



# Covenant & Conversation

Jonathan Sacks  
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

TETZAVEH • תצוה

FROM THE TEACHINGS AND WRITINGS OF **RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS** ז"צ

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

This year's series of essays and videos were originally written and recorded by Rabbi Sacks ז"ל in 5771 (2010–2011). These timeless messages are accompanied by a new [Family Edition](#) (2023–2024), created to inspire intergenerational learning on the parsha.

## Leadership Means Making Space

Tetzaveh is, as is well known, the parsha in which for once Moses take second place. In fact, he is not mentioned by name at all, and all the focus is on his brother, Aaron, and on the role he came to occupy and personify, that of High Priest, the Kohen Gadol.

There are many conjectures as to why this went to Aaron as opposed to Moses himself, the most obvious being that this was Moses' punishment for refusing one time too many God's request that he lead the Israelites.

And Moses said, "Pardon Your servant, Lord. Please send someone else."

Then the Lord's anger burned against Moses and He said, "What about your brother, Aaron the Levite? I know he can speak well. He is already on his way to meet you, and he will be glad to see you. You shall speak to him and put words in his mouth; I will help both of you speak and will teach you what to do.

He will speak to the people for you, he will be your spokesman, and you will be his guide.

Ex. 4:13–16

There is, though, a deeper message, the principle of the separation of powers, which opposes the concentration of leadership into one person or institution. All human authority needs checks and balances if it is to remain uncorrupted. In particular, political and religious leadership, *keter malchut* and *keter kehunah*, should never be combined. Moses wore the crowns of political and prophetic leadership, Aaron that of priesthood. The division allowed each to be a check on the other.

That is the theory. What is especially interesting is how this works out in terms of personal relationships, in this case that between the two brothers, Moses and Aaron. The Torah says relatively little about their family dynamic, but the hints are fascinating.

Consider, first of all, the passage we've just seen from near the beginning of the book of Exodus,

when God tells Moses that Aaron is “already on his way to meet you, and *he will be glad to see you.*” These sound like simple words, but in reality they are far from common.

Moses was Aaron’s younger brother, three years his junior. Would it not have been natural for Aaron to be more than a little envious that his younger brother was about to become the leader he himself was not destined to be – all the more so since Moses had not spent his life among his people. He had been, first, an adopted prince of Egypt, and had then taken refuge with Yitro and the Midianites. Relative to Aaron, Moses, his younger brother, was also an outsider.

Yet God says, “He will be glad to see you.”

Aaron’s ability to rejoice in his brother’s rise to greatness is particularly striking when set against the entire biblical history of the relationship between brothers thus far. It has been a set of variations on the theme of sibling rivalry: Cain and Abel, Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers. The Psalm says:

“How good and pleasant it is for brothers to live together.”

*Ps. 133:1*

And in response, reading Bereishit, we are likely to add, “and how rare.”

But now comes the second test, this time not of Aaron but of Moses. Moses is now being commanded to create a form of leadership he himself will never be able to exercise, that of the priesthood, and the person he must award it to is his elder brother. Can he do so with the same generosity of spirit that his brother showed toward him?

Note how the Torah emphasises God’s insistence that it be Moses who bestows this honour on Aaron.

Three times the word *ve-atah*, “And you,” is used early on in the parsha:

“*And you* shall command the Israelites to bring you pure oil” (for the Menorah that Aaron and his sons would keep alight).

*Ex. 27:20*

“*And you* shall draw your brother Aaron and his sons close to you to serve Me as priests – Aaron and his sons Nadav and Avihu, Elazar, and Itamar. Make sacred vestments for your brother Aaron, for glory and for splendour.

*Ex. 28:1-2*

“*And you* shall speak to all the skilled craftsmen whom I have endowed with a spirit of wisdom, and ask them to make Aaron’s vestments; these will consecrate him to serve Me as priest.

*Ex. 28:3*

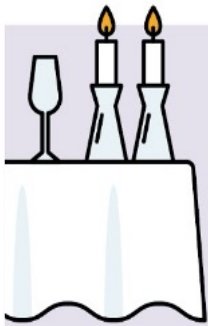
Moses must show the people – and Aaron himself – that he has the humility, the *tzimtzum*, the power of self-effacement, needed to make space for someone else to share in the leadership of the people. Someone whose strengths are not his, whose role is different from his, someone who may be more popular, closer to the people, than Moses is – as in fact Aaron turned out to be.

It's rare for a leader to be able to share the spotlight so generously. In 2005 the historian Doris Kearns Goodwin published an influential book about Abraham Lincoln entitled *Team of Rivals*. In it she tells the story of how Lincoln appointed to his cabinet the three men who had

opposed him as candidate for the Republican party leadership. William Henry Seward, who had been expected to win, eventually said of him, “His magnanimity is almost superhuman . . . the President is the best of us.”

It takes a special kind of character to make space for those whom one is entitled to see as rivals. Early on, Aaron showed that character in relation to Moses, and now Moses is called on to show it to Aaron.

True leadership involves humility and magnanimity. The smaller the ego, the greater the leader. That’s what Moses showed in the parsha that does not mention his name.



## Around the Shabbat Table

1. After learning about Moses and Aaron, what qualities do you think make a good leader?
2. What are some challenges that might arise from sibling rivalry, and how can they be overcome?
3. Think of other sibling relationships in the Tanach. Can you find the positive and challenging dynamics from each pairing?

● 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 [RabbiSacks.org/covenant-conversation-family-edition/tetzaveh/leadership-means-making-space/](https://RabbiSacks.org/covenant-conversation-family-edition/tetzaveh/leadership-means-making-space/)