Covenant & Conversation

FAMILY EDITION

Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

VA'ETCHANAN • ואתחנן

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

The Idea that Changed the World

● This summary is based on the video and essay available at **RabbiSacks.org/covenant-conversation/vaetchanan/the-idea-that-changed-the-world/**

Moshe believed that there would come a time when our covenant with God, with its vision of a society based on the equal dignity of all, and the rule of justice and compassion under the sovereignty and in the image of God would inspire other nations. And he was right. We see this most clearly in the political culture and language of the United States.

American politics are based on the biblical idea of covenant. But **how did the Bible become so ingrained in the American political system?** It began with the invention of printing. As books became less expensive and more accessible, literacy spread.

Then came the translation of the Bible into a more accessible format. For a time this was forbidden. In the 1530s, the great Tyndale translation appeared. Tyndale paid for this with his life: he was arrested, found guilty of heresy, strangled and burned at the stake in 1536. However, as contemporary tyrannies have discovered, it is hard to stop the spread of information that new technologies make possible. English Bibles continued to be printed and sold in massive numbers, and inspired philosophers, explorers, and the common people, including the early English settlers of America.

The Tyndale Bibles led to a group of thinkers known as the Christian Hebraists, who studied not only Tanach but also the Talmud Bavel, Sanhedrin, and Rambam's Mishneh Torah, and applied Judaic principles to the politics of their day. This influenced European and American politics in three different ways.

First, the Christian Hebraists took the view – like Abarbanel – that appointing a king in Israel in the days of Shmuel was a (tolerated) sin rather than a mitzvah. So they became republicans. **Second**, they centred their politics on the idea that one of the tasks of government was to redistribute wealth from the rich to the poor, a concept alien to Roman law. **Third**, they used the Hebrew Bible – especially the separation of powers between the king and the Kohen Gadol – to argue for the principle of religious toleration.

This historic encounter between Christians and the Hebrew Bible in the 1600s led to the birth of liberty in England and America. Those who led the English and American revolutions were saturated in the politics of the Hebrew Bible, especially of the book of Devarim.

Of the four revolutions that mark modernity, two, the English (the 1640s) and American (1776), were based on the Hebrew Bible, and two, the French and the Russian were based on secular philosophy. The first two led to liberty. The second two ended in the suppression of freedom: in France in the Reign of Terror (1793-94) and in Russia in the form of Stalinist Communism.

John Adams, second President of the United States, once wrote, "The Hebrews have done more to civilise men than any other nation... Fate ...ordained the Jews to be the most essential instrument for civilising the nations." **The irony is that there is nothing like this Israeli politics today.** Its founders were driven by high ideals, but they owed more to secularists like Marx, Tolstoy, or Nietzsche than to Moshe. Religion in Israel remains sectarian rather than society-building. The significance of this cannot be sufficiently emphasised. Whenever Jews lost their religious vision in the past, or when religion became a divisive rather than a uniting force, they also lost their sovereignty. In four thousand years of history, there has never been a sustained secular Jewish survival, in Israel or outside.

How ironic that the political culture of the United States should be more Judaic than that of the Jewish state. But Moshe warned that it would be so. Keep the Torah's laws carefully, Moshe said, "for this is your wisdom and understanding in the eyes of the nations." Moshe knew that Gentiles would see what Jews sometimes do not see: the wisdom of God's law when it comes to sustaining a free society. **Israeli politics needs to recover Moshe's vision of social justice, compassion, human dignity, and love of the stranger, which has never been surpassed in the intervening centuries.**

Around the **Shabbat Table**

1. How did Moshe believe the Torah's laws would impact how other nations viewed us?
2. In what ways do you think the Torah influenced the political ideas of early American settlers?
3. Why do you think it's important for Israeli politics to reconnect with the principles of the Torah?

Parsha in **Passing**

In parshat Ve'etchanan, Moshe recounts how he pleaded with God to permit him to enter the Land of Israel, but ultimately God denied his request. Instead, He allowed Moshe to climb a mountain and look over to see the land he was not destined to reach.

Moshe then continues his review of the Torah, recalling the miraculous Exodus from Egypt and the Giving of the Torah at Har Sinai, emphasising the uniqueness of these events in human history.

He reminds Bnei Yisrael that they heard God's voice from the fire and saw God as the only true deity.

Moshe also predicts that future generations will turn away from God, worship idols, and be exiled, but they will eventually seek God and return to His commandments. Ve'etchanan also includes the repetition of the two key passages of our Torah, namely Ten Commandments and the Shema.

Parsha **People**

Moshe: From afar I stand and survey,
the land of Israel not far away,
a beautiful land I can't pursue, my
days are numbered, my days are few.

The Shema: One God we proclaim, in
love we declare His name.

The Ten Commandments:
Ten laws to guide, in justice and
truth we abide.

Bnei Yisrael: In awe we stood, at
Har Sinai we understood.

Parsha **Practical**

Practically speaking, the most important mitzvah you can take from parshat Ve'etchanan is the mitzvah of teaching the Torah to the next generation, and helping them become a link in the Jewish chain, a letter in the scroll.

How is this done? There are many options. Here's one:

Every Shabbat, or even every day, set aside regular time to study Torah with your family. (Reading this weekly Family Edition is a great place to start!)

By consistently engaging in Torah learning and "doing", you are fulfilling the mitzvah of teaching Torah to the next generation and reinforcing our incredible Torah value system practically and meaningfully.

- **Why is this such an important mitzvah?**
- **What other creative ways can you think of to embed more Torah learning into your everyday routine, and into your interactions with those younger than you?**

Parsha **Playoff**

The Time Capsule: Here's a special way to preserve memories for the future. The Torah is kind of like a time capsule which has survived for centuries, and now we will create our own. Begin by choosing a purpose and a date for re-opening it, such as 10 years from now. Gather items like letters, photographs, and small mementos representing your current life. Use a durable container to protect these items, and label it with the opening date. Pack everything carefully, and store the capsule in a cool, dry place. Document the details and share them with the people involved, including exactly where to find the time capsule when the time comes. This project can be brainstormed over Shabbat and implemented after Shabbat is over!

Parsha **Puzzle**

Q. In the Torah's description of a land flowing with milk and honey, what does it mean? Is this literal?

A. Rashi explains that the milk is goat's milk, and the honey is derived from figs and dates, all of which will be abundantly available in the land of Israel (Shemot 13:5).

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

Parsha **Philosophy**

Rabbi Sacks poignantly highlights how Moshe predicted that the values and laws given in the Torah would eventually inspire other nations even more than they did Israel itself. Moshe envisioned a society based on equality, justice, and compassion under God, which he believed would impress other nations. This idea materialised, especially in the United States, where leaders often reference biblical principles in their speeches and governance, reflecting a deep connection to these ancient teachings.

Interestingly, in modern Israel, secular politics often dominate, whereas religious vision is less prevalent in public life. Rabbi Sacks suggests that for Israel to thrive and truly thrive, it must reconnect with the Torah's principles of justice and compassion, which have been instrumental in shaping free societies elsewhere. The irony is that non-Jewish nations often recognise and adopt these Jewish values more readily than the Jewish state itself.

- **What do you think of this irony? How would you suggest Israel commits to a more religiously-minded political system?**

Parsha **Parable**

The New Colossus

Emma Lazarus was born in 1849 in New York City. She came from a Jewish family that loved being Jewish and believed in important values like fairness, kindness, and respect for everyone.

One of Emma's favourite things to do as a child was write poems and stories. When Emma grew up, she became a famous poet. During her time, many Jewish people in Europe were being treated very badly and needed a safe place to live. Emma felt very sad for them and wanted to help, and lift their spirits.

So, in 1883, she wrote a special poem called "The New Colossus".

This poem is now on the Statue of Liberty! And it's the first thing people would see when they immigrate to the United States.

Emma wrote, "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free." These words offered a welcome to people looking for a new start and a safe home. Can you imagine how special it was for all of the new immigrants to see words that spoke about their future freedom? If you visit New York City, you can still see those words on the Statue of Liberty today.

Parsha **Ponderings**

What would you do? Imagine you're Moshe, and you are at the end of your life. You cannot enter the land of Israel yourself, but the Jewish People will, and they need to prepare for this challenge. How would you speak to them, and what would you say to motivate them?

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