



# Covenant & Conversation



Jonathan Sacks  
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

BEREISHIT • בְּרֵאשִׁית

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

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 God of Creation and the Land of Israel

● This summary is adapted from an essay by Rabbi Sacks, available at [RabbiSacks.org/covenant-conversation/bereishit/creation-and-israel/](http://RabbiSacks.org/covenant-conversation/bereishit/creation-and-israel/)

The very first question Rashi raises in his Commentary on the Chumash is: **Why does the Torah begin with the story of Creation?** His answer is fascinating. Seven times God will promise the land of Israel to Avraham, once to Yitzchak, and three times to Yaacov. Soon after we complete the book of Bereishit, we will read of Moshe hearing about "the land flowing with milk and honey." After that, the entire Torah is about Israel, the destination of the Jewish journey.

If the central theme of the Torah is the promise of the Land, the beginning must in some way be related to it. Hence Rashi's comment on the first verse of the Torah explaining why the Torah begins with the Creation narrative:

So that if the nations of the world will say to Israel, "You took the land by force," Israel can reply to them, "The whole earth belongs to the Hashem. He created it... and by His will He gave [the land] to us."

**The Creation narrative is therefore highly relevant to Israel. It signals that the Jewish People's connection to the Land of Israel comes from the highest source imaginable, the Sovereign of the Universe, the Creator of all.**

And now an obvious question arises. Why should a religion be tied to a land? It sounds absurd, especially in the context of monotheism. Surely the God of everywhere can be served anywhere. The answer here is

that Judaism is primarily about collective redemption, about what it is to create an entire society that is the opposite of ancient Egypt, where the strong enslaved the weak. The Torah teaches of a society of free people, where justice rules and each individual is recognised as bearing the image of God. **We are social animals. Therefore we find God in society.** That is what we discover when we reflect on the basic structure of the Torah's many commands. They include laws about courts of justice, the conduct of war, ownership of land, employer-employee relationships, the welfare of the poor, and the Shmittah cancellation of debts.

**Laws shape a society, and a society needs space. A sacred society needs sacred space, a holy land.**

**Hence Jews and Judaism need their own land.** In four thousand years, for much of which Jews lived in exile, the people of the covenant have been scattered over the face of the earth. There is no land in which Jews have never lived. Yet in all those centuries, there was only ever one land where they were able to do what almost every other nation takes for granted: create their own society in accordance with their own beliefs.

**The premise of the Torah is that God must be found somewhere in particular if He is to be found everywhere in general. Just as in the Creation narrative Shabbat is holy time, so in the Torah as a whole Israel is holy space. That is why, in Judaism, religion is tied to a land, and a land is linked to a religion.**



### Around the Shabbat Table

1. What can we learn from knowing how God created the world?
2. Do you think there is a difference between Judaism practised in the diaspora compared to Judaism kept by those living in the Land of Israel?
3. Do you think the State of Israel today is "a society that is the opposite of ancient Egypt"?

## Parsha in Passing

Parshat Bereishit serves as the opening act for our entire Torah. God created the world in six days, declaring the seventh day the day of rest. At the end of the sixth day, God placed man and woman into the Garden of Eden to create, inspire, and enhance the world around them. With total freedom in the garden, Adam and Chava only had one rule. Do not eat from the

trees in the middle of the garden.

A talking snake encouraged Chava to try the fruit, and sadly, Adam and Chava both gave in to temptation and ate the fruit from the forbidden tree. Cursed with a life of hard work, they were expelled from the garden to forge their own way in the world. Then the world's first couple

had two sons, Kayin and Hevel. One day, Hevel brought his best lamb as a sacrifice to God. Kayin too brought a *korban*, a sacrifice, but not one nearly as wonderful as Hevel's. God accepted Hevel's *korban* and rejected Kayin's. In a fit of jealousy, Kayin murdered his brother. He was punished with a life of wandering, marked forever by his misdeeds.

The parsha ends with a chronology of the subsequent ten generations of humankind.

## Parsha People

**God:** Chief architect of the world, and sparking life with a word.

**Adam:** First man around, always found with dirt under his nails and curiosity in his eyes.

**Chava:** First woman of the world, keenly inquisitive, and not afraid to break the rules.

**The Snake:** Sneaky garden gossip, full of tantalising tales and dubious advice.

**Kayin:** The original green thumb, yet prone to sprouting fits of jealousy.

**Hevel:** Gentle soul with a shepherd's crook, unaware of his tragic fate.



## Parsha Philosophy

This week Rabbi Sacks highlights the special relationship between the land, our faith, and how we live as a community. In order to truly live according to our beliefs, we need our own land, and that land is Israel.

Something that we can learn from this essay is how to stand up to people who question whether Israel should exist at all as the Jewish homeland. As Rabbi Sacks points out, many people actually do believe in the same

God we do - the God of Avraham. To them, we can point out that, unlike Christianity or Islam, Judaism never aimed to win over the world or start an empire.

We just want one small piece of land, the land promised to the Children of Israel by the very God we all believe in. But how should we think about our own advocacy responsibilities? Let's explore that further in the *Parsha Practical!*

## Parsha Playoff

Let's play **"Two Facts and a Fib."** Unlike Adam and Chava, the Parsha People who faced consequences for deceit, in this game, there's no penalty for bending the truth!

Each player takes a turn to shares two truths and one lie about themselves, keeping a straight face to prevent giving away which is the falsehood. Others then try to guess which statement is false.

For an added challenge, try creating two truths and one fib about the State of Israel or the history of the Jewish People.

## Parsha Puzzle

**Q. Who was the first person to learn Chumash with Rashi?**

**A.** Trick question: Rashi's father studied Chumash with him from when he was a young boy, hence Rashi's father was the first person to study Chumash with Rashi!

Adapted from Torah IQ by David Woolf, a collection of 1,500 Torah riddles, available on Amazon.



## Parsha Practical

Let's unravel a profound lesson from Parshat Bereishit! You know the story of Kayin and Hevel, right? Kayin got jealous when God favoured Hevel's sacrifice, and, well, things got out of hand: Kayin ended up taking his brother's life. Talk about sibling rivalry gone wrong! When God asked him about it, Kayin shot back with that classic line, "Am I my brother's keeper?" What if we turn Kayin's retort into a life lesson, a mitzvah that matters?

Let's be serious about taking responsibility for one another, being like 'keepers' for our fellow human beings - especially the people that, like Hevel, most need our love and support. That's what makes our community and faith shine. And guess what? Rabbi Sacks connects this beautiful idea to our bond with Israel, our collective 'home sweet home.'

Let's imagine every Jew, no matter their location, as our brother

or sister. Advocating for Israel - manifesting its place as that one little land that God gave us to be our home - is, in essence, us fulfilling the role of being our 'brother's keeper.'

So, what's the practical mitzvah here? Dive into learning more about Israel - its captivating history and the vital role it plays in our shared faith. Then, seek ways to connect, defend, and treasure Israel and those who live there. Live out the spirit of your 'brother's keeper' and you'll be fulfilling a truly profound and far-reaching ideal.

1. What are some ways you think we could counter misinformation about Israel when it is spread online?
2. Why is understanding the history and culture of Israel so important when advocating for the country?



## Parsha Parable

### David Ben-Gurion: The Teenage Visionary Who Shaped a Nation

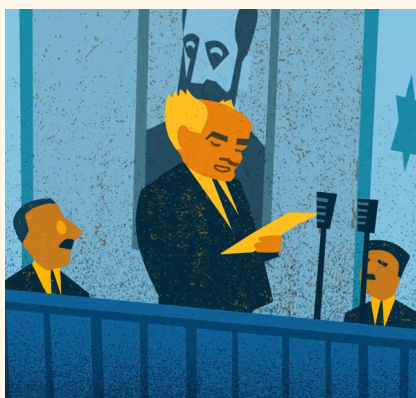
Our tale begins with David Ben-Gurion, born David Gruen in 1886, in the Polish town of Plonsk.

Even as a teenager, David was buzzing with Zionist ideals.

Picture a young David, fired up with passion for a Jewish homeland in what was then known as Palestine.

At just 14 he was all in, and he eagerly joined a Zionist youth club. It was like finding his tribe, where everyone had the same dream - a place to call their own, where they could sow the seeds of a nation.

And here's where the story gets interesting. In 1906, when he was barely 20 years old, David embarked on his first adventure



to Palestine. Mind you, it wasn't the Israel we know and love today. David faced tremendous hardships while working as a farmer in a land of swamps and deserts. Yet he persisted, valiantly grappling with the challenges of the strange yet strangely familiar land.

As the years rolled on, he became a force to be reckoned with, rising through the ranks of various Zionist organizations.

Soon, David Ben-Gurion became one of the key leaders of the Zionist movement and eventually the very first Prime Minister of Israel. So, there you have it, a glimpse into the journey of a young dreamer with humble beginnings who turned into a visionary leader.

David Ben-Gurion showed us what it means to dream big and work even bigger.

His legacy still shines brightly today, inspiring us to keep striving for our dreams - just like he did back in the day.

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