



# Covenant & Conversation



Jonathan Sacks  
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

ACHAREI MOT • אַחֲרֵי מוֹת

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

## Holy People, Holy Land

● This summary is adapted from the video and essay available at [www.RabbiSacks.org/covenant-conversation/acharei-mot/holy-people-holy-land/](http://www.RabbiSacks.org/covenant-conversation/acharei-mot/holy-people-holy-land/)

Why is the central narrative of the Torah the promise of a journey to the Land of Israel. **Why is Judaism not a religion that can be practised by individuals wherever they happen to be? Why did the people of the covenant need their own land?**

The best way to approach an answer is through an important comment of the Ramban (Nahmanides) on this week's parsha. Chapter 18 of Vayikra ends with a solemn warning about defiling the land. In short, it says that if you defile the land, you will be severely punished.

The Ramban asks the following question: Reward and punishment in the Torah are based on the principle of *middah kenegged middah*, measure for measure. The punishment must fit the crime. It makes sense to say that if the Israelites neglected or broke mitzvot relating to the land (*hateluyot ha'areztz*) the punishment would be an exile from Israel, but there are many offences that have nothing to do with the land, commands relating to person, not place. Why would these also lead to exile? Ramban answers by stating that all the commands are intrinsically related to the Land of Israel. It is simply not the same to put on *tefillin* or keep *kashrut* or observe Shabbat within Israel as it is outside Israel. **The Torah is the law of a holy people in the holy land.**

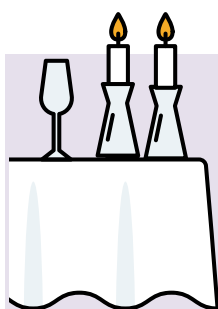
We can understand this further by reflecting on the opening chapters of the Torah and the story they tell. God sought a humanity that would freely choose to do the will of its Creator. Humanity chose otherwise. Adam and Chava sinned. Kayin murdered his brother. Soon "the earth was filled with violence", and God "regretted that He had made human beings on earth." He brought the Flood and began again, this time with the righteous Noah, but again, humans disappointed Him. And so God chose another way – this time with a living example: Avraham, Sarah, and their children who would become a people with a covenant and the Torah.

The commands of the Torah are a prescription for the construction of a society with God at its centre. God

asks the Jewish People to become a role model for humanity by the shape and texture of the society they build, a society characterised by justice and the rule of law, welfare and concern for the poor, the marginal, the vulnerable and the weak, a society in which all would have equal dignity under the sovereignty of God. But a society needs land, a home, and a space location where a nation can shape its own destiny in accordance with its deepest aspirations and ideals. Jews have been around for a long time, almost four thousand years. During that period, they lived in every country on the face of the earth, under good conditions and bad, freedom and persecution. Yet in all that time, there was only one place where they formed a majority and exercised sovereignty: the Land of Israel, a tiny country of difficult terrain and all too little rainfall, surrounded by enemies and empires.

Wherever they were, they prayed *about* Israel and *facing* Israel. The Jewish people has always known that its centre is the holy land, and within that, Jerusalem the holy city. During those long centuries of exile they lived suspended between memory and hope, sustained by the promise that one day God would bring them back.

Jews need a land because they are a nation charged with bringing the Divine Presence down to earth in the shared spaces of our collective life. This message that Jews need a land to create their society and follow the Divine plan contains a message for Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike. To Christians and Muslims, it says: **if you believe in the God of Avraham, ensure that the children of Avraham have a right to the land that God promised them, and to which He promised them that after exile, they would return.** To Jews, it says that our right comes hand-in-hand with a duty to live individually and collectively by the standards of justice and compassion, fidelity and generosity, love of neighbour and of stranger. **This constitutes our mission and destiny: a holy people in the holy land.**



### Around the Shabbat Table

1. What are some ways we can continue to elevate the Land of Israel through our actions?
2. Can you think of a time in your life where your "home" was more than just a place to live?
3. Are there other ways that we are meant to keep the land holy, as referenced in the Torah?

## Parsha in Passing

Acharei Mot describes the service of the Kohen Gadol (the High Priest) on Yom Kippur, the great Day of Atonement.

Back when we had a Bet Hamikdash, or a Mishkan, the entry of the High Priest into the Holy of Holies marked the spiritual highpoint of the Jewish year. In a dramatic and highly charged ritual,

he would cast lots on two identical goats, one of which was then chosen to be offered as a sacrifice while the other was sent into the wilderness to die, the so-called “scapegoat.”

When Acharei Mot outlines the Yom Kippur rituals, it emphasises purification and atonement.

The parsha also lists the prohibitions for the people of Israel, framing them within the context of maintaining the purity of the land, which expels those who defile it. The parsha teaches that the Land of Israel itself is a stakeholder in the covenant, capable of reacting to the moral failures – and spiritual achievements – of its inhabitants.

## Parsha Principles

**Aharon:** I am the High Priest, and my service is great; my actions on Yom Kippur seal your fate.

**Bnei Yisrael:** Keeping the laws is more than an obligation; it’s the essence of what makes us a holy nation.

**Yom Kippur:** The holiest day, most special of the year. This is the day when God commands us to draw near.

**The Land of Israel:** Keep me pure, and I’ll keep you; I’m a reflection of your values; I’m holy through and through.



## Parsha Practical

Practical mitzvot performed in Israel hold special significance. Having said that, even for those of us who don’t live in Israel, there are steps we can take to sanctify and elevate our everyday lives. In a world that often feels devoid of the spirituality we so desperately crave, how can we do this?

One idea is to enhance our own

responsibilities within our communities. Just as the Land of Israel is central to Jewish identity and spirituality, our local communities and environments hold significant roles in our lives.

Engaging in community service, supporting local businesses, and participating in communal rituals can strengthen our bonds and

enhance our communal life.

This mitzvah of community engagement enriches our lives and mirrors the Torah’s teachings about the importance of nurturing the soil – both literally and metaphorically – of our communal and spiritual homes.

- **What is something you can do today to elevate your daily routine?**

## Parsha Playoff

Let’s play “**Land and Command!**”

In this game, everyone needs to separate, and secretly gather one item from the house that could represent something from Israel!

Then all players return to the table, and each player is given the chance to explain how that object relates to the theme of holiness and respect for the land. Let’s see how creative you can get!

## Parsha Puzzle

❓ What is the connection between Binyamin in the Egyptian palace of Paroh, and the Kohen Gadol on Yom Kippur?

▲ Clothes! Binyamin was given five changes of clothing when he first met Yosef (Bereishit 45:22) and the Kohen Gadol changes his clothing five times on Yom Kippur.

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



# Parsha Philosophy

This week Rabbi Sacks elaborates on the idea of *middah keneged middah* explaining that the Torah’s structure of rewards and punishments directly reflects the nature of the offences committed. (You may be familiar with the popular phrase, ‘an eye for an eye’, which comes from the Torah.) He

also points out that every mitzvah performed in the Land of Israel carries a unique significance, intensifying the connection between the people and their land.

Keeping the land holy is not merely something to do on the side, but a central element in the fulfilment of God’s laws. This teaches us that

our surroundings and the context in which we practice our values significantly influence the quality and impact of our spiritual and ethical lives! This is incredibly profound: the land is not just a place to live; it is an essential partner in the covenant between God and the Jewish people.



# Parsha Parable

## The Story of Kibbutz Sasa

Kibbutz Sasa was founded in 1949 by members of the Palmach, the elite underground army of the Jewish community. These founders were survivors of World War II and had participated in many battles during Israel’s War of Independence. When they first arrived, Israel was partly rocky and desert-dry, and partly a swamp. Far from the ideal setting for any farming. However, the members of Kibbutz Sasa were determined to make their new home a success. They began by clearing the rocky land, an exhausting and time-consuming process that required real perseverance and dedication. But they “rocked” at their new mission.

Through years of hard work, the residents of Kibbutz Sasa transformed their harsh surroundings into fertile land, eventually developing one of the most successful agricultural operations in the region. They planted orchards, vineyards, and fields of crops, and established dairy farming and poultry facilities.



If you close your eyes you can

almost smell the fragrant plants growing!

But their love for the land didn’t just stop at agriculture. In the 1980s, Kibbutz Sasa entered a new industrial arena by establishing Plasan Sasa, a factory that started by manufacturing fibreglass and later specialised in advanced armour technology, providing protection solutions for military and civilian vehicles worldwide. This shift from agricultural farming to high-tech industry also made sure that the people would have enough money and food to support the whole kibbutz.

Throughout its history, Kibbutz Sasa has maintained a strong communal spirit. The residents love the land and care for it—just as the Torah commands. It’s more than just a place to live. It’s part of their identity as Jewish people.



# Parsha Ponderings

## What Would You Say...

...to someone who doesn’t respect the space where they live? How would you try to teach them to show their land some love?

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The Rabbi Sacks Legacy perpetuates the timeless and universal wisdom of Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks as a teacher of Torah, a leader of leaders, and a moral voice.

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