



# Covenant & Conversation

FAMILY  
EDITION

Jonathan Sacks  
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

SHEMOT • שמות

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

## The Challenge of Jewish Leadership

● This summary is adapted from a video by Rabbi Sacks, available at [RabbiSacks.org/covenant-conversation/shemot/jewish-leadership/](https://RabbiSacks.org/covenant-conversation/shemot/jewish-leadership/)

Rabbi Sacks used to say – only half joking – that a proof that Moshe was the greatest of all the prophets was his initial reluctance to lead the Jewish People. Moshe questioned his own capabilities and feared rejection from his people. He admitted his lack of eloquence and implored God to choose someone else. **Moshe seemed to intuitively understand the immense challenge of leading Jews, a task almost impossible in its nature.**

This insight dates back to Moshe's youth. Growing up in the Egyptian palace, he was detached from his Jewish heritage. However, upon witnessing the enslavement and hard labour of his people, his sense of identity was awakened. His first act of leadership was intervening when an Egyptian was beating a Hebrew. This act of bravery was followed the next day by an attempt to resolve a conflict between two Hebrews. But instead of gratitude, Moshe faced a challenge to his authority. This encounter foreshadowed the difficulties he would face as a leader. **This encounter foreshadowed the difficulties he would face as a leader.**

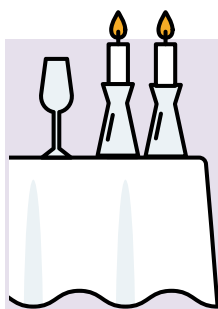
Moshe does indeed find leading Bnei Yisrael to be a tough task. In Devarim, he expresses his struggles handling the community's burdens alone. His frustrations reach their peak in Beha'alotecha, where he confronts God about the immense responsibility, feeling incapable and even wishing for death over his inability to bear the burden. It's hard to believe that this despair was voiced by the one who would become the most revered Jewish leader of all time.

Moshe's leadership challenges are further illuminated by the story of Korach, his chief antagonist. Korach accuses Moshe and Aharon of setting themselves above the rest of the community. Despite his ulterior motives for power, Korach's challenge highlights a critical aspect of Jewish identity – strong individualism.

Jewish history is marked by this individualism. Prophets defied kings, Mordechai refused to bow to Haman, and the Maccabees resisted foreign dominations. This trait makes Jews both unconquerable and almost ungovernable. Moshe's early experiences – where his attempts to help were met with scepticism – epitomise this difficulty in leadership.

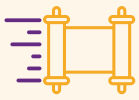
The sheer range of diverse opinions within the Jewish people showcases the individualistic nature of Jews. Historically, we have seldom agreed on anything. Rabbi Sacks says this is both a problem and a strength. It makes us difficult to lead, but also remarkably resilient.

Moshe's initial reluctance, his struggles as a leader, and the nature of Jewish individualism offer profound insights. Moshe's story, along with the ongoing debates within Jewish communities, highlights the complexities of leading a people fiercely proud of their heritage and individuality. **Jews are a nation of strong individuals who rarely agree about anything. This makes them hard to lead, but impossible to conquer – the good and the bad go hand in hand. And if, as we believe, God still loves this people despite all its faults, may we do less?**



### Around the Shabbat Table

1. How do you think Moshe's experiences in his youth shaped his approach to leadership?
2. Consider other leaders in Tanach; what similarities and differences can you find between Moshe and others, such as Yehoshua and King David?
3. How can Moshe's experience as a leader inform our understanding of the complexities and responsibilities involved in leading a diverse and opinionated group?



# Parsha in Passing

Bnei Yisrael have been rapidly growing. Fearing the size of a future army of Jewish men, Paroh enslaves Bnei Yisrael and orders the death of all newborn boys.

During this time, a son is born to Yocheved and Amram, from the tribe of Levi. To protect her child, Yocheved places him in a basket on the Nile while his sister, Miriam, watches from a distance. The baby is found by Paroh's daughter, who adopts him and names him Moshe, raising him in the Egyptian royal palace.

As Moshe grows up, he becomes aware of the plight of the Jewish slaves around him. Upon seeing an Egyptian taskmaster hitting a Jewish slave, Moshe intervenes and kills the Egyptian. The next day, Moshe sees two Jewish slaves fighting and tries to help. However, the Jewish slaves reprimand him for his actions the day before.

Moshe runs away to Midian. There, he rescues Yitro's daughters from bullying shepherds, marries Tziporah, and settles into life as a shepherd. However, Moshe is not

meant to tend to sheep forever.

One day, God appears to him in the Burning Bush. He commands Moshe to return to Mitzrayim to lead Bnei Yisrael to freedom. Moshe is hesitant at first but is reassured that God will always be with him. Aharon, Moshe's brother will also be there to help. And so Moshe returns to Egypt. But when Moshe and Aharon approach Paroh, he rejects their plea and increases the workload of the Jews. Distressed, Moshe returns to God, asking for help. God assures Moshe that liberation is near. The stage is now set for the dramatic events soon to come.



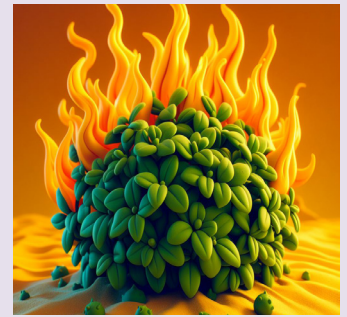
# Parsha People

**God:** A familiar and strong Voice, the leader of the leader.

**Paroh:** Forgetful of the past, fearful of the future. Will not let God's people go.

**Moshe:** Born to lead, his leadership was born out of his courage and morality.

**Bnei Yisrael:** A nation who yearns for freedom, but must also learn about unity.



# Parsha Practical

Moshe's story is an example of how tough it can be to take criticism, especially as a leader.

Nobody loves being told that they are wrong, but Moshe shows us that a good leader accepts criticism. He didn't just brush off the doubts and complaints from his people; he actually listened and learned from them. This shows us

something incredibly important: being a leader isn't about always being right or having all the answers. It's about being open to feedback, even when it stings a bit. Good leaders can admit they're not perfect, and then adapt. That's what humility in leadership is all about.

For anyone leading a team, a

community, or even just trying to be a leader in their own life, Moshe's approach is inspiring. Embracing criticism instead of getting defensive. It's all about keeping it real and remembering that even leaders have stuff to learn. There's always room to grow.

• How do you feel when someone shares a critique with you?

• How can you turn critiques into opportunities to learn?



# Parsha Playoff

'Follow Your Leader' is a fun game that requires a great leader and a lot of trust.

One player takes on the role of the leader, while the rest of the players are Bnei Yisrael. Use household items like chairs and pillows to create an obstacle course across a room and then blindfold all players except the leader. The leader must guide the group through the room using only their voice, emphasising clear and effective communication.

You can extend this game by only allowing the leader to use certain commands, or have every word be its opposite. For example, when the leader says stop; you go!



# Parsha Puzzle

Q. Give 3 examples in Jewish history where a fire's fuel-source miraculously does not deplete.

▼ The sneh (the Burning Bush), the pillar of fire that guided Bnei Yisrael in the desert, and the miracle of the Chanukah oil.

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



# Parsha Philosophy

In Shemot we can explore the nuanced balance between humility and authority in leadership. Moshe was initially reluctant to lead, perhaps due to a deep understanding of his limitations, paired with the complexities of leading a strong-willed community. This theme is timeless, resonating with the challenges and dynamics of leadership even today. Moshe's experiences offer profound

insights into leading a diverse and opinionated group. His story encourages leaders to reflect on the qualities necessary for effective leadership, especially in contexts marked by strong individualism. The goal is to balance authority with empathy, asserting one's vision while fostering individual growth and expression within the community. Moshe's journey teaches the value of perseverance and resilience

in the face of challenges and criticism. His ability to navigate Bnei Yisrael's scepticism and defiance, coupled with his constant faith in God, highlights the emotional depth and complexity inherent in leadership roles. Through Moshe's story, we learn that true leadership involves not just guiding others but also understanding and managing one's own fears, doubts, and limitations.

**Reflect: What are some of your strengths? What is something that would make you a strong leader today?**



## Parsha Parable

### A Light Army

Once upon a time, in a land called Judea, there was a brave man named Yehuda Hamaccabee. Wait a second – this name sounds familiar. It's almost like we just learned about Yehuda Hamaccabee... that's right! This story is usually told during Chanukah, but there are some important links to this week's parsha too, as you will see!

Yehuda lived in the days when a powerful king named Antiochus ruled over Judea. King Antiochus ordered everyone to follow his rules and his ways, even when these rules were different from their own beliefs and traditions.

The people of Judea, including Yehuda and his family, were Jewish and had their own special traditions and ways of worshiping. But King Antiochus didn't like

that. No way. He told the Jewish people they couldn't follow their traditions anymore and even used their Temple in Jerusalem as a place to worship his gods. Worse still, he actually brought a pig – a non-kosher animal – into the Beit HaMikdash.



Yehuda and his family were very upset. They couldn't allow things to continue like this. So Yehuda formed the Maccabees, a small army prepared to fight for their right to follow Hashem. Although they didn't have a big army like King Antiochus, they

were determined and clever. Most importantly, they worked together as a team – and guess what? They won many battles, even when it seemed impossible!

A special moment came when the Maccabees took back their Temple in Yerushalayim. They cleaned it up and made it ready for their special traditions again. But there was a problem – there was only a little bit of oil to light their special lamp, the Menorah, and it was supposed to stay lit all the time. Miraculously, the little bit of oil lasted for eight whole days – long enough for them to get more oil.

We celebrate Chanukah every year and remember these miracles. And Yehuda became our hero, because he showed that standing up for what you believe is important. He taught us that even when things seem tough, being a strong leader and working together with others can make amazing things happen!

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