



# Covenant & Conversation

FAMILY  
EDITION

Jonathan Sacks  
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

NOACH • נח

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

## A Tale of Four Cities

● This summary is adapted from an essay by Rabbi Sacks, available at [RabbiSacks.org/covenant-conversation/noach/a-tale-of-four-cities/](https://RabbiSacks.org/covenant-conversation/noach/a-tale-of-four-cities/)

The story of Bavel is **the second act** in a four act drama that is unmistakably one of the connecting threads of Bereishit. It is a sustained criticism against the idea of a city and all that this encompassed in the ancient world. **The message: the city is not where we find God.**

**The first act** begins with Kayin and Hevel both bringing *korbanot* to God. God accepts Hevel's, but not Kayin's. Kayin, in anger, murders Hevel. Kayin's punishment is that he will become a "restless wanderer on the earth."

Kayin then "went out from the Lord's presence and lived in the land of Nod, east of Eden... and he [Kayin] built a city, and called the name of the city, after the name of his son, Chanoch." The first city was founded by the first murderer. The city was born in blood. **The most important fact about the first city, according to the Bible, is that it was built in defiance of God's will.** Kayin was sentenced to a life of wandering, but instead he built a city.

**The second act is the Tower of Bavel**, where the people attempt to challenge God Himself, and **the third act is Sodom**, the most prominent of the cities in the Jordan valley. God announces His plan to destroy the city, and Avraham challenges Him. Perhaps there are fifty innocent people there, perhaps there are ten. How can God destroy the whole city? It turns out that there are no innocent people other than Lot and his family. What do we see in the city of Sodom? The people do not like strangers. They do not see them as protected by law – and they do not even treat them as guests. There is also the idea of a crowd, a mob. People in a crowd can commit crimes they would not dream of doing on their own. Therefore, large cities are inherently a moral

hazard. Crowds drag down more often than they lift up. Hence Avraham's decision to live apart. He argues with Hashem on behalf of Sodom and prays for its inhabitants, but he will not live there. **The patriarchs and matriarchs were shepherds and travellers who lived far from the cities.** They moved from place to place. They spent much of their time in quiet spaces where they could be with God.

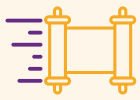
**The fourth scene is Egypt**, where Yosef is brought as a slave and serves in Potiphar's house. There, Potiphar's wife accuses him of a crime he did not commit, so he is sent to prison. The descriptions of Egypt in Bereishit, unlike those in Shemot, do not speak of violence but, as the Yosef story makes pointedly clear, there is immorality and injustice.

**The book of Bereishit gives us the tale of four ancient cities: Chanoch, Bavel, Sodom, and the Egyptian cities.** In each instance, the city is a dehumanising environment and potentially a place where people forget God. What the Torah is telling us, implicitly, is how and why Abrahamic monotheism was born. The Torah teaches us how to sustain strong face-to-face communities, even within cities. For it is only when we relate to one another as persons, as individuals bound together in shared covenant, that we avoid the sins of the city. The Torah laws help us to live morally, with a focus on our relationships with others and with God, fair division of wealth and power, and respectful treatment of others. For all people are created in the image of God, and are therefore worthy of fair treatment. **That is the antidote to Bavel, then and now, guiding us to the unity of all humanity.**



## Around the Shabbat Table

1. What do you think the sin of the builders of the Tower of Bavel was?
2. Do you think cities today support the point made by Rabbi Sacks about the potential for evil in cities?
3. How can we create large, flourishing cities where the residents are more righteous?



# Parsha in Passing

Parshat Noach begins by introducing the most righteous man of this time, Noah. God decides that the state of the world is no good and a major reset is needed. So Noah and his family are designated as survivors and Noah will pave the way for a new, brighter future for society. God tells Noah to build a massive boat (an Ark) which will save him, his family, and all the animals of the

world. After the animals enter two by two (one pair of every non-kosher animal, and seven pairs of every kosher animal, Noah closes the doors of the Ark and sets sail.

Rain falls for forty days and forty nights, and it is another several months before Noah steps out onto dry land. With a fresh start for the world, God places a rainbow in the sky as a reminder that He

will never destroy humanity with a Flood again. Noah and his sons bring a *korban* as a way to thank God.

The parsha concludes with the inhabitants of the city of Bavel building a massive tower as a way to try and reach God. This tower is destroyed and subsequently, all of the people of the world are scattered, their languages and ideologies splintered. At the very end of the parsha, we read a list of the ten generations between Noah and Avraham.



# Parsha People

**God:** The Creator, reworking life and guiding destinies.

**Noach:** Newly seasoned sailor and animal saviour. The steady rock in a world awash.

**The Flood:** Washing away the old to make way for the new.

**City of Bavel:** A city full of big dreams, chatty construction workers... and lofty ambitions.



# Parsha Practical

One important mitzva we can extrapolate from this week's parsha is the prohibition against harmful speech, Lashon Hara.

In today's digital age, with the dominance of social media, the potential for damaging and divisive communication is immense. To combat this, we can turn to two

practical approaches. First, we can promote a "think before you post" culture, using curiosity to assess whether a post is harmful, hurtful, or helpful. This encourages a sense of responsibility for ourselves and our online community. Secondly, we can foster online spaces that celebrate positivity, empathy, and unity

to counter the divisive effects of harmful speech. These could include spaces designated for constructive dialogue, support groups, or even pages that share uplifting content. Whereas Bavel built an isolated self-obsessed city, we can build inclusive, wholesome networks. These teachings from Rabbi Sacks can help us to use the tools of communication to build stronger, more compassionate communities both online and in person.



# Parsha Playoff

Let's play "**Broken Telephone.**" Form a circle or line of players and begin with someone whispering a kind action into the ear of the next. For example, "Help a friend with their homework," or "Bake cookies for the neighbours."

Every time the message is passed along the chain, a positive action is added. So if the first message was, "Help a friend with their homework," the next person might add, "Help a friend with their homework and call your grandmother." In the middle of the game, introduce a **disruptor** element – a negative message or action. For example, "Ignore the new kid at school." The next person in the game then has a choice: pass on this negative message or choose to convert it into something positive. The last person in the group shares out loud the message they received. Everybody then reflects on the evolution of the message, and how positive and negative words can impact the outcome of the game.



# Parsha Puzzle

**Q.** We know that Noah brought creatures into the Ark in pairs, to protect all the animals and birds of the world from extinction. But which creatures survived without exception, not just the chosen pairs living inside the Ark?

**A.** No fish were brought into the Ark. Yet the Gemara (Zevachim 113b) notes that not a single fish died during the Flood.

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



# Parsha Philosophy

In Rabbi Sacks' insightful essay, 'A Tale of Four Cities', he delves into the complex dynamics of urbanisation and civilisation from a biblical perspective, exploring each of the built-up areas mentioned in the Book of Bereishit.

Among the central themes he unpacks is the danger of self-deification and societal complacency. He casts Babel, where the citizens build a tower to rival God, as a cautionary tale of self-worship.

The people's unwillingness to branch out and populate the land – an explicit mandate from God – illustrates an additional resistance to community-building, kindness, and relationships.

Rabbi Sacks' lens invites us to reflect upon our own behavioural and communication habits, particularly how social media platforms can mirror or combat the problems of those ancient civilisations.

1. Having read Parsha Practical and Parsha Philosophy, what specific steps can you take to adopt a "think before you post" mindset?
2. How can you actively contribute to online spaces in a way that will promote positivity, empathy, and unity?



# Parsha Parable

## Irena Sendler: Standing Up in the Face of Evil

This is the story of Irena Sendler, a non-Jewish social worker who lived in Poland during World War II. Even though the general sentiment towards Jews in Poland at that time was indifference or even antisemitism, 29-year-old Irena, along with her network in the Żegota (the Council to Aid Jews), did not give in to this groupthink. Instead, she chose the path of kindness.

When the Nazis rounded up the Jews and put them into the Warsaw Ghetto, she and her friends sprang into action.

She organised a daring, intricate rescue, smuggling children out of the Ghetto via ambulances, trams, and even through the sewer pipes. Then she provided them with false



identity papers and placed them with safe foster families and in orphanages where their Jewish identities were kept secret. She bravely defied the Nazis at every turn, and her actions saved around 2,500 Jewish children.

Irena Sendler demonstrated an extraordinary level of courage, compassion, and moral clarity in the face of widespread hostility and complicity in evil.

Her story is a poignant reminder of our capacity to resist harmful societal norms and assert our commitment to human dignity and life. It underlines the importance of standing for the right values, even if they contradict the majority view, a concept highlighted in this week's message from Rabbi Sacks.

The Covenant & Conversation Family Edition is written by Sara Lamm | © The Rabbi Sacks Legacy 2023



The Rabbi Sacks Legacy perpetuates the timeless and universal wisdom of Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks as a teacher of Torah, a leader of leaders, and a moral voice.

Explore the digital archive, containing much of Rabbi Sacks' writings, broadcasts, and speeches, or support the Legacy's work, at [www.RabbiSacks.org](http://www.RabbiSacks.org), and follow The Rabbi Sacks Legacy on social media @RabbiSacks.