



# Covenant & Conversation



Jonathan Sacks  
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

PEKUDEI • פקודי

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

## On Jewish Character

● This summary is adapted from the video and essay available at [www.RabbiSacks.org/covenant-conversation/pekudei/on-jewish-character/](http://www.RabbiSacks.org/covenant-conversation/pekudei/on-jewish-character/)

Pekudei has sometimes been called "The Accountant's Parsha" because that is how it begins, with the audited accounts of the money and materials donated to the Mishkan. It is the Torah's way of teaching us the need for financial transparency.

**But beneath the sometimes-dry surface lie two extraordinary stories, one told in last week's parsha, the other the week before, teaching us something deep about Jewish nature that is still true today.**

The first has to do with the Mishkan itself. God told Moshe to ask people to make contributions. From gold and silver to wood and precious stones. What was remarkable was the willingness with which they gave.

They reached a point where they brought too much. Moshe had to tell them to stop! This is a new side of Bnei Yisrael. A generous and giving group, in contrast to the Bnei Yisrael we have become accustomed to seeing: argumentative, quarrelsome, and ungrateful.

One parsha earlier, in Ki Tissa, we read a very different story. The people were anxious. Moshe had been up the mountain for a long time. Was he still alive? Had some accident happened to him? If so, how would the people receive the Divine word telling them what to do and where to go? Hence, their demand for an oracle, an object through which Divine instruction could be heard.

According to the most favoured explanation, Aharon realised that he could not stop the people directly by refusing their request, so he adopted a stalling manoeuvre. He asked them to donate their gold jewellery towards the project, with the intention of slowing them down, trusting that if the work could be delayed, Moshe would reappear.

The Midrash explains that Aharon assumed this would create arguments within families and the project would

be delayed. Instead, immediately thereafter, without a pause, Bnei Yisrael demonstrated that same generosity.

Now, these two projects could not be less alike. One, the Mishkan, was holy. The other, the Golden Calf, was close to being an idol. Building the Mishkan was a supreme mitzvah; making the Calf was a terrible sin. Yet their response was the same in both cases. **Jews may not always make the right choices in what they give to, but they always give.**

In the twelfth century, The Rambam, speaking about tzedakah, said, "We have never seen or heard about a Jewish community that does not have a charity fund." (see Laws of Gifts to the Poor, 9:3)

The idea that a Jewish community could exist without a network of charitable provisions was almost inconceivable. A disposition to donate is written into Jewish genes; it's part of our inherited DNA. It is one of the signs of being a child of Avraham, so much so that if someone does not give tzedakah, there are "grounds to suspect his lineage." **Whether this is nature or nurture or both, to be Jewish is to give.**

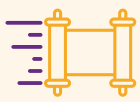
There is a fascinating feature of the geography of the land of Israel. It contains two seas: the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea. The Sea of Galilee is full of life. The Dead Sea, as its name implies, is not. Yet they are fed by the same river, the Jordan. The key difference is that the Sea of Galilee receives water and gives water. The Dead Sea receives but does not give. **To receive but not to give is, in Jewish geography as well as Jewish psychology, simply not life.**

So it was in the time of Moshe. So it is today. **In virtually every country in which Jews live, their charitable giving is out of all proportion to their numbers. In Judaism, to live is to give.**



## Around the Shabbat Table

1. How does the intention behind our charity affect its impact, as seen with the Mishkan versus the sin of the Golden Calf?
2. How do we balance the importance of giving with personal or economic constraints?
3. How can we inspire the next generation to uphold the tradition of generosity with their tzedakah?



## Parsha in Passing

Pekudei shares a detailed record of the community's contributions of gold, silver, and copper to the construction of the Mishkan.

Under the guidance of Betzalel and Oholiav, along with their skilled team, the eight holy garments for the Kohanim are crafted per

the detailed instructions given to Moshe in Tetzaveh. These garments include the apron, breastplate, cloak, crown, hat, tunic, sash, and breeches.

After completing the Mishkan and its intricate components, everything is assembled and

presented to Moshe. He then erects the Mishkan, consecrates it with the special anointing oil, and officially ordains Aharon and his four sons for the priestly service.

The Mishkan becomes filled with the glory of the Lord, and a Cloud of Hashem descends over the it, marking a momentous occasion in the community's spiritual life.



## Parsha People

**Betzalel:** With wisdom, skill, and art, he took Bnei Yisrael's gifts and made them a part...

Of our heritage, a tapestry so holy and fine, weaving generosity into every line.

**The Kohanim:** They stand, anointed and true, ready to serve in robes of blue. With Aharon at the helm, Divinely picked, they're prepared for their roles, sacred and strict.

**Moshe:** Our teacher, our leader, with grand plans, led the Mishkan's construction with a steady hand. As director supreme of this holy site, he built a dwelling for God's bright light.

**The Donations:** From gold to silver, the donations did flow, until Moshe stated, "There's too much now.... whoa!"



## Parsha Practical

*Hiddur Mitzvah*, the principle of beautifying a commandment, increases the spiritual and communal impact of our actions. As Rabbi Sacks shares, Bnei Yisrael's contributions to the Mishkan exemplify *Hiddur Mitzvah* through *chessed*, where their generosity went beyond mere obligation, imbuing the sacred with beauty. This approach to *chessed* can transform our everyday

kindnesses into profound and dignified acts of service in the community.

Consider this idea: when donating to a food bank, instead of simply giving the bare minimum or leftover items, one might choose high-quality, nutritious foods thoughtfully selected to offer both sustenance and joy to the recipients. Similarly, volunteering at a community centre can

transcend basic participation; organising an art workshop or music event can create enriching, meaningful experiences that deepen community bonds!

*Hiddur Mitzvah* can be applied to *chessed* to transform mundane acts into meaningful moments, reflecting a commitment to the abundance of generosity we know as a Jewish People.

• What are some acts of kindness that you do now that you could elevate through the concept of *Hiddur Mitzvah*?



## Parsha Playoff

Let's play "**The Web of Generosity.**" Sit in a circle, with a ball of yarn (or string, thread, or similar). First player shares an idea of how to be generous to others, and then, while still holding onto their piece of yarn, passes the rest of the ball to someone not sitting next to them. Each player shares their own act of generosity. As the yarn moves around the group, it eventually creates a web, showing how interconnected we are, and how much stronger we are when we support and give to one another.

## ? Parsha Puzzle

Q. What is the one Mishkan item that the Torah specifically says Betzalel hand-made himself?

A. The passuk says "vaya'as Betzalel et ha-aron" – "and Betzalel made the Aron" (Shemot 37:1). Rashi says he is credited because he dedicated himself to this work so wholeheartedly.

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



# Parsha Philosophy

Rabbi Sacks' essay delves into the Jewish ethos of generosity, specifically through the lens of receiving and giving, as exemplified in the contributions towards the Mishkan.

This narrative highlights the inherent willingness of Bnei Yisrael to give, which was so incredibly abundant that Moshe had to

request they cease their offerings for the Mishkan! This act of giving is juxtaposed with the donations for the Golden Calf, a misguided venture that nonetheless demonstrates the same spirit of generosity.

Rabbi Sacks then uses a comparison of the Sea of Galilee with the Dead Sea to explain

generosity as a critical Jewish value: The Dead Sea receives water but does not give, and it becomes a body of stagnant water whether nothing living can flourish.

Generosity is a pivotal aspect of Jewish life and identity, and it's something deeply rooted in our collective historical consciousness.

● Rabbi Sacks writes, "Whether this is nature or nurture or both, to be Jewish is to give." Which do you think it is?



# Parsha Parable

## The Greatest Gift

Betzalel was a boy with a kind heart and a lot of friends. When his ninth birthday party was drawing near, he had an excellent idea. Looking around his room, which was full of amazing toys and games, he thought, "I have everything I need. I even have two of the same Lego set! Maybe this year, my birthday can be a day to bring happiness to others."

Betzalel knew that some people in his town found it difficult to earn enough money during the week to have nice Shabbat meals. So, he asked his family to donate food donations to the local food bank instead of buying him presents.

Then he sent out invitations to his birthday party, and each one came

with a note about his wish, and a list of items the food bank needed most: challah, grape juice, chicken for Shabbat, and candy, of course.

But he wasn't sure what his friends would think about his notes. Would they choose to join him in this unusual request?



He needn't have worried. The day of the party was filled with laughter and joy. Friends arrived, their arms full of bags of groceries instead of wrapped gifts. They were excited to be a part of the special birthday mission. Betzalel's heart almost burst with happiness at the growing mountain of Shabbat goody bags. He and his friends played games and enjoyed birthday treats, but the highlight was yet to come.

The following morning, Betzalel and his family delivered the collected food to the kosher food bank. Seeing the smiles of the volunteers and imagining the families they were helping filled Betzalel with pride. He had turned his birthday into a day of giving.



# Parsha Ponderings

## What Would You Do?

What is the best way to raise a large amount of money for a big tzedakah project? How would you convey the importance of your cause?

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