



# Covenant & Conversation

FAMILY EDITION

Jonathan Sacks  
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

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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 March of Folly

● This summary is adapted from a video by Rabbi Sacks, available at [www.RabbiSacks.org/covenant-conversation/bo/the-march-of-folly/](http://www.RabbiSacks.org/covenant-conversation/bo/the-march-of-folly/)

There is a fascinating moment in the unfolding story of the plagues that should make us stop and take notice. Seven plagues have now struck Mitzrayim. The people are suffering. Several times Paroh seems to soften, only to harden his heart again. And now Moshe and Aharon have warned him of another plague, a plague of locusts that will devour all the grain left after the hail, as well as the fruit of the trees. And for the first time we hear something we have not heard before. Paroh's own advisors tell him he is making a mistake! But will he listen?

Back in 1984 the historian Barbara Tuchman published a famous book called *The March of Folly*. In it, she asks the great question: How is it that throughout history, intelligent people have made foolish decisions that – even at the time – they could see were damaging both to their own position and to that of the people they led?

**In other words, decisions where there were clear red flags, but they were ignored.**

One example Tuchman offers is the famous story of the wooden horse of Troy, where the Trojans were fooled into accepting a giant wooden horse into their city, but a team of Greek soldiers were hiding inside it. That night, the Greek soldiers burst out of hiding and were able to capture the city of Troy. It was a brilliant ploy, but Laocoön, the Trojan priest, had guessed that it was a trick and warned the people. His warning was ignored, and Troy fell.

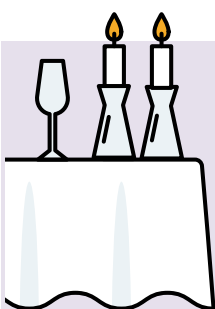
That is the context in which we should read the story of Paroh and his advisers. This is one of the first recorded instances of 'the march of folly', where clear warnings are bafflingly disregarded.

Rabbi Sacks was brought in as an advisor when the animated movie, *The Prince of Egypt*, was in production. He noted that Paroh is portrayed in a fascinating way in that film – not as a sinisterly evil man but as a leader focused on maintaining the success of the longest-lived empire of the ancient world and not allowing it, as it were, to be undermined by change. Let slaves go free, he might have thought, and who knows what will happen next? Royal authority will seem to have been undermined. **He did not wish to show weakness, and so he feared change. That is what led to his downfall.**

We tend to see Paroh as both wicked and foolish, because we know the story all the way to the end. But at the time, he may well have felt that he was being strong while his advisers were merely fearful. Decisions are only easy, and errors are only clearly visible, in retrospect.

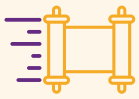
Yet Paroh remains an enduring symbol of failure. He could not see that the world had changed, that he was facing something new, that his enslavement of a people was no longer tolerable. He failed to understand that the old magic no longer worked, that the empire over which he was presiding was growing older, and that the more obstinate he became, the closer he was bringing his people to tragedy.

**Knowing how to listen to advice, how to respond to change, and when to admit you've got it wrong, remain three of the most difficult tasks of leadership. Rejecting advice, refusing to change, and refusing to admit you're wrong, may look like strength to some. But usually they are the beginning of yet another march of folly.**



## Around the Shabbat Table

1. Why do you think leaders often ignore advice and warnings from others, even good ones?
2. How can we tell the difference between being strong and being stubborn? Can you think of an example where this difference is important?
3. Can you think of leaders who have been open to change, or who have had to adapt to new situations?



# Parsha in Passing

Last week we read of the first seven of the Ten Plagues. Parshat Bo contains the final three. A plague of destructive locusts, a plague of crushing darkness, and then the grand finale begins at midnight on the 15th of Nissan, when all Egyptian firstborns perish.

At this point, God instructs

Bnei Yisrael to establish a lunar-based calendar and to prepare a Pesach offering.

Overcome by the death of the firstborns, Paroh finally gives in. He urges Bnei Yisrael to leave Mitzrayim in haste, leading to their speedy departure with unleavened dough - or matzah.

It's a mitzvah to this day to remember this Exodus from Egypt. It is the main theme of the Pesach Seder.

We do not eat leavened bread for seven days (or eight days, if we are outside of Israel) and we retell the story of the miraculous escape from Mitzrayim as we sit with our families and use symbols of food and wine to bring the narrative to life.



# Parsha People

**Paroh:** I believe I'm ill-advised; the Jewish people aren't that wise. But what's this? Darkness before my eyes? And oh no - my firstborn - he has died! Slaves, leave now! Before your bread can rise.

**Moshe:** Wreaking havoc on Paroh with plagues eight to ten; Let my people go! I'll say it again and again.

**Bnei Yisrael:** We have a new leader to listen to. One of the first things God's asking us to do? Make a Korban Pesach barbecue.

**The New Moon:** God created me on day four. Every month I become new once more. Stick with my schedule and your calendar is set. Never a Rosh Chodesh shall you forget.



# Parsha Practical

How do we practically implement the ideas we have learned from Paroh's "folly"?

One of the main things we can see the importance of in this week's parsha is the art of listening.

Really - listen to this. Paroh's failure to listen to his advisors had disastrous consequences - for himself and his people.

So how can we "listen" better today? Listening involves being open to advice, considering different viewpoints, and acknowledging when one's initial understanding or approach may need revisiting or correction.

Interestingly, Bnei Yisrael are also taught to listen in this week's parsha. And for the first time in their history, the people are given

their first mitzvah: it is here that we first learned to create a calendar and celebrate Rosh Chodesh every month.

In that sense, Paroh's folly highlights the changes being undergone by the Jewish People, as they learn to listen to the Leader of leaders - God.

● **Why do you think Rosh Chodesh was the first mitzvah given to the Jewish People?**



# Parsha Playoff

In 'The Ball's in Your Court, Paroh' we will hone our teamwork skills as well as our ability to respond to change, unlike Paroh, who was unable to adapt to new situations. This means that in this game, we have a chance to flip Paroh's folly! In pairs or as a group, do your best to keep a ball or balloon in the air without letting it touch the ground. To create variations, restrict the use of certain body parts (like using only one hand), or set different areas where the ball must be passed to increase complexity and enhance teamwork skills. For extra parsha fun, pretend that the ball is a "moon" and honour the very first mitzvah in the Torah, sanctifying the new moon.



# Parsha Puzzle

❓ Whose beard was equal to his height?

▲ The Gemara (Moed Katan 18a) states that Paroh was only translated as a cubit, about 18-24 inches long) and he possessed a beard that was also an amah long.

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



# Parsha Philosophy

Rabbi Sacks stresses the importance of leaders being open to change and able to listen to advice.

He brings the story of Paroh as well as other historical examples to show just how bad things can get when leaders are too stubborn and

ignore warnings from others.

Good leaders should be flexible, Rabbi Sacks says. They should be willing to admit when they're wrong, and adapt to changing circumstances.

Part of leadership is about understanding that being a strong

leader doesn't mean you have to resist change.

Rather, you must be flexible when appropriate, and make sure to consider the misgivings of others.

• **Why do you think it is so hard for people to "listen" or admit that they were wrong?**



# Parsha Parable

## It's All Going Swimmingly

There once was a man who found himself in danger during a great flood.

First the water began to leak into his house, and he grew a little concerned. Then his kitchen chairs and table were flooded, and so he ran upstairs. As the water level rose higher and higher, he climbed to the roof of his house and prayed for God to save him.

Still the water level continued to rise. Sitting on his roof and praying to God, his feet were soon engulfed in water when suddenly a neighbour came by, rowing in her canoe. She called out to him, "Climb into the canoe and into safety!"

But the man refused, saying, "No thank you. I don't need to leave this roof, for I have faith that God will save me."



The water rose higher, and a small rescue team came by in a motorboat. They urged the man to climb aboard, but again he refused, insisting that he was waiting for a sign from God.

Finally, as the waters covered his rooftop, a helicopter flew overhead and dropped a ladder. The rescue

team shouted for him to climb up! Yet again, the man refused, yelling back that he was still waiting for a sign from God, and he had faith.

It wasn't long before he was standing on the roof on the tips of his toes, up to his elbows in water. Starting to feel somewhat afraid, he cried out, "God! Why haven't you sent me a sign to save me?" And God replied, "My child, how many signs do you need?! I sent you a canoe, a motorboat, and a helicopter. What more were you waiting for?"

Had our very wet friend listened a bit more closely and spotted the opportunities in everything that was happening around him, he might be a little bit drier right now! But hey, the water in this flood didn't turn to blood. At least he wasn't in Mitzrayim!



# Parsha Ponderings

## Imagine:

**You are a leader who must choose between an ethically sound but risky decision OR a decision that is less ethical but guarantees safety and success. How would you deal with this dilemma?**

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