



Covenant & Conversation

Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

CHAYEI SARAH • חיי שרה

FROM THE TEACHINGS AND WRITINGS OF **RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS** זצ"ל

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

Abraham: A Life of Faith

Abraham, the Sages were convinced, was a greater religious hero than Noah. We hear this in the famous dispute among the Sages about the phrase that Noah was "perfect in his generations," meaning *relative* to his generations:

"In his generations" – Some of our Sages interpret this favourably: if he had lived in a generation of righteous people, he would have been even more righteous. Others interpret it derogatorily: In comparison with his generation he was righteous, but if he had lived in Abraham's generation, he would not have been considered of any importance.

Some thought that if Noah had lived in the time of Abraham he would have been inspired by his example to yet greater heights; others that he would have stayed the same, and thus been insignificant when compared to Abraham. But neither side doubted that Abraham was the greater.

Similarly, the Sages contrasted the phrase, "Noah walked with God," with the fact that Abraham walked *before* God.

"Noah walked with God" – But concerning Abraham, Scripture says in Genesis 24:40: "[The Lord] before Whom I walked." Noah required [God's] support to uphold him [in righteousness], but Abraham strengthened himself and walked in his righteousness by himself.

Rashi to Genesis 6:9

Yet what evidence do we have in the text itself that Abraham was greater than Noah? To be sure, Abraham argued with God in protest against the destruction of the cities of the plain, while Noah merely accepted God's verdict about the Flood. Yet God invited Abraham's protest. Immediately beforehand the text says:

Then the Lord said, 'Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do? Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation, and all nations on earth will be blessed through him. For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just, so that the Lord will bring about for Abraham what He has promised him.'

Genesis 18:17-19

This is an almost explicit invitation to challenge the verdict. God delivered no such summons to Noah. So Noah's failure to protest should not be held against him.

If anything, the Torah seems to speak more highly of Noah than of Abraham. We are told:

Noah found favour in the eyes of the Lord.

Genesis 6:6

Twice Noah is described as a righteous man, a *tzaddik*:

1) “Noah was a righteous man, blameless among the people of his time, and he walked with God” (Genesis 6:9).

2) “The Lord then said to Noah, ‘Go into the Ark, you and your whole family, because I have found you righteous in this generation’” (Genesis 7:1).

No one else in the whole of *Tanach* is called righteous. How then was Abraham greater than Noah?

One answer, and a profound one, is suggested in the way the two men responded to tragedy and grief. After the Flood, we read this about Noah:

Noah began to be a man of the soil, and he planted a vineyard. He drank some of the wine, making himself drunk, and uncovered himself in the tent.

Genesis 9:20-21

This is an extraordinary decline. The “righteous man” has become a “man of the soil.” The man who was looked to “bring us comfort” (Genesis 5:29) now seeks comfort in wine. What has happened?

The answer, surely, is that Noah was indeed a righteous man, but one who had seen a world destroyed. We gain the impression of a man paralysed with grief, seeking oblivion. Like Lot’s wife who turned back to look on the destruction, Noah finds he cannot carry on. He is desolated, grief-stricken. His heart is broken. The weight of the past prevents him from turning toward the future.

Now think of Abraham at the beginning of this week’s parsha. He had just been through the greatest trial of his life. He had been asked by God to sacrifice the son he had waited for for so many years. He was about to lose the most precious thing in his whole life. It’s hard to imagine his state of mind as the trial unfolded.

Then just as he was about to lift the knife the call came from Heaven saying 'Stop', and the story seemed to have a happy ending after all. But there was a terrible twist in store. Just as Abraham was returning, relieved his son’s life spared, he discovers

that the trial had a victim after all. Immediately after it, at the beginning of this week’s parsha, we read of the death of Sarah. And the Sages suggested that the two events were simultaneous. As Rashi explains: “The account of Sarah’s demise was juxtaposed to the Binding of Isaac because as a result of the news of the ‘Binding,’ that her son was prepared for slaughter, and was almost slaughtered, her soul flew out of her, and she died.” We would say today she had a heart attack from the news.

Now try and put yourself in the situation of Abraham. He has almost sacrificed his child and now as an indirect result of the trial itself, the news has killed his wife of many years, the woman who stayed with him through all his travels and travails, who twice saved his life, who in joy gave birth to Isaac in her old age. Had Abraham grieved for the rest of his days we would surely have understood, just as we understand Noah’s grief. Instead we read the following:

And Sarah died in Kiryat Arba, that is Chevron in the land of Canaan, and Abraham came to mourn for Sarah and to weep for her, *and Abraham rose up from before his dead.*

Genesis 23:2-3

Abraham mourns and weeps, and then *rises up* and does two things to secure the Jewish future, two acts whose effects we feel to this day. He buys the first plot in the Land of Israel, a field in the Cave of Machpelah. And then he secures a wife for his son Isaac, so that there will be Jewish grandchildren, Jewish continuity. Noah grieves and is overwhelmed by his loss. Abraham grieves knowing what he has lost. But then he rises up and builds the Jewish future. There is a limit to grief. This is what Abraham knows and Noah does not.

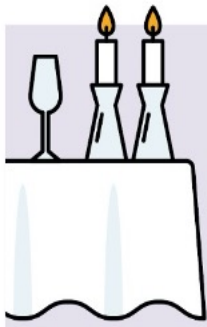
Abraham bestowed this singular gift on his descendants. The Jewish people suffered tragedies that would have devastated other nations beyond any hope of recovery. The destruction of the first Temple and the Babylonian exile. The destruction of the second Temple and the end of Jewish sovereignty. The expulsions, massacres, forced conversions and inquisitions of the Middle Ages, the pogroms of the

17th and 19th centuries, and finally the Shoah. Yet somehow the Jewish people mourned and wept, and then rose up and built the future. This is their unique strength and it came from Abraham, as we see in this week's parsha.

Kierkegaard wrote a profound sentence in his journals:

It requires moral courage to grieve, it requires religious courage to rejoice.

Perhaps that's the difference between Noah the Righteous, and Abraham the Man of Faith. Noah grieved, but Abraham knew that there must eventually be an end to grief. We must turn from yesterday's loss to the call of a tomorrow we must help to be born.



Around the Shabbat Table

1. Why were Noah and Abraham singled out as leaders? Do they share any qualities?
2. Why do you think Abraham had this emotional strength that Noah lacked?
3. When faced with recent tragedies in Israel, have you seen any examples of Jewish people rising up to build the future?

● These questions come from this week's **Family Edition** to Rabbi Sacks' Covenant & Conversation. For an interactive, multi-generational study, check out the full edition at www.RabbiSacks.org/covenant-conversation-family-edition/chayei-sarah/abraham-a-life-of-faith/