



# Covenant & Conversation

FAMILY  
EDITION

Jonathan Sacks  
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

כי תבוא • KI TAVO

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*

## We Are What We Remember

● This summary is adapted from the C&C essay of the week, available at [RabbiSacks.org/covenant-conversation/ki-tavo/we-are-what-we-remember/](https://RabbiSacks.org/covenant-conversation/ki-tavo/we-are-what-we-remember/)

There is a remarkable law in Ki Tavo. It tells us that first-fruits were to be taken to "the place God chooses," i.e., Jerusalem. They were to be handed to the priest, and he who brought the offering was to then make the following declaration:

My ancestor was a wandering Aramean. He went down into Egypt and lived there as a stranger, with just a handful of souls, and there he became a nation – large, mighty, and great. The Egyptians dealt cruelly with us and oppressed us, subjecting us to harsh labour. We cried out to the Lord, God of our ancestors. And the Lord heard our voice and He saw our oppression, our toil, and our enslavement. The Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and His arm stretched forth, with terrifying power, with signs and with wonders. He brought us into this place and He gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and with honey. And now I am bringing the first-fruit of the land that You, O Lord, have given me. (Devarim 26:5–10)

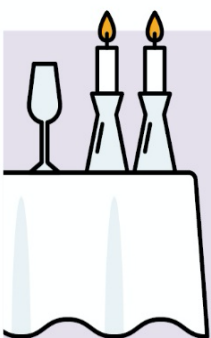
We know this passage because, at least since Second Temple times, it has been a central part of the Haggada, the story we tell at the Seder table. But note that it was originally to be said on bringing first-fruits, which was not on Pesach. Usually they were delivered for Shavuot.

What makes this law remarkable is this: We would expect, when celebrating the soil and its produce, to speak of the God of nature. But **this text is not about nature. It is about history.** It is about a distant ancestor, a "wandering Aramean." It is the story of our ancestors. It is a narrative

explaining why I am here, and why the people to whom I belong is what it is and where it is. There was nothing remotely like this in the ancient world, and there is nothing quite like it today. As Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi said in his classic book *Zakhor*, Jews were *the first people to see God in history, the first to see an overarching meaning in history, and the first to make memory a religious duty.*

That is why Jewish identity has proven to be the most tenacious the world has ever known: the only identity ever sustained by a minority dispersed throughout the world for two thousand years, one that eventually led Jews back to the Land and State of Israel, turning Hebrew, the language of the Bible, into a living speech again after a lapse of many centuries in which it was used only for poetry and prayer. **We are what we remember, and the first-fruits' declaration was a way of ensuring that Jews would never forget.**

Jews have told the story of who we are for longer and more devotedly than any other people on the face of the earth. That is what makes Jewish identity so rich and resonant. In an age in which computer and smartphone memories have grown so fast, from kilobytes to megabytes to gigabytes, while human memories have become so foreshortened, there is an important Jewish message to humanity as a whole. You can't delegate memory to machines. You have to renew it regularly and teach it to the next generation. Winston Churchill said: "The longer you can look back, the further you can see forward." Or to put it slightly differently: **Those who tell the story of their past have already begun to build their children's future.**



## Around the Shabbat Table

1. Why is story-telling important?
2. How do you know the Jewish story? Who told it to you?
3. In which ways does the Torah seek to ensure that the Jewish story is never forgotten?



# Our Family Tree

by Josh Sacks

One day, when I was a child, my father came home with a huge rolled up piece of paper. Some of his relatives were keen genealogists who had researched their family history and drawn a family tree. We opened it out on the dining table and looked for people we recognised. At the bottom we found my father and my grandparents. Nearby we found friends we didn't know we were related to. Higher up, my father found some famous Rabbis. And, to my amazement, at the top we found King David, and Avraham, and other biblical figures I had learned about in school.

I was excited to learn that we were actually related to people in the Torah. My father replied that most Jewish people are too. But to me, seeing each link in the chain made it more tangible. My father often wrote about our connection to our past. He taught that "Judaism is a religion of memory" and "Memory is different from history. History is someone else's story. It's about events that occurred long ago to someone else. Memory is my story. It's about where I come from and of what narrative I am a part." Seeing myself in the same family tree as Avraham made me realise that as well as being related to Torah characters, we are, each of us, characters in the same story, and the story has not yet ended.

My father felt this strongly. Born a few weeks before the establishment of the modern State of Israel, he knew that he was living in times of historic significance, and that we all have a part to play in the Jewish story. This week's *Covenant & Conversation* quotes the *parsha* which says that every year after the Israelites settle in Israel, they should bring their first-fruits to the priests and recite the story that brought them there, from slavery in Egypt to freedom in Israel. These could be two separate commandments – bringing new fruits to the priests, and remembering our story – why combine them? Perhaps it is to remind the people that growing fruit in Israel is itself part of the story.

● Josh Sacks is a Solution Architect at Endava, and a Trustee for The Rabbi Sacks Legacy. He is also the son of Rabbi Sacks zt"l.



## A CLOSER LOOK

● Josh Sacks now shares some of the deeper ideas he learnt from Rabbi Sacks.

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

People often tell me about the things they learned from my father. Even a few days ago, someone I had just met told me that the idea he always remembers is that we view our history differently to some other groups of people. Some groups define themselves by historic events, whether glorious or catastrophic. Whereas in Judaism we don't define ourselves solely by our past, we remember the past and use it to help navigate our future. As my father wrote, "Remember the past, but do not be held captive by it".

Perhaps one reason we Jews have kept our identity over thousands of years is that our story isn't limited to one time or one place. When we moved to different countries, we were not leaving the Jewish story, instead we were starting new chapters.

Some have suggested that in our modern society, personal identity is not linked to family history; all that matters is the individual's achievements and associations. On the other hand, what did the BBC choose to call its long-running series on people tracing their family trees? 'Who Do You Think You Are?'

**This week's piece discusses the mitzva of people bringing new fruit to the Temple and remembering the events that led to that moment, and then thanking God. But we no longer have the Temple. So how can I do something similar to this, when I reach an achievement in my own life?**

You could say the 'Shehecheyanu' blessing. Its translation is: Blessed are you, Lord our God, King of the Universe, who has given us life, sustained us, and brought us to this time.



## TORAH TRIVIA

Q: Which is the only Hebrew letter missing from the section in Ki Tavo which deals with the *bikkurim* (the first-fruit offerings)? Can you think of an explanation for this?

A: The letter *samech* is the only letter missing. The Baal Haturim quotes "Ittur Bikkurim" and says that since *bikkurim* are in fact 1/60<sup>th</sup>, there is no need for the letter *samech* which is valued at 60. An alternative explanation is that since one part in 60 has been separated, there are only 59 parts left, and the *samech* (or 60<sup>th</sup>) is missing. The Ittur Bikkurim adds that this is why the word, "tene" is used for basket in this section of Ki Tavo, instead of "sal" with contains the letter *samech*.

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