



# Covenant & Conversation

Jonathan Sacks  
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

הַאֲזִינוּ • האזינו

FROM THE TEACHINGS AND WRITINGS OF **RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS** ל"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

This year's series of essays and videos were originally written and recorded by Rabbi Sacks ז"ל in 5771 (2010–2011). These timeless messages are accompanied by a new [Family Edition](#) (2023–2024), created to inspire intergenerational learning on the Parsha.

## The Inheritance that Belongs to Everyone

Commenting on a key verse from today's Parsha, a Midrash tells a pointed story:

Once Rabbi Yannai was walking along the way when he met a man who was elegantly dressed. He said to him, "Will the master be my guest?" He replied, "As you please."

Rabbi Yannai then took him home and questioned him on Bible, but he knew nothing; on Talmud, but he knew nothing; on Aggadah, but he knew nothing. Finally, he asked him to say Grace After Meals. The man, however, replied, "Let Yannai say grace in his house."

Rabbi Yannai then said to him, "Can you repeat what I tell you?"

The man answered, "Yes."

Rabbi Yannai then said: "Say, 'A dog has eaten Yannai's bread.'"

The guest then rose up and seized Rabbi Yannai demanding, "Where is my inheritance that you have and are keeping from me?"

"What inheritance of yours do I have?"

He replied, "The children recite, 'Moses commanded us the Torah, an inheritance of the congregation of Jacob' (Deuteronomy 33:5). It is not written, 'congregation of Yannai,' but 'congregation of Jacob.'"

Vayikra Rabbah 9

It's a powerful story. Rabbi Yannai sees an elegantly dressed stranger and assumes that he must be well-educated. He takes him home and discovers the man has had no Jewish education whatsoever. He knows nothing of the rabbinic literature. He can't even say Grace After Meals.

Rabbi Yannai, a Torah scholar, looks down at the guest with contempt. But the stranger, with great dignity, says to him in effect, "The Torah is my inheritance as well as yours. Since you have much, and I have none, share a little of

what you have with me. Instead of dismissing me, teach me.”

Few ideas in the history of Judaism have greater power than this: the idea that Torah knowledge belongs to everyone; that everyone should have the chance to learn; that education should be universal; that everyone should be, if possible, literate in the laws, the history, and the faith of Judaism; that education is the highest form of dignity, and it should be accessible to all.

This idea goes so far back and so deep in Judaism that we can easily forget how radical it is. Knowledge – in the famous phrase of Sir Francis Bacon – is power.<sup>1</sup> Those who have it are usually reluctant to share it with others. Most societies have had literate elites who controlled the administration of government. To this day, many professions use a technical vocabulary intelligible only to insiders, so that their knowledge is impenetrable to outsiders.

Judaism was different, profoundly so. I have speculated that this is connected with the fact that the birth of Judaism happened at roughly the same time as the birth of the alphabet<sup>2</sup> – proto-Semitic, appearing in the age of the patriarchs, and whose earliest traces have been discovered in the Sinai desert in areas where slaves worked.

Mesopotamia, from which Abraham came, and Egypt in the days of Moses, had the world's two earliest forms of writing, cuneiform and hieroglyphics respectively. But these systems – pictograms, ideograms and syllabaries in which symbols stood for whole words or syllables – involved too many signs to be taught to everyone. The alphabet, with its mere 22

symbols, for the first time opened up the possibility of a society of universal literacy.

Judaism bears the mark of this throughout. Abraham was chosen to be a teacher, “For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord” (Gen. 18:19).

Moses repeatedly speaks about education:

“Teach them to your children, talking about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.”

Deut. 11:19

The verb *l-m-d*, “to teach,” occurs no less than 17 times in the book of Deuteronomy, making it a motif of the book as a whole.

Above all is the personal example of Moses himself. Devarim, the book of Deuteronomy as a whole, is a massive adult education experience, the Master Prophet taking the whole people as his disciples and teaching them both the law – the commands, statutes and judgments – and no less importantly, the history that lies behind it.

This rises to a climax at the end of the book, in the form of the “song” of Ha'azinu, this week's Parsha, which is preceded and followed by these words:

“Moses recited the words of this song from beginning to end in the hearing of the whole assembly of Israel”

Deut. 31:30

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<sup>1</sup> The famous phrase “knowledge is power” attributed to Francis Bacon comes from his *Meditationes Sacrae* (1597). The entry for this quotation is available online at [Bartleby.com](http://Bartleby.com).

<sup>2</sup> See [On the Internet and Judaism](#), and [The Home of the Book for The People of the Book](#).

“This is the blessing that Moses the man of God pronounced on the Israelites before his death . . . Moses commanded us the Torah, an inheritance of the congregation of Jacob.

Deut. 33:1, Deut. 33:4

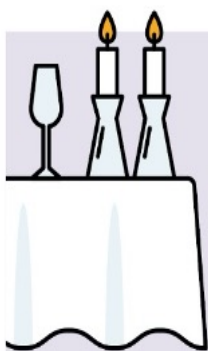
Note the insistence, in the first of these two verses, on the fact that Moses is speaking to everyone, not an elite. The second passage contains the famous line quoted by Rabbi Yannai's guest as proof that Torah belongs to everyone. It is the possession not of the learned, the elect, the specially-gifted; not of a class or caste. It is the inheritance of the entire congregation of Jacob.

Not until relatively modern times did this idea of universal education spread beyond Judaism. It did not exist even in England, then the premier world power, until the Education Act of 1870. It has taken the Internet revolution – Google and the rest – to make it a reality

throughout the world. Even today, some 70 million children are still deprived of education, in countries like Somalia, Eritrea, Haiti, Comoros, and Ethiopia.

That education is the key to human dignity and should be equally available to all is one of the most profound ideas in all of history, and it was born in those powerful words, immediately following this week's Parsha:

“Moses commanded us the Torah, an inheritance of the congregation of Jacob.”



## Around the Shabbat Table

1. How has education impacted your life?
2. What are some barriers to education today, and how can they be addressed to ensure that everyone has access to learning?
3. If you could have one character from Tanach be your modern-day teacher, who would you want to learn from?

● These questions come from this week's **Family Edition** to Rabbi Sacks' Covenant & Conversation. For an interactive, multi-generational study, check out the full edition at [www.RabbiSacks.org/covenant-conversation-family-edition/haazinu/the-inheritance-that-belongs-to-everyone/](http://www.RabbiSacks.org/covenant-conversation-family-edition/haazinu/the-inheritance-that-belongs-to-everyone/)