



Covenant & Conversation



Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

BEHAR • בְּהָרַ

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

Minority Rights

● This summary is adapted from the video and essay available at www.RabbiSacks.org/covenant-conversation/behar/minority-rights/

One of the most striking features of the Torah is its emphasis on love of and vigilance toward, the *ger*, the stranger:

Do not oppress a stranger; you yourselves know how it feels to be strangers, because you were strangers in Egypt. (Shemot 23:9)

For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes. He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the stranger residing among you, giving them food and clothing. You are to love those who are strangers, for you yourselves were strangers in Egypt. (Devarim 10:17-19)

The Sages went so far as to say that the Torah commands us in only one place to love our neighbour but thirty-six times to love the stranger.

What is the definition of a stranger? Clearly, the reference is to one who is not Jewish by birth. It could mean one of the original inhabitants of the land of Canaan. It could mean one of the "mixed multitude" who left Egypt with the Israelites. It might even mean a foreigner who has entered the land seeking safety or a livelihood.

Whatever the case, immense significance is attached to how the Israelites treat the stranger. They were meant to have learned this from their own experience of exile and suffering in Egypt. They were strangers. They were oppressed. Therefore, they knew "how it feels to be a stranger." They were not to inflict on others what was once inflicted on them.

The Sages held that the word *ger* might mean one of two things. One was a *ger tzedek*, a convert to Judaism who had accepted all its commands and obligations. The other was the *ger toshav*, the "resident alien", who had not adopted

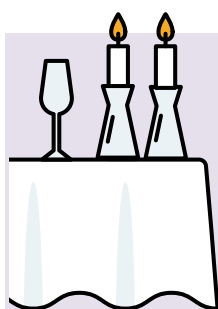
the religion of Israel but who lived in the land of Israel.

From Behar we learn that there is an obligation to support and sustain a resident alien. Not only do they have the right to live in the Holy Land, but they also have the right to share in its welfare provisions. Recall that this is a very ancient law indeed, long before the Sages formulated such principles as "the ways of peace," obligating Jews to extend charity and care to non-Jews as well as Jews.

A *ger toshav* is now defined as a non-Jew living in Israel who accepts the Noahide laws binding on everyone, and *ger toshav* legislation is one of the earliest extant forms of minority rights. According to the Rambam there is an obligation on Jews in Israel to establish courts of law for resident aliens to allow them to settle their own disputes – or disputes they have with Jews – according to the provisions of Noahide law.

The difference between this and later "ways of peace" legislation is that the ways of peace apply to non-Jews without regard to their beliefs or religious practice. They date from a time when Jews were a minority in a predominantly non-Jewish, non-monotheistic environment. "Ways of peace" are essentially pragmatic rules of what today we would call good community relations and active citizenship in a multi-ethnic and multicultural society. *Ger toshav* legislation cuts deeper. It is based not on pragmatism but on religious principles. According to the Torah you don't have to be Jewish in a Jewish society and Jewish land to have many of the rights of citizenship. You simply have to be moral.

Minority rights are the best test of a free and just society. Since the days of Moshe they have been central to the vision of the kind of society God wants us to create in the land of Israel. How vital, therefore, that we take them seriously today.



Around the Shabbat Table

1. Where else in the Tanach do you think we see exemplary treatment of the "ger"?
2. What do you see today as the Jewish "ways of peace"?
3. Can you think of modern-day examples of non-Jews who have advocated for and stood up for the rights of Jewish people?

Parsha in Passing

This week's parsha title, Behar, means "on Mount Sinai". This week includes the outlining of God's commands to Moshe on Mount Sinai regarding the Sabbatical year, also known as *shemittah*.

According to these laws, every seventh year is to be a rest year for the land, during which no farming

or agricultural work is to be done, and all produce that does grow in the land of Israel is considered to be freely available to everyone, including animals.

Much like the seven weeks of the *omer*, which culminate in Shavuot on the fiftieth day, there is a parallel in the years. Following seven of these sabbatical *shemittah*

cycles, a jubilee year (*yovel*) is observed every fiftieth year. During this year, no agricultural work is permitted, all slaves are to be freed, and any sold land in the Holy Land must return to its original family owners.

Additionally, Behar covers laws related to land sales, and includes prohibitions against fraudulent business practices and charging interest to those who owe you money.

Parsha People

The Stranger: A stranger in lands not of his own finds a home when kindness is shown.

The Business Owner: In land and trade they must take care, clear of tricks, fair and square.

The Slave: Once the Jubilee year hits the clock, every slave gets to unlock.

The Land: Every seven years it's my "shabbat". No picking or ploughing, my plants you won't cut.



Parsha Practical

There are many practical laws we are taught in this week's *sedra*, such as the laws of *shemittah*, *yovel*, money-lending, and business ethics. How can we also find practical ways to implement the message in Behar of showing kindness to strangers?

This should be an easy thing, given we all want a kinder world. But what do you do when the strangers

you are meant to show kindness to are unkind to you in return? In such cases, at least when teaching young children, it's important to remember that kindness doesn't mean letting others treat you poorly. You can still be friendly and polite while making it clear that you expect to be treated with respect, too.

Teaching children that it's okay to

walk away from situations where they feel unsafe or disrespected is an important tool: encouraging them to seek help from a trusted adult if they're unsure how to handle a difficult interaction. Kindness involves not only how we treat others but also how we protect our own well-being. By setting these boundaries, children learn to balance compassion for others with care for themselves.

Parsha Playoff

Let's play "**Stranger Rangers!**" In this activity, each player takes on the role of a stranger with a secret identity (you can choose to be anything from a Torah character to a chef or a famous athlete.) Other players welcome the 'stranger' by crafting gifts, performing rituals, and asking themed questions to guess their identity. This method emphasises understanding and embracing newcomers, aligning with the commandment to love the stranger, and fostering empathy and curiosity.

Parsha Puzzle

Q. This week Bnei Yisrael are referred to as *avadai* (my servants). Who are the only three individuals in the Torah that Hashem calls *avdi* (my servant)?

▲ Avraham (26:24), Moshe (Bamidbar 12:7), and Calev (Bamidbar 14:24).

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



Parsha Philosophy

Rabbi Sacks emphasises the Torah’s profound commitment to the rights and humane treatment of the *ger*. The Torah instructs us to love the stranger extensively, even more so than one’s own neighbour! We can draw on our experience of once having been “strangers” when the Israelites were slaves in Egypt, to have true empathy for other strangers.

It’s clear that one of the takeaways from living in Egypt was learning compassion and the importance of fair treatment of others. Despite the fact that there are different categories of “*ger*”, all *gerim* need to be given important rights and an equitable role in society.

In the story of King David and Batsheva, the Tanach emphasises

Uriah the Hittite’s loyalty, and King David’s transgression. Uriah was a *ger*, and David was the greatest king that Israel has ever known. Rabbi Sacks says that this passage comes to teach us that righteousness and moral standing transcend religious identity. It’s always a good thing to be a good person!

- How do you think the rights of minorities can be improved?
- Can you think of some “minority” groups that aren’t always seen as needing support?



Parsha Parable

The Lost Doll

In 1923, Franz Kafka was a 40-year-old writer living in Berlin. He had never married and had no children. One day when walking through the park he came across a little girl crying because she had lost her favourite doll. Seeing her tears, he offered to help. Kafka and the little girl searched high and low, but when it was time for her to return home, they still had not found the doll, and she had almost lost hope. So Kafka said to her, “Don’t fret, child, we can continue our search here tomorrow.”

The next day, Kafka was there and ready to help again. They searched together again, but when they still could not find the doll, Kafka gave

the girl a letter. It said, “Please don’t cry. I took a trip to see the world. I will write to you about my adventures.” And it was signed from her doll.



Thus began a friendship that would continue until the end of Kafka’s life. The two began to meet regularly. During their meetings, Kafka would always have letters for his young friend,

full of her doll’s adventures and new discoveries, which thrilled the girl. Finally, Kafka had some news for his friend “Your doll has returned home!” he announced, handing her a new doll that he had bought in a local store. “It doesn’t look like my doll at all,” said the girl. Then Kafka handed her another letter that explained why she looked so different. “My travels have changed me.” The little girl hugged the new doll and happily took her home.

A year later, Kafka died. Many years after that, the now-adult girl found a letter hiding within the doll. In the tiny letter, signed by Kafka, it was written, “Everything you love will probably be lost, but in the end, love will return in another way.”



Parsha Ponderings

What would you do if a ‘stranger’ was protesting your rights to exist? How would you open up the dialogue to demonstrate your ability to be dignified in your values, but kind to someone you disagree with?

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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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