



# Covenant & Conversation

FAMILY  
EDITION

Jonathan Sacks  
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

BAMIDBAR • במדבר

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

## Liminal Space

● This summary is adapted from the video and essay available at [www.RabbiSacks.org/covenant-conversation/bamidbar/liminal-space/](http://www.RabbiSacks.org/covenant-conversation/bamidbar/liminal-space/)

The English name for the fourth books in the Torah is 'Numbers', for an obvious reason. This is a central theme of the book. Our *parsha* opens with a census, and there's a second count near the end of the book. The Israelites will be on the brink of entering Israel by then. Even now, they are a sizeable nation, with an army of 600,000 men.

Within Jewish tradition, however, our book is known as Bamidbar, meaning "in the wilderness". This suggests a very different theme. Israel's experience in the wilderness turned out to be highly significant. It is here that the people experience one of the Torah's most revolutionary ideas, namely that an ideal society is one in which everyone has equal dignity under the sovereignty of God.

Van Gennep identified three stages of transitions from childhood to adulthood. The first is separation, a symbolic break with the past. The third is incorporation, re-entering society with a new identity. Between them is the crucial stage of transition, when you are recast and reborn. Van Gennep used the term **liminal**, from the Latin for "threshold," to describe this state, a no-man's-land between the old and the new. **This is what the wilderness signifies for Israel: liminal space between Egypt and the Promised Land, where Israel is reborn as "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."**

This helps us understand the details of the book of Shemot. Painting doorposts with blood (Shemot. 12:7) is part of the separation stage, with the door symbolising leaving old life behind. The division of the Red Sea is a symbolic enactment of transition. Then began forty years of wandering.

The journey through the desert was a time of intense comradeship and equality. Societal hierarchies disappeared there. This rare state, where everyone was equal, highlights the transformative power of the wilderness experience.

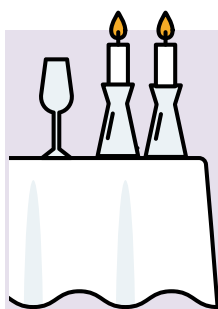
We now begin to understand the significance of *midbar*,

"wilderness," in the spiritual life of Israel. It was the place where they experienced with an intensity they had never felt before, the direct closeness of God which bound them to Him, and to one another. We also now understand the significance of the account at the beginning of Bamidbar, in which the twelve tribes were encamped, in rows of three on the four sides of the Mishkan, each equidistant from the holy. Each tribe was different, but (except for the Leviim) all were equal. They ate the same food, manna from heaven. They drank the same drink, water from a rock or well. The desert has no owners, so there was no fighting over land. Economic and territorial conflicts had little bearing.

The entire description of the camp at the beginning of Bamidbar with its emphasis on equality fits perfectly with the ideal state people only experience in liminal space, where they have left the past (Egypt) behind but have not yet reached their future destination, the land of Israel. They have not yet begun building a society with all the inequalities to which society gives rise. **They are together now, their tents forming a perfect square with the Mishkan at its centre.** The poignancy of the book of Bamidbar lies in the fact that this harmony within the community lasted so briefly. The serene mood of will soon be shattered by quarrel after quarrel, rebellion after rebellion, a series of disruptions that will cost an entire generation their chance of entering the land.

The *midbar* was not just a place; it was a state of being, a moment of solidarity, midway between enslavement in Egypt and the social inequalities that would later emerge in Israel. It was an ideal never to be forgotten, even if never fully captured again in real space and time.

**Judaism never forgot its vision of natural and social harmony, set out in the beginnings of the books of Bereishit and Bamidbar, as if to say that what once was could be again, if only we heed the word of God.**



## Around the Shabbat Table

1. What do you think makes an experience "formative?" Can you think of a time when you have had such an experience?
2. What are some rituals that your community uses to mark transitions?
3. Can you relate to the idea that challenging times can lead to positive transformation? Why, or why not?

## Parsha in Passing

In the Sinai Desert, God instructed Moshe to conduct a census (counting) of the twelve tribes of Israel. They counted 603,550 men aged 20 to 60, deemed eligible for military service.

The tribe of Levi, totalling 22,300 males aged one month and older, was counted separately to serve in the Mishkan, replacing the disqualified firstborn sons. The 273

firstborns without a Levi substitute paid a five-shekel ransom.

When the Israelites moved their camp, the Leviim transported and reassembled the Mishkan at the new camp's centre. The Kohathites carried the Mishkan's vessels and camped to the south, the Gershonites handled the tapestries and camped to the west, and the Merarites transported the wall

panels to the north.

Our *parsha* also explains the layout. Moshe, Aharon, and Aharon's sons camped to the east. Surrounding the Leviim, the twelve tribes camped in four groups of three: Yehuda, Issachar, and Zevulun to the east; Reuven, Shimon, and Gad to the south; Ephraim, Menashe, and Binyamin to the west; and Dan, Asher, and Naphtali to the north. This arrangement was maintained during all future travels.

## Parsha People

**Moshe:** Moshe Rabbeinu leads the way, counting tribes without delay.

**Aharon:** Lighting the flame, with faith pure and true, guiding priests in holy rites, through everything they do.

**Leviim:** They haul holy things through the desert so wide, guardians of the Mishkan, with God as their guide.

**The Shvatim:** The tribes hold camp, set up neat and clear, each *shevet* is equal, with banner and cheer.



## Parsha Practical

The lessons taught in Bamidbar can inspire us to foster a sense of unity and equality in our communities. We can strive to create spaces where people from different backgrounds, with other interests, likes, and dislikes, can come together and experience a shared sense of purpose and belonging.

What is the best way this can be achieved? Through taking the time to ask open-ended questions to one another. Getting to know the people around you and appreciating all that they can bring to the table is a practical way to transform your community.

Additionally, we can draw inspiration from the Israelites'

journey through the wilderness when facing our challenges and significant life changes. By finding community and strengthening the people around us, we can face tough times together and emerge stronger and more connected, both to Judaism and towards each other.

● **What steps can you take to promote unity and equality in your community?**

## Parsha Playoff

Let's play **Our Flag Flying High...**! Each *shevet* had a unique banner with their own tribal symbol on it. So let's create that together for our own family! Gather to discuss what your banner should look like. Each member can share ideas for symbols, colours, and images representing their family. This could be a silly banner filled with inside jokes, or you may want it to represent the underlying family values and narrative. Whatever you choose, it's sure to be unique!

## Parsha Puzzle

Q. What was colour-coordinated with the flags of each tribe?

▲ The colour chosen for the flag of each tribe matched the colour of its corresponding stone in the Kohen Gadol's breastplate (see Rashi Bamidbar 2:2).

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



# Parsha Philosophy

Rabbi Sacks explores the deeper meaning of the book of Numbers, known in Jewish tradition as Bamidbar, which means “in the wilderness.” While Numbers focuses on the census and demographics of the Israelites, the name Bamidbar suggests a transformation and spiritual

growth theme. Rabbi Sacks explains how the wilderness experience was a crucial part of the journey for the Israelites. A sense of community marked this phase.

The wilderness was a place without civilisation and one that allowed the Israelites to cast off their

identity as slaves and emerge as a united, holy nation. This period of closeness to God was essential in Israel’s spiritual journey. It showed the possibility of achieving a harmonious society under God. This timeless message is crucial to take into our communities, even today.



# Parsha Parable

## If Water Can Change a Rock...

A long time ago, there lived a man named Akiva. He worked as a shepherd, and he was excellent at his job, but there were some things he could not do at all. For instance, Akiva couldn’t read or write. Not one word. Then one regular day, as Akiva was tending to his sheep, he noticed water droplets falling on a rock, and slowly but surely these water drops had made a deep groove, one little drop at a time.

A thought popped into his head at that moment. “If water can change a rock, I can change too!” Akiva was forty years old when he had that thought, and it led him to a life-changing decision.

Encouraged by his wife Rachel, Akiva decided to begin going to school, for he wanted to learn. And learn, and learn, and learn.



Starting from scratch, Akiva went to school with the youngest students there, including his young son. He worked extremely hard. Then slowly but surely, drop by drop, Akiva became a scholar. Then he became a teacher

and a rabbi himself. He taught thousands of students, and he became a living testament of the human capacity to not just grow, but transform!

Rabbi Akiva is known today as one of the greatest Jewish teachers who ever lived. This story is a lot like the journey of Bnei Yisrael. Akiva started school aged forty, and Bnei Yisrael began as slaves in Egypt, so they each started out at the very bottom. But through perseverance and community support, they ended up doing incredible things. Rabbi Akiva’s story is a wonderful example of the Jewish idea that no matter where we begin, we can achieve great things with determination and help from friends and family.



# Parsha Ponderings

## What Would You Do...

...to maintain unity within a group during a critical journey? How would you handle conflicts to ensure everyone feels valued, knowing that the success of this journey is essential for the group’s future?

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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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