Covenant & Conversation

FAMILY EDITION

Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

CHAYEI SARAH • חיי שרה

BASED ON 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

● This summary is adapted from a video by Rabbi Sacks, available at **www.RabbiSacks.org/covenant-conversation/chayei-sarah/abraham-a-life-of-faith/**

The Sages believed Avraham was a greater religious figure than Noach, illustrated by their discussions on Noach being "perfect in his generation" (by comparison). Based on this, some say Noach would have become even more righteous if he had been among better people, while others think he only seemed righteous compared to his wicked generation and would have been insignificant in Avraham's time. Despite these differing opinions, all agree that Avraham was greater and more righteous than Noach.

But **why**?

Avraham and Noach's respective relationships with God are contrasted in phrases from the Torah. Describing Noach, the Torah says "Noach walked with God," indicating that Noach needed God's support, whereas it says that Avraham "walked before God," showing Avraham was independently righteous. While God challenged Avraham and invited his protest against the destruction of the cities, He did not do the same for Noach during the Flood, suggesting Avraham's greater role in the course of history.

Avraham's greater inner strength is also evident if we examine the aftermath of their respective trials and tribulations. After emerging from the Ark, Noach seems to spiral into despair, seeking to drown his sorrows in wine. We see a man whose experiences lead him to plant a vineyard and then get drunk on the wine. He takes no other action. He is paralysed by grief.

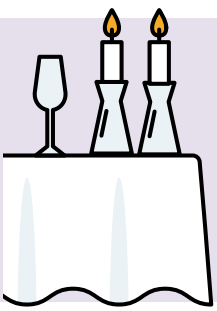
By contrast, after Avraham's immense trial of nearly sacrificing his son and subsequently losing his wife Sarah, he doesn't succumb to sorrow and pain. **After he takes the time to mourn, he then rises and takes actions that secure the Jewish future**: He purchases land in Israel so that his wife can be buried, and he sends Eliezer to find a wife for Yitzchak, so that the family can grow.

This is the legacy Avraham leaves – turning loss into an opportunity to build the future. **Avraham's strength is apparent throughout the history of the Jewish peopl**e, where resilience has been the response to innumerable tragedies that would have devastated other nations beyond any hope of recovery. Just think of 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 then the Shoah. Yet somehow, **the Jewish people mourned and wept and then rose up, looked ahead, and built and rebuilt.**

This is our unique strength, and it can be traced directly to Avraham, as we see in this week's parsha. As Rabbi Sacks reminds us:

"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 Noach the Righteous and Avraham the Man of Faith. Noach grieved, but Avraham 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 Noach and Avraham singled out as leaders? Do they share any qualities?**
2. **Why do you think Avraham had the emotional strength that Noach lacked?**
3. **When faced with recent tragedies in Israel, have you seen any examples of Jewish people rising up to build the future?**

Parsha in **Passing**

At 127 years old, Sarah passes away. This event marks the beginning of Chayei Sarah, which tells the story of how Avraham handles this tragic loss in his life. He owns no land, so he must buy a burial plot in Kiryat Arba, located in Chevron, to lay Sarah to rest.

After getting up from mourning, Avraham then focuses on securing his family's future, starting by finding a wife for his son Yitzchak. He entrusts this task to his servant Eliezer, who travels to the city of Nachor in order to find the perfect match.

In Nachor, Eliezer meets Rivka, a young woman of exceptional character and kindness. Unlike others at the city well, she takes the time to offer Eliezer water, as well as water for his camels. Recognising her virtues, Eliezer seeks permission from Rivka's brother, Lavan, to take her back to Canaan. Both Rivka and Lavan accept to the marriage proposal. And so Rivka journeys with Eliezer to meet her future husband.

The parsha concludes with the death of Avraham. At 175 years old he is buried beside Sarah in Ma'arat HaMachpelah.

Parsha **People**

Avraham: A man of a quiet yet unwavering strength and belief in his convictions and his future.

Sarah: The mother of all Jewish children, heartbroken over her only son. And yet, even after her passing, she lives on through her descendants.

Eliezer: A messenger and a matchmaker on a mission.

Rivka: An embodiment of virtue and kindness, she brings water to the many camels and visitors at her well. She represents the Jewish people's future.

Parsha **Practical**

Practically speaking, what does it look like to rebuild, to rise again after a period of devastation? On a national scale, one can point to the monumental accomplishment of building the State of Israel in the wake of the Holocaust. But what does this look like on an individual level?

Let's start small. How can you as an individual take the steps to rebuild after something hard happens?

First, establish a routine and focus on self-care: Bringing structure to your day through a consistent routine can provide stability and a sense of normalcy.

One of the most significant ways we can do this as Jewish people is through incorporating *tefillah* (prayer) into our daily routine. This foundation of giving thanks and connecting with God fosters resilience and strengthens our ability to navigate challenges in a profound way. Our next challenge is to cultivate resilience. Develop a resilient mindset by focusing on positive thinking, maintaining hope, and taking action. As a wise family matriarch was known for saying, "Tough times don't last, but tough people do."

Next, regularly engage in activities that provide a sense of purpose, whether it's volunteering, mentoring, or finding other ways to spread light from and to the Jewish people and beyond.

Parsha **Playoff**

Let's play **"Matchmaker Matchmaker"**. Everyone playing removes their shoes and places them in a pile in the centre of the room. Once the shoes are shuffled to ensure no matching pairs are together, count to three and let everyone rush to the pile to grab two shoes (don't grab your own). Next, work together to put your shoes into pairs. Everyone must now be holding a matching pair. Finally, the main objective: for each person to find the owner of the shoes they are holding. **Bonus challenge**: once the owner of the shoes is identified, they should answer a themed question provided at the start of the game to receive their shoes. For example, to get your shoes back, you must answer one of the "Around the Shabbat Table" questions, or "Parsha Philosophy" questions!

Parsha **Puzzle**

Q. Put these events in chronological order: the Tower of Bavel, Avraham's birth, Avraham's death, Noach's birth, Noach's death, the Flood.

A. Noach's birth, the Flood, Avraham's birth, the Tower of Bavel, Noach's death, Avraham's death.

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

Parsha **Philosophy**

Rabbi Sacks' writing continues to reflect the timeless values of our religion, providing messages of strength and love for Jews worldwide.

Sadly, in the year 2023, we continue to encounter variations of the devastation, hardships, and sorrow that afflicted our forefathers time and time again.

From raging antisemitism to our fight for independence and a homeland in Israel, we have so much we have needed to overcome. And yet, despite all of this, we dare to have faith - faith in our God and in our future. Rabbi Sacks' message this week speaks directly to this virtue.

We are the children of Avraham.

When something bad happens, we take the time to grieve, and we take the time to rebuild, to become stronger than before. We secure our place in history by moving forward. We do not drown ourselves in our sorrows like Noach. We take concrete steps, continuing to solidify our future as the Jewish people.

1. **How can you help support your friends and family as we go through difficult times?**
2. **Looking back at a challenge that you've experienced, what is something you did to help yourself overcome that challenge?**

Parsha **Parable**

Dancing in times of Darkness: A Wedding to Remember

Yonatan and Galya were looking forward to beginning their lives as newlyweds. But when their wedding was just ten days away, the attacks of Shemini Atzeret happened, and their entire world changed.

Within hours, Yonatan and his brother Daniel were called to duty. Yonatan was shot in the leg, the bullet narrowly missing important arteries and bones. It was a severe injury but he will, please God, recover from it. But his brother Daniel is unfortunately one of the soldiers now Missing in Action.

Yonatan and his family, confronting this pain and loss, made the decision to go ahead with the upcoming wedding. Standing under the chupah, the couple become a beacon of hope for the Jewish people. Yonatan and Galya had chosen a song by Israeli musician Noam Banai to play during *bedeken*. They were shocked to see Banai himself at the wedding, in a surprise organised by their friends. Banai ended up playing for the entire ceremony. Despite the grief and worry, the day was also full of *simcha*.

"Judaism is a life-affirming religion," Rav Doron Perez (Yonatan's father) said. "Even in the face of unimaginable challenges, we must persevere and have faith that God will prevail. It was obviously a very bittersweet wedding and there were tears, but somehow we were able to celebrate, and it was also very happy."

In this week's parsha, Avraham made every effort to continue to secure a Jewish future in the face of his own personal tragedy. We follow in his footsteps, and we have seen time and time again the remarkable strength of the Jewish people, whose determination to live and thrive is what ultimately will defeat the evil forces of the world.

How do we move forward? How can we rebuild? The story of Yonatan and Galya is a powerful example of what rebuilding looks like - in the face of existential evil.

Please pray for the safe return of Daniel Shimon ben Sharon, as well as for all of the hostages still being held in captivity in Gaza.

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