships.

● Abi Keene is Assistant Headteacher and Director of Jewish Life and Learning at JFS School. She is also a Sacks Scholar.



A CLOSER LOOK

● **Abi Keene** reflects on some of the deeper lessons she learnt from Rabbi Sacks.

Which idea expressed in this week's piece do you think is the most important message for the next generation?

In a world characterised by noise and distraction, where we are constantly bombarded with information and stimuli, it can be difficult to find the time and space for introspection. However, Rabbi Sacks teaches that self-reflection is crucial for personal growth and well-being. This is an important message for young people. Much of their life is surrounded by noise, especially from technology and social media. Breaking free from these modern constraints is critical. That is why Shabbat is so important. It is the desert that Rabbi Sacks speaks about, where we can find "a place of silence" that can help us appreciate who we are and what we truly value.

What influence did Rabbi Sacks have on your approach as an educator?

One of Rabbi Sacks' greatest gifts was his ability to connect with young people and make them feel valued and empowered, believing that every person had a unique voice and perspective to offer. He encouraged me to speak out and share my ideas, and I try to emulate his example by engaging with my students and empowering them to find their own way to contribute to their community and society.

Can you share something you learnt from Rabbi Sacks himself?

As Mazkira of Bnei Akiva, I would often ask Rabbi Sacks for his advice. Each time I did, I would explain the challenge or ask a particular question, and after I finished, he would almost never respond immediately. Instead, he would pause and reflect upon what I had said. Only then would he engage in conversation and share his perspective. The moment of silence never lasted long, but it was a powerful lesson. It showed that he had really listened to what I was saying or asking. That was part of what made him so respected; he gave the same level of attention to whoever he interacted with, whoever they were. That is something we can all seek to emulate.



TORAH TRIVIA

Q: Of what is Bamidbar the largest of seventeen?

▲ There are only seventeen *parshiyot* that contain no *mitzvot*. Of these seventeen, Bamidbar is the largest *parsha*.

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