



Covenant & Conversation



Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

DEVARIM • דברים

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

The Book of the Covenant

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

As we begin reading Devarim, there are three questions to consider. First, why is this final book of the Torah structured as a mix of history and law? Second, are the laws given in Devarim repetitions of laws already received by Bnei Yisrael, or are they new? And lastly, what is this book doing here in the first place? What is its significance to the Torah as a whole?

Way back in ancient times, covenants were used to make treaties between neighbouring powers in the ancient Middle East. Avraham, for example, made a *brit* with Avimelech, king of Gerar, at Beersheva. So did Yitzchak. And Yaakov makes a similar one with Lavan.

The entire book of Devarim is structured in precisely the same way as the ancient treaties that archaeologists have now uncovered. In other words, apart from Moshe's song and blessing of the tribes - shortly before his death - the entire book of Devarim is in fact a covenant on a monumental scale. We now see the extraordinary nature of the book. It has taken an ancient political formula and used it for a new purpose.

Two things that make the Jewish *brit* unique. First, one of the parties is God Himself. This would have been unintelligible to Bnei Yisrael's neighbours, and remains extraordinary even today. The idea that God might bind Himself to human beings, asking for their help, and making them His ambassadors - His "witnesses" - to the world, is still radical and challenging. Second, the other party to the covenant is not, as it was in the ancient world, the king or ruler of the relevant nation, but the people as a whole. Every Israelite, as we see in Shemot 19 and 24, and throughout Devarim, is bound to the covenant, and co-responsible with the people as a whole for its being kept.

From this flows the idea of *Kol Yisrael arevin zeh lazeh*, "all Jews are responsible for one another". This transformation meant that **every Jew had to know the law and teach it to their children.** Every Jew had to know the story of their people, reciting it on Pesach and when bringing first-fruits to Jerusalem.

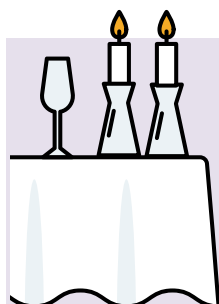
This is covenantal politics, a unique form of political structure based not on a hierarchy of power but on a shared sense of history and destiny. It is a moral politics, dedicated to creating a just and gracious society that honours the dignity of all, especially the downtrodden, the poor, the powerless and the marginal: the widow, the orphan, and the stranger.

Religiously, our covenant with God is also unique. For it means that God, the stronger of the two parties in the *brit* has taken an entire nation to be His "partners in the work of creation" by showing all humanity what it is to construct a society that honours each individual as the image of God.

We now see why Devarim is also called Mishneh Torah. In essence, this book is a "copy" of the *brit* God made with the people at Sinai, renewed on the bank of the Jordan, and renewed again at significant moments of Jewish history. It is the written record of the agreement, just as a *ketubah* is a written record of wedding vows.

We can now also understand the place of Devarim in Tanach. It is the axis on which all Jewish history turns. Had the generation who left Egypt the faith and courage to enter the promised land, all Jewish history would turn on the revelation at Sinai. In fact, though, the episode of the spies showed that that generation lacked the spirit to do so. Therefore the critical moment came for the next generation, when Moshe - at the end of his life - renewed the *brit* with them as the condition of their inheritance of the land. The four previous books of the Torah lead up to this moment, and all the other books of Tanach are a commentary to it - an account of how it worked out in the course of time.

Devarim is the book of the covenant, the centre-point of Jewish theology, and the project it defines is unique. For it aims at nothing less than the construction of a society that would moralise its members, inspire others, and serve as a role model of what might be achieved were humanity as a whole to worship the one God who made us all in His image.



Around the Shabbat Table

1. Why does Devarim mix history, laws, and speeches? How might this be helpful to Bnei Yisrael?
2. Why is it important that every Israelite is part of this unique covenant in Devarim?
3. How does the principle that "all Jews are responsible for one another" impact community behaviour? Can you give an example?

Parsha in Passing

The book of Devarim opens up with Moshe reciting the entire Torah to Bnai Yisrael. He reviews their forty-year journey from Egypt to Israel, recounting events and laws and often rebuking them for their failings.

Then Moshe urges the people to keep the Torah and observe its mitzvot in the land they will inherit after his passing. Moshe

brings up how he appointed judges to help give out just rulings and teach God's word to the people. He recounts the journey from Sinai through the desert, the sending of spies, and the people's rejection of Israel, resulting in God's decree that the Exodus generation would die in the desert. He also mentions God's anger at him, which barred him from entering the land.

Moshe's words remind us of the refusal of Moav and Ammon to let the Israelites pass, the wars against the Emorite kings Sichon and Og, and the settlement of their lands by Reuven, Gad, and part of Menashe. He encourages Yehoshua to lead the people into the land, assuring him that God will support the people.

Parsha People

Moshe: Moshe's great speech is his final plea, lighting wisdom's torch for all to see.

The Israelites: Bnei Yisrael march anew, off to the land where dreams come true.

Shoffim: Judges rule with fair decree, justice for all, strong and free.

The Book of Devarim: Devarim's words, a covenant call, binding hearts, one and all.



Parsha Practical

Establishing a justice system is crucial for maintaining order and trust in any society. That much is clear.

The book of Devarim emphasises appointing judges and officials to ensure laws are applied fairly and consistently. This upholds communal values and resolves disputes as fairly as possible.

Creating boundaries and guidelines in schools, for example, can foster a safe learning environment where students develop responsibility and respect for authority.

And, of course, within family units, setting clear expectations provides a feeling of stability, security, and, most importantly, love for children and grownups alike. These

structures create a framework where people can thrive, safe in the knowledge that their rights and obligations are recognised and upheld.

● Can you think of boundaries that we keep on a religious level?

Parsha Playoff

Let's play "**Family Courtroom!**" Start by assigning family members roles such as judge, prosecutor, defendant, defence attorney, and witnesses. Create a fun scenario (the sillier, the better), like someone "stealing" all the cookies from the family cookie jar.

The judge listens to evidence while the lawyers present their cases, and witnesses offer testimonies. The judge then delivers a verdict based on the arguments and evidence. Will it be a fair verdict? How will the family get justice?

Parsha Puzzle

❓ This week, a strange spelling of the name Yehoshua appears (Devarim 3:21). Why is it spelled differently here?

▲ The reason given in *Orzar Mithashim* (in perek 2, which deals with unusual spellings in Tanach) says that the extra *vav* is because at this moment, Yehoshua was adorned with six crowns. The crowns of beauty, strength, wealth, wisdom, leadership, and prophecy.

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



Parsha Philosophy

The book of Devarim focuses on renewing the covenant made at Har Sinai between God and Bnei Yisrael, emphasizing the people's moral obligations and shared responsibilities. Unlike many ancient treaties between powerful rulers and their subjects, this *brit* is between God and the entire Israelite nation, and every

single Jewish person plays a role in upholding the covenant and keeping the mitzvot. The message embedded in Devarim is that together we must build a society that values justice, compassion, and mutual responsibility.

Devarim is central to Jewish theology, highlighting the

importance of the *brit* between God and the people to Jewish identity and the pursuit of a just and ethical society. As Rabbi Sacks wrote, "Social covenant is about moral commitment, the values we share and the ideals that inspire us to work together for the sake of the common good."

● **Why do you think this final book in the Torah was crucial for Bnai Yisrael before entering Israel?**



Parsha Parable

The Promise

Yosef Mendelevitch was a Jewish activist in the Soviet Union during the 1970s, at a time when Jews were not allowed to show their Judaism in any way, shape, or form. They also weren't allowed to go to Israel. Yosef was deeply committed to being Jewish and dreamed of living in Israel, so he made a promise to himself and his friends that he would fight for their right to freedom, no matter the cost. And so Yosef and his fellow Jewish activists planned a daring escape from the Soviet Union. They called it "Operation Wedding" because they planned

to say they were heading to a wedding celebration in a small plane that they would actually use to fly to freedom. However, their plan was discovered by the KGB



(the Soviet's secret police) and Yosef and his friends were arrested before they could board the plane. During the intense interrogations

and harsh treatment that followed, Yosef kept his silence. He did not betray his friends or give up on his commitment to fight for their freedom.

Yosef was sentenced to many years in a Soviet labour camp. Even in prison, he kept his word to uphold his Jewish identity. He secretly celebrated Jewish holidays, he davened, and he strove to keep kosher despite the severe restrictions and even punishments. Yosef's promise inspired many people around the world. Finally, after 11 years in prison, Yosef was released. In 1981, Yosef fulfilled his dream and made aliyah to Israel, where he was welcomed as a hero.



Parsha Ponderings

Imagine you're a judge in a small community, and a good friend is accused of breaking a rule. How would you ensure that your judgment remained fair and impartial, which could mean making a difficult decision?

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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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