



Covenant & Conversation

FAMILY
EDITION

Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

BECHUKOTAI • בחוקתי

BASED ON THE TEACHINGS AND WRITINGS OF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS 7"צט

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 Rejection of Rejection

● This summary is adapted from the video and essay available at www.RabbiSacks.org/covenant-conversation/bechukotai/the-rejection-of-rejection/

There is one aspect of Christianity that we, as Jews, that must reject and that even Christians have begun to reject. It is the concept of rejection itself, the idea that Christianity represents God's rejection of the Jewish people, of the "old Israel", in favour of a new people. This concept is embodied in such phrases as the Christian name for the Torah. Calling our Bible the "Old Testament" implies that this is a testament – a covenant – once in force but no longer. On this view, God no longer wants us to serve Him the Jewish way, through the 613 commandments, but a new way, through a New Testament. His old chosen people were the descendants of Avraham. His newly chosen people are not Jews but Christians.

The results of this belief were devastating. They led to crusades and centuries of Jews being persecuted by the dominating groups. But then Pope John XXIII re-examined these views, ultimately leading to the declaration of 'Nostra Aetate' in 1965, which transformed relations between the Catholic Church and the Jewish people.

The original statement that disputes this Christian belief that God rejected the Jewish people occurs – surprisingly – in perhaps the darkest passage of the entire Torah: the curses of Bechukotai. Here, in the starkest possible terms, are set out the consequences of the choices the people of Israel make. If they stay faithful to God, they will be blessed. But if not, the results will be defeat, devastation, destruction, and despair. The vision terrifying. Yet, at the very end, we are told that God will never reject His people.

While the people may be faithless to God, God will never be unfaithful to them. He may punish them, but He will not abandon them. He may judge them harshly, but He will not forget their ancestors, who followed Him, nor will He break the covenant He made with them. God does not break His promises even if we break ours. A central theme of the Torah, and Tanach, is the rejection of rejection.

God rejects humanity, saving only Noach, when He sees the world full of violence. Yet after the Flood He vows:

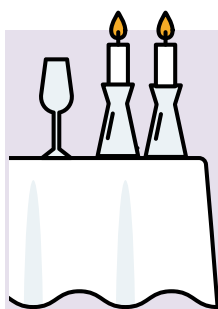
"Never again will I curse the ground because of humans, even though every inclination of the human heart is evil from childhood. And never again will I destroy all living creatures, as I have done" (Bereishit 8:21). **That is the first rejection of rejection.** Then comes the series of sibling rivalries. Note what happens to the rejected children...

The covenant passes through Yitzchak, not Yishmael, Yaakov, not Eisav. But God hears Hagar's and Yishmael's cries and sends an angel to them. He hears Eisav's also, for He later commands, "Do not hate an Edomite [i.e. a descendant of Eisav] because he is your brother" (Devarim 23:7). Finally, God brings it about that Levi, one of the children Yaakov *curses* on his deathbed, "Cursed be their anger, so fierce, and their fury, so cruel" (Bereishit 49:6), becomes the father of Israel's spiritual leaders, Moshe, Aharon and Miriam. **From now on, all of Israel is chosen. That is the second rejection of rejection.**

Even when Israel suffers exile and finds itself "in the land of their enemies," they are still the children of God's covenant, which He will not break because He does not abandon His people. They may be faithless to Him, but He will not be faithless to them. **That is the third rejection of rejection,** stated in our *parsha*. We keep our faith in God, who keeps His promises.

Thus, the claim on which the 'Replacement' theology is based – that God rejects His people because they rejected Him – is unthinkable in terms of Abrahamic monotheism. **God keeps His word even if others break theirs. God does not, will not, abandon His people. The covenant with Avraham, given content at Har Sinai and renewed at every critical juncture in Israel's history since, is still in force, undiminished, unqualified, and unbreakable.**

The "Old Testament" is not old. God's covenant with the Jewish people is still alive, still strong. Acknowledging this fact has transformed the relationship between Christians and Jews and helped wipe away many centuries of tears.



Around the Shabbat Table

1. How do you understand the idea of an unbreakable covenant between God and the Jewish people?
2. How can we apply the "rejection of rejection" to the way we treat others, particularly those who are different from us?
3. How can we best keep our commitment to our faith and heritage, even when it is challenging?

Parsha in Passing

This week's *parsha*, Bechukotai, is the last in the book of Vayikra. Bechukotai outlines the rewards for following God's commandments and the punishments for disregarding them.

The *parsha* also details different

offerings to the Temple and the animal tithe. The first half of the *parsha* discusses the blessings the Israelites are promised, such as abundant food, timely rain, and security if we observe the mitzvot. We learn about the blessings of peace we will receive, including safety from wild animals and

military success and of course, God's presence.

The Israelites also learn about details of the severe punishments for rejecting the mitzvot, including disease, famine, and exile. The *parsha* emphasises the importance of observing the Shemittah year as well as different pledges made during the eventual times of the Beit Hamikdash.

Parsha Principles

Blessings for Observance: Follow His ways and blessings will flow, like rain from the heavens your crops will grow.

Punishments for Disobedience: Turn away and face the plight, disease, famine, and exiled night.

Pledges to the Temple: Pledge your worth; the price is set. Redeem with love, and never forget.

Animal Tithe: Every tenth to the altar goes, a sacred gift to the One who bestows.



Parsha Practical

Today, one of the biggest challenges facing Jews, especially in countries outside of Israel, is the lack of education their non-Jewish counterparts have on Israel, Jewish culture, identity, and tradition. While there has been so much progress in the interfaith communities to educate and connect on shared value systems, there has been a more significant rift, especially among younger, college-aged students in recent years.

To effectively inform non-Jews about Judaism, some Jews have been organising informative workshops and seminars to explain critical tenants of Jewish beliefs, practices, and history. How else can we extend our hands to our neighbours?

Inviting non-Jews to our Shabbat dinners and synagogue services can allow them to experience the richness of Jewish rituals and traditions. Jewish community

centres can host open houses and cultural events, showcasing Jewish holidays, food, music, and art. Collaborating with schools and universities to include Jewish studies in their curricula can also enhance understanding.

Most importantly, Jews can continue to be a light unto the nations, do their best, be kind, and make a good name for themselves and the Jewish people through their actions and good deeds.

● **What is something you can do today to spread positivity and light on the Jewish people?**

Parsha Playoff

Let's play **Stand Up If...**! One person begins by calling out "Stand up..." followed by a statement, such as, "...if you have a pet," or "...if you like dancing". Those for whom the statement is true stand up, look around to see who shares this trait, and then sit back down. Someone who stood up then calls out the next "Stand up". You can get as silly or specific as you want, especially if you know the players well. This is a great game to help everyone recognise and appreciate differences and unifiers!

Parsha Puzzle

❓ Which word from our *parsha* is recited at least four times every Shabbat?

▲ The word is *komeniyut* (Vayikra 26:13). We say it in the Shabbat *bitkat hamazon*, three times over Shabbat (once per meal) as well as once in the *bracha of ahava rabba* before *Kriat Shema* (during *Shacharit*).

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



Parsha Philosophy

Rabbi Sacks dives into the heart of an enduring truth in Judaism: God’s covenant with the Jewish people is eternal and unbreakable. However, many people have tried to challenge that truth over the centuries. Supersessionism (the concept that Christians replace Jews as the chosen people) is a belief that has led to centuries of persecution and suffering for Jews.

The Torah brings a counterargument to that theory:

drawing from the Tanach, Rabbi Sacks shows how God’s commitment to the Jewish people remains steadfast, even when we (the Jewish people!) fall short. He emphasises that while God may punish His people, He never abandons them. The covenant is still in place, alive and unbroken.

Something to note is that these theological insights have reshaped Christian-Jewish relations. Leaders like Pope John XXIII

and the Second Vatican Council have helped to heal old wounds by acknowledging the enduring covenant between God and the Jewish people.

This is a powerful reminder that God’s promises are unchanging. Even in times of exile and despair, the Jewish people remain His chosen ones, and this recognition has the potential to transform interfaith understanding and respect.

● If there were one thing you would want other faiths to know about the Jewish people, what would it be and why?



Parsha Parable

A Faithful Hand

In a quiet town in Poland, a convent of nuns from the Franciscan Sisters of the Family of Mary lived. They kept to themselves, tending to the church and their own community, until the day that the Nazis began rounding up Jewish families in their town. That was in 1942. That was the day that they became heroes.

Seeing the soldiers, the nuns sprang into action, looking for a way to help those in need. Their fearless leader, Mother Matylda, opened the convent doors, and the nuns gathered in as many Jewish children as they could. Their plan was to shelter them from danger, hiding them from the soldiers and caring for them.

Mother Matylda instructed the children to act and dress a little bit differently than they were used to. This way, their identities would not be revealed.



The nuns also taught the Jewish children the prayers, songs, and customs from the church. For extra protection, the nuns gave them new Christian names so that even if the Nazis would come by, no-one would be able to guess their true Jewish identities. For over two years, Mother Matylda

and her nuns sheltered as many as 40 children of all ages in the convent, hiding them in rooms, the attic, and the chapel.

The nuns were not rich, but they shared all the food and supplies they had, keeping the Jewish children alive through dangerous times. Their acts of bravery and selflessness inspired the rest of the town to follow their lead and hundreds more children were rescued and cared for in over 60 local monasteries and homes. Though the Nazis came searching, the brave people managed to keep everyone safe from suspicion until the war ended. Then the rescued Jews expressed eternal gratitude to the heroic Mother Matylda and her selfless nuns. Even today, their names are honoured in Yad Vashem. The kindness of strangers saved many, many lives.

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