



# Covenant & Conversation



Jonathan Sacks  
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

VAYECHI • 'N'I

BASED ON THE TEACHINGS OF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS 7"צז

COVENANT & CONVERSATION SUMMARY

## When can we lie?

After the death of Yaakov, Yosef's brothers were afraid. He had always acted like he had forgiven them for selling him as a slave, but what if he still harboured resentment. Perhaps his respect for Yaakov was the only reason he had not taken revenge, and now Yaakov was gone. So the brothers came before Yosef and said, "Our father asks you to forgive your brothers. He left this message before he died."

The brothers' tale was what we may call a "white lie". Its primary aim was not to deceive but to ease a potentially explosive situation. The Sages derived a principle from this passage. *Mutar le-shanot mipnei ha-shalom*: "It is permitted to "change the facts" for the sake of peace." In short, a white lie is permitted in Jewish law.

What is at stake here is an important feature of the moral life. Moral conflict is unavoidable. You can't always promote both peace and truth at the same time, and in these cases, which should you choose.

The existence of conflicting values means that the kind of morality we adopt and the society we create depend not only on the values we embrace but also on the way we prioritise them. Prioritising equality over freedom creates one kind of society – Soviet Communism for example. Prioritising freedom over equality leads to market economics. People in both societies may value the same things but they rank them differently in the scale of values, and thus how they choose when the two conflict.

**Truth and peace are both values, but which do we choose when they conflict?** Not everyone among the rabbinic Sages agreed. There is a famous argument between Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai as to what to say about the

bride on her wedding day. The custom was to say that "The bride is beautiful and graceful." Members of Beit Shammai, however, were not prepared to say so if, in their eyes, the bride was not beautiful and graceful. For them the supreme value was the Torah's insistence on truth: "Keep far from falsehood". Beit Hillel did not accept this. To praise the bride gave her and her *chatan* honour. It was a way of celebrating the couple's happiness.

Courtesies are often like this. Telling someone how much you like the gift they have brought, even if you don't, or saying to someone, "Great to see you" is more like good manners than an attempt to deceive. We all know this, and thus no harm is done.

**For us, truth is always partial, fragmentary, the view from somewhere and not, as philosophers sometimes say, "the view from nowhere".**

This deep insight is, I believe, the reason why the Torah is multi-perspectival, and why Tanach contains so many different kinds of voices, why Mishnah and Gemara are structured around argument, and why Midrash is built on the premise that there are "seventy faces" to Torah. No other civilisation I know has had so subtle and complex an understanding of the nature of truth. Nor has any other so valued peace.

The Sages valued peace over truth, not least because truth can flourish in peace, while it is often the first casualty in war. The brothers were not wrong to tell Yosef a lie for the sake of peace within the family. It reminded them all of the deeper truth that not only their human father, now dead, but also their heavenly Father, eternally alive, wants the people of the covenant to be at peace. **Jews can only be at peace with the world if they are first at peace with themselves.**

● The full essay written by Rabbi Sacks is available [on our website](#).

### In a Nutshell

Yaakov spent his final 17 years in Egypt. Before his death, he asked Yosef to promise to bury him in Canaan. Yaakov blesses Yosef's sons, Menashe and Ephraim, granting them the status of his own children and future tribal leaders. Yaakov blesses each son with a unique destiny: Yehuda will produce kings, Levi will serve as priests, Yissachar will be scholars, and other tribes will fulfil different roles. Yaakov is buried in the Maarat Hamachpela in Hebron. Yosef requests his own bones be returned to the Holy Land when he dies, reminding the Israelites of God's promise to bring them back to the land.



## Around the Shabbat Table

1. Are there some other examples from your life when telling a lie is permissible?
2. How can you strike the balance of keeping the peace and keeping it truthful?
3. What if Sarah, or Yosef's brothers, had not lied. How do you think the story would have been different?



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ON THE PARSHA • WRITTEN BY SARA LAMM

INSPIRED BY THE TEACHINGS OF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS 7"צז

PHILOSOPHY OF RABBI SACKS



## Delving Deeper

The balance between truth and peace, especially in relationships, is a delicate one. In some cases, peace can take precedence over truth, for example, when Yosef's brothers lied to him to preserve family harmony.

Another example is seen when the angels came to visit Avraham and Sarah, to tell them they were about to have a child, "Sarah laughed to herself as she thought, 'After I am worn out and my lord is old, will I now have this pleasure?'" God then asked Avraham, "Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Will I really have a child, now that I am old?'"

God did not mention that Sarah

believed that not only was she too old, she believed that Avraham was as well. The Sages taught that God did not want there to be bad feeling between husband and wife. They said: it is permitted to change the facts for the sake of peace.

God wanted to avoid conflict. While the truth is important, Judaism also acknowledges that sometimes peace must be prioritised, as it creates an environment where relationships can thrive and truth can emerge more meaningfully.

• What does a "meaningful truth" mean to you?



## Parsha Activity

### Look into my Lies

Player takes turns sharing statements about themselves, while looking into the eyes of everyone else. All players then guess whether the statement is a lie. After everyone has made their guesses, the person reveals the truth. It has never been this much fun to fib!

Consider a time when you have omitted the truth when getting to know someone new. How did that impact your relationship with that person?

A STORY FOR THE AGES



## The Surprise

Leah had been planning her mom's birthday party for weeks. She was excited, but she also knew it would be challenging to keep the party a secret. Leah's mom, Miriam, loved spending time with her family, and Leah knew a surprise party would make her feel extra special. But there was one problem: Miriam kept asking Leah what they were doing for her birthday.

"I'm not sure," Leah would say, trying to keep the secret without giving anything away. "Maybe we'll do something fun together, just the two of us."

It was getting more difficult though. Every couple of days she would ask about the big day. "Any

plans yet? Maybe we should make a restaurant booking?"

Leah considered telling the truth, but she knew that would ruin the surprise. So she gently fibbed and said, "No, I think we'll just have a quiet night at home."

Finally it was the day of the party, and everything was ready. Leah, along with her dad, brothers, and a few close friends had decorated the house, and the cake was all set. When Miriam entered the house, she was delighted to see everyone gather to celebrate her. "Surprise!" they all shouted.

Miriam was so touched that Leah had made such an effort to make her birthday unforgettable. "I can't



believe you pulled this off!" she said with tears in her eyes.

Leah smiled and said, "We all thought you deserved a special surprise. I'm just glad you're happy, Mom."

Leah's little white lie wasn't about tricking her mom but about creating a moment that filled her heart with love and joy. It reminded everyone that sometimes, small acts of kindness and saving the truth for the right moment can make life's celebrations even sweeter.



## The Haftara in a Nutshell

Haftara - I Kings 2:1-12

In the Haftara for Vayechi, King David is nearing the end of his life, and he must make preparation for a plan of succession. So he gives final instructions to his son Solomon (Shlomo), who is destined to succeed him as king.

David urges Solomon to be strong, to follow God's ways, and to obey His commandments. He reminds his son of God's promise that 'If your descendants are scrupulous in their conduct, and walk before Me faithfully, with all their heart and soul, your line on the throne of Israel shall never end!' And so to ensure that David's

lineage remains on the throne of Israel, and all will be well, he must follow the righteous path.

David also advises Solomon on how to deal with certain individuals: he instructs him to deal wisely with Yoav, who had shed innocent blood, and Shimi, who had cursed David.

However, he also tells Solomon to show kindness to the sons of Barzillai, who were loyal to David. After giving these instructions, David dies and is buried in the City of David.

Solomon then firmly establishes himself as the new king of Israel.

Of all David Hamelech's children, why do you think Shlomo was the one chosen to be the next king of Israel?



## Points to Ponder

1. Why do you think that strangers living in the land of Israel need to keep Shabbat?
2. King David's advice to his son includes Torah advice and politics. Which other leader receives multiple pieces of encouragement when he takes charge?

(Clue: He follows Moshe as leader)



## Parsha and Haftara Links

Both the Parsha and Haftara include the final words of a parent to a son on his deathbed. Yaakov uses this time to give guidance and blesses each of his twelve sons, and King David does the same for his son, Solomon.

In fact, an almost identical phrase is used at the beginning of the Parsha and Haftara. Bereishit



47:29 states: "The days of Yisrael [Yaakov] drew near to die." Whilst the beginning of the Haftara, I Kings 2:1 tells us: "The days of David drew near to die."

There is even more than a linguistic connection: David's testament to Shlomo on the eve of his death corresponds to Yaakov's testament to his sons on the eve of his death. Both include favourable and less favourable consequences for different people: Yaakov foretells of the rewards for Yehuda and Yosef for their good actions, and David speaks of the reward that will come to the sons of Barzilai the Gileadite.

The Haftara closes with the death of David and the number of years of his reign, just as the Parsha details

Yaakov's death and the years of his life.

Rabbi Sacks shared Rashi's comment that "*Yaakov wished to reveal what would happen in the future, but the Divine Presence was removed from him.*" He tried to foresee the future but found he could not. Similarly, the Talmud tells an intriguing story about King David, who asked God to tell him how long he would live. God refused to tell him when he would die, and revealed only that he would die on a Shabbat.

- Why do you think both these leaders of dynasties asked God about the future, just as their lives were ending?



# On the Book of Kings

As Rabbi Sacks quotes from the book of Kings, “Solomon’s wisdom was greater than the wisdom of all the people of the East, and greater than all the wisdom of Egypt... From all nations people came to listen to Solomon’s wisdom, sent by all the kings of the world, who had heard of his wisdom.” (1 Kings 5:10-14)

Rabbi Sacks then gives examples of other great statesmen who spent their time learning. “**Gladstone, four times Prime Minister of Britain, had a library of 32, 000 books. We know – because he made a note in his diary every time he finished reading a book – that he read 22, 000 of them. Assuming he did so over the course of eighty years (he lived to be 88), this meant that he read on average 275 books a year, or more than five each week for a lifetime... Ben Gurion was a voracious reader as well as a prolific author. Benjamin Disraeli was a best-selling novelist before he entered politics. Winston Churchill wrote almost 50 books and won the Nobel Prize for Literature. Reading and writing are what separate the statesman from the mere politician.**”




## Further Ponderings

How would you summarise your life so far? What are the key events, both positive and negative, that made you who you are today?



## Quote of the Week

**“Leaders learn. They read. They study. They take time to familiarise themselves with the world of ideas. Only thus do they gain the perspective to be able to see further and clearer than others...”**

*Learning and Leadership, Shoftim, Covenant & Conversation*

*Jonathan Sacks*  
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

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**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