



Covenant & Conversation

FAMILY
EDITION

Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

BO • אב

BASED ON THE TEACHINGS OF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS 7"צ7

The Necessity of Asking Questions

Parshat Bo turns three times to the idea of children and the role of parents in educating them. **As Jews we believe that to defend a country you need an army, but to defend a civilisation you need education. Freedom is lost when it is taken for granted. Unless parents hand on their memories and ideals to the next generation – the story of how they won their freedom and the battles they had to fight along the way – the long journey falters and we lose our way.**

What is fascinating is the way the Torah emphasises the fact that children must ask questions. The four passages where this emphasis is placed have become famous because of their appearance as the Four Children in the Haggadah on Pesach.

Reading them together, the Sages concluded that children should ask questions, Seder night should revolve around a child's questions, and it is the duty of a parent to encourage their children to ask questions. There is nothing natural about this at all. To the contrary, most traditional cultures see it as the task of a parent or teacher to instruct, guide, or command, and the task of a child to obey. "Children should be seen, not heard," goes the old English proverb. Socrates, who spent his life teaching people to ask questions, was condemned by the citizens of Athens for corrupting the young. In Judaism the opposite is the case. **It is a religious duty to teach our children to ask questions. That is how they grow.**

Judaism is unique, for it is a faith based on asking questions, sometimes deep and difficult ones that seem to shake the very foundations of faith itself. For example, in yeshiva the aim is to learn to ask a good question. Our

highest duty is to seek to understand the will of God, not just to obey blindly. We believe that intelligence is God's greatest gift to humanity. The very first of our requests in the weekday Amidah is for "knowledge, understanding, and discernment." One of the most breathtakingly bold blessings created by the rabbis is the *bracha* to be said upon seeing a great non-Jewish scholar. Not only do we see wisdom in cultures other than our own, we even thank God for it. That's a clear sign of how much Judaism values intelligence, scholars, and learning.

Ultimately it's all about how we learn and how we teach children. The Torah focuses on this at the most powerful and poignant point in Jewish history – just as Bnai Yisrael are about to leave Egypt and begin their life as a free people. Hand on the memory of this moment to your children, the Torah says, encouraging them to ask, investigate, analyse, explore. Liberty means freedom of the mind, as well as the body.

It's essential to know, and to teach our children, that not all questions have an answer we can immediately understand. There are some ideas that we will only fully comprehend through age and experience. Others may be entirely beyond our collective comprehension at this stage of the human quest.

Isaac Newton, founder of modern science, understood how little he understood, and put it beautifully: "I seem to have been only a boy playing on the seashore, and diverting myself in now and then finding a smoother pebble or prettier shell than ordinary, whilst the great ocean of truth lay all undiscovered before me." The more we know, the more we realise is still left to be learnt, if we keep investigating.

In teaching its children to ask and keep asking, Judaism honoured what Rambam called the "active intellect" and saw it as the gift of God. No faith has honoured human intelligence more.

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



In a Nutshell

The final three plagues devastate Egypt. Locusts, intense darkness, and the death of all Egyptian firstborns. God gives Bnai Yisrael their first mitzva: to create a lunar calendar and celebrate Rosh Chodesh. They are told to offer a lamb and add its blood on their doorposts so God will pass over their homes. Paroh finally tells them to leave, and so Bnai Yisrael depart in haste - so quickly in fact that their dough does not have time to rise. God commands them to commemorate the Exodus yearly with matza and storytelling, and to wear tefillin as a reminder of their miraculous escape.



Around the Shabbat Table

1. Why do you think Judaism encourages children to ask questions, when other cultures encourage obedience?
2. Not every question has an immediate answer we can understand. How do you feel when you receive this type of response to your questions? How do you handle it?
3. How might asking help make beliefs stronger rather than weaker?



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Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

ON THE PARSHA • WRITTEN BY SARA LAMM

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



Delving Deeper

While many other cultures and religions emphasise blind obedience, Judaism sees asking questions as a religious duty and a path to deeper understanding. In fact, in a religion of 613 commandments, there is no Hebrew word that means “to obey”. The Torah instead uses the verb *shema*, untranslatable into English because it means so many things: to listen, to hear, to understand, to internalise, and to respond.

This is a religion that uniquely values and encourages questioning as a fundamental part of faith

and education, particularly when teaching children.

Questioning doesn’t undermine faith but rather strengthens it - even if not all questions have immediate or easily understood answers. Ultimately it is those who have freedom of their mind, and who are at liberty to ask, who are truly free.

- If you could ask God one question, what would it be?
- Do you think your teachers have fewer questions than you, or more?



Parsha Activity

Question Chain

Players sit in a circle, with the first person asking a question on any topic. Each subsequent player must answer the previous question and then ask a new question that somehow connects to either the answer or the original question. No “yes/no” questions or repeats are allowed!

How far off-topic can you get from the original question, while maintaining a chain of related questions?



Watch and Learn

In the quiet hours of weekend mornings, a young boy and his father regularly set out on walks through nature. Young Richard Feynman and his father would explore the sights together, often pausing to observe the world around them, especially the birds.

Unlike other parents who focused on teaching their children to identify and name things, Feynman’s father had a different approach. He taught Richard to watch carefully and think about what he was seeing. When they spotted birds, they would notice their behaviours - how they moved, what they ate, and how they interacted with their environment. Richard Feynman later wrote about how his father

taught him that observation and questioning were more valuable than memorising names. He wrote: “You can know the name of that bird in all the languages of the world, but when you’re finished, you’ll know absolutely nothing whatever about the bird. You’ll only know about humans in different places and what they call the bird.”

These walks, filled with careful observation and questioning, shaped young Richard’s entire approach to understanding the world. The curious boy who learned to watch birds eventually became one of the world’s greatest physicists. In 1965 he received the Nobel Prize in Physics for his research into quantum electrodynamics.



Through all his years of research and discovery, he carried with him that early lesson that real understanding comes not from memorising facts, but from careful observation and asking questions about what you see.

- Consider your own education: what questions have enabled you to think deeply and critically about a subject matter? What impact can parents and teachers have on the way children learn?



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ON THE HAFTARAH • WRITTEN BY RABBI BARRY KLEINBERG

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

HAFTARAH SUMMARY



The Haftara in a Nutshell

Jeremiah 46:13-28 (Ashkenazim and Sephardim)
Isaiah 19:1-25 (Yemenites)

This is the first time that Ashkenazim read a section of the book of Jeremiah for one of the Haftarot. However, the theme of this week's Haftara overlaps considerably with last week's Haftara. In our Haftara, the prophet delivers a message of judgment against Egypt and hope for Israel. Jeremiah foretells the defeat of Egypt at the hands of Babylon, led by King Nebuchadnezzar. Egypt, once a powerful nation, will face humiliation and devastation as its allies fail to support it. The destruction is portrayed as

inevitable and ordained by God. Amid this prophecy of Egypt's downfall, Jeremiah offers reassurance to Israel and Judah.

Though they face their own punishment for sin, God promises not to destroy them completely. Unlike Egypt, Israel's punishment is corrective, not purely destructive, reflecting God's enduring covenant. God vows to preserve His people and ultimately restore them, declaring that they need not fear because He is with them, offering protection and deliverance from their oppressors.



Points to Ponder

First, read the Quote of the Week on the back page.

1. Why are we told to pray for the city we are exiled to?
2. For those Jews living outside of Israel, what do we ask for when praying for the leaders of our country of residence?



TANACH CONNECTIONS



Parsha and Haftara Links

This week, both our Parsha and Haftara refer to locusts. In Shemot 10:14-15, the Parsha opens with the plague of locusts brought on the Egyptians, and notes their great number. In the Haftara, Jeremiah 46:23, the Babylonian armies who will invade Egypt are described as follows: "They are more than locusts, and they are innumerable."

The Parsha continues with the narrative of the final two plagues brought against Egypt. The Haftara also deals with the punishment against Egypt (as it did last week).

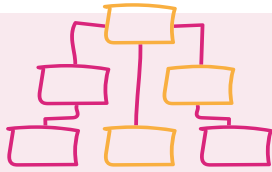
When considering Pharaoh's

leadership, and how he suffered the consequences, Rabbi Sacks wrote "**We see Pharaoh as both wicked and foolish, because we have read the book. His advisors could see clearly that he was leading his people to disaster, but he may**



well have felt that he was being strong while they were merely fearful. Leadership is only easy, and its errors only clearly visible, in retrospect...

"Knowing how to listen to advice, how to respond to change and when to admit you've got it wrong, remain three of the most difficult tasks of leadership. Rejecting advice, refusing to change, and refusing to admit you're wrong, may look like strength to some. But, usually, they are the beginning of yet another march of folly."



On the book of Jeremiah

The Book of Jeremiah, written by the prophet Jeremiah during the late 7th and early 6th centuries BCE, spans a critical period leading to the destruction of Jerusalem and the Babylonian exile. Jeremiah, often called the “weeping prophet,” was tasked with delivering God’s messages of judgment, warning Judah of the consequences of their idolatry, injustice, and covenant unfaithfulness. Rabbi Sacks also notes that Jeremiah was Jeremiah, “**the Prophet who foresaw the destruction and whose words form... [two of the Haftarat read during] the Three Weeks.**”



The book of Jeremiah is a blend of oracles, poetic laments, and narratives detailing Jeremiah’s struggles as he faced rejection, persecution, and despair. Key themes include God’s sovereignty, human accountability, and the inevitability of Divine judgment. Jeremiah also emphasises hope: despite the fall of Jerusalem, God promises restoration, a new covenant written on the hearts of His people, and future redemption. In the telling of Jeremiah’s life and speeches, the book underscores the tension between Divine justice and mercy, calling for repentance and trust in God amid profound national and spiritual crises.



Further Ponderings

How would you feel about praying for leaders who seem to be behaving immorally or antisemitically?



Quote of the Week

“Jeremiah was the leader who defined for all time the role of Jews in the Diaspora: ‘Seek the welfare of the city to which I have exiled you and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its prosperity you shall prosper’ (Jeremiah 29:7) – the first statement in history of what it is to be a creative minority.”



Leadership at a Time of Crisis, Masei, Covenant & Conversation, Lessons in Leadership series

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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.

Explore the digital archive, containing much of Rabbi Sacks’ writings, broadcasts, and speeches, or support the Legacy’s work, at www.RabbiSacks.org, and follow The Rabbi Sacks Legacy on social media @RabbiSacks.

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