Covenant & Conversation

FAMILY EDITION

Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

BEHA'ALOTECHA • בהעלתך

STUDIES IN SPIRITUALITY

BASED ON THE TEACHINGS AND WRITINGS OF **RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS** זצ"ל

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

From Despair to Hope

● This summary is adapted from the C&C essay of the week, available at **RabbiSacks.org/covenant-conversation/behaalotecha/from despair-to-hope/**.

In this week's *parsha,* Moshe reaches his lowest ebb. The cause seems trivial. The people were engaged in their favourite activity: complaining about the food. With self-deceptive nostalgia, they spoke about the fish they ate in Egypt, and the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions, and garlic. Gone is their memory of slavery. All they can recall is the cuisine. At this, understandably, God was very angry (Bamidbar 11:10). But Moshe was more than angry. He suffered a complete emotional breakdown.

This for me is the benchmark of despair. Whenever I felt unable to carry on, I would read this passage and think, "If I haven't yet reached this point, I'm okay." Somehow the knowledge that the greatest Jewish leader of all time had experienced this depth of darkness was empowering. It said that the feeling of failure does not necessarily mean that you have failed. All it means is that you have not yet succeeded. Still less does it mean that *you are* a failure. To the contrary, **failure comes to those who take risks; and the willingness to take risks is absolutely necessary if you seek, in however small a way, to change the world for the better.**

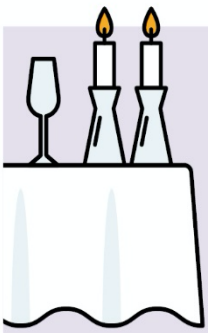
Moshe's mission was to help the Israelites create a society that would be the opposite of Egypt, that would liberate instead of oppress; dignify, not enslave. But the people had not changed. Worse, they had taken refuge in this strange nostalgia for the Egypt they had left: memories of fish, cucumbers, garlic, and the rest. Moshe had discovered it was easier to take the Israelites out of Egypt than to take Egypt out of the Israelites. And if the people had not changed by now, it was a reasonable assumption that they never would. Moshe was staring at his own defeat. He felt there was no point in carrying on.

God then comforted him. First, He told him to gather seventy elders with whom to share the burdens of leadership. Then He told him not to worry about the food. The people would soon have meat in plenty. It came in the form of a huge avalanche of quails.

The Torah is giving us a remarkable account of the psychodynamics of emotional crisis. The first thing it is telling us is that **it is important, in the midst of despair, not to be alone.** God performs the role of comforter. It is He who lifts Moshe from the pit of despair. He speaks directly to Moshe's concerns. He tells him he will not have to lead alone in the future. There will be others to help him. **Then He tells him not to be anxious about the people's complaint.** They would soon have so much meat that it would make them ill, and they would not complain about the food again.

The other thing this *parsha* is telling us, is that **surviving despair is a character-transforming experience.** It is when your self-esteem is ground to dust that you suddenly realise that *life is not about you*. It is about others, and ideals, and a sense of mission or vocation. What matters is the cause, not the person. That is what true humility is about. As the wise saying goes, popularly attributed to C. S. Lewis: *Humility is not about thinking less of yourself. It is about thinking of yourself less.*

Moshe believed he was a failure. That is worth remembering every time we think we are failures. **His journey from despair to self-effacing strength is one of the great psychological narratives in the Torah, a timeless tutorial in hope.**



Around the Shabbat Table

1. Why do you think the Torah includes stories where our leaders face failure and despair?
2. Have you ever experienced failure and frustration, like Moshe in this week's *parsha*?
3. Can you apply any of the messages God taught Moshe to help you in times of crisis?

A STORY FOR SHABBAT

You May Not Give Up

by Rabbi Dr. Harvey Belovski

An extraordinary Midrash records the reaction of Adam to hearing that Cain had murdered his brother Abel. The Rabbis explain that Adam was devastated by the tragic news and further troubled by the fact that Cain was now destined to wander the land as a fugitive and would one day lose his life.

Adam despaired of the value of having more children if they would eventually share their brothers' fate. So Adam abandoned Eve and lived in isolation for 130 years, until God intervened, brought them back together, and their son Seth was born.

We can identify with Adam's despair – he and Eve had produced two sons: one had murdered the other and the murderer was now condemned. Maybe he blamed himself or Eve, perhaps he blamed no-one but assumed that this would be the unavoidable fate of any future children. So he gave up hope and entered a state of hopeless, existential depression about the future of humankind.

Yet God taught him a lesson that resonates through history – you may not give up, there is always hope; your responsibility is to invest in the future, no matter the circumstances. To paraphrase Rabbi Nachman of Breslov, 'there is no despair in the world'. And it was their son Seth whose descendants eventually led to Noach who saved humanity, and then to Avraham, who reintroduced spirituality to the world.

● Rabbi Dr. Harvey Belovski is senior rabbi of Golders Green Synagogue, and chief strategist and rabbinic head of University Jewish Chaplaincy.

A CLOSER LOOK

● **Rabbi Belovski** reflects on some of the deeper lessons he learnt from Rabbi Sacks.

How can we implement Rabbi Sacks' message on blessings into our own lives?

"...surviving despair is a character-transforming experience. It is when your self-esteem is ground to dust that you suddenly realise that *life is not about you*. It is about others, and ideals, and a sense of mission or vocation. What matters is the cause, not the person..."

This quote characterises Rabbi Sacks' leadership approach and it's something I've thought about many times. It's possible to get one's priorities inverted and forget the vocational core of servant-leadership (a phrase Rabbi Sacks used often).

Can you share with us something you learnt from Rabbi Sacks himself?

In my early years in the rabbinate, I often heard Rabbi Sacks say that whatever challenges community rabbis face dealing with difficult, intransigent people, 'it's not personal; sometimes it seems personal, but I assure you that it isn't'.

I took this advice very seriously and over the years I have repeated it many times to my own students. It aligns well with a central message in Rabbi Sacks' essay, in which he recognises that leaders may sometime despair about whether they can ever be truly effective. He recognises that this often reflects the difficulties people have with change, and the consequences for their leaders, who must persevere nonetheless.

TORAH TRIVIA

Q: Which *passuk* in Beha'alotecha teaches us that you do not need to perform *shechita (ritual* killing for kosher meat*)* on fish?

A: "Could enough sheep and cattle be slaughtered to feed all of Israel? Could all the fish in the sea be gathered to feed them?" (Bamidbar 11:22).

The Torah Temima quotes the Gemara (Chulin 27b) which points out that the sheep and cattle in this scenario are slaughtered (*shechita*) but the fish are gathered, and from this we deduce the law that fish do not require *shechita*.

● Adapted from Torah IQ by David Woolf, a collection of 1500 Torah riddles, available worldwide on Amazon.