



# Covenant & Conversation

Jonathan Sacks  
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

SHELACH LECHA • שלח לך

FROM 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

This year's series of essays were originally written and recorded by Rabbi Sacks זצ"ל in 5772 (2011–2012). These timeless messages are accompanied by a new [Family Edition](#) created to inspire intergenerational learning on the Parsha and Haftara.

## The Real World

The episode of the spies has rightly puzzled commentators throughout the centuries. How could they have got it so wrong? The land, they said, was as Moses had promised. It was indeed "flowing with milk and honey." But conquering it was impossible. "The people who live there are powerful, and the cities fortified and very large. We even saw descendants of the giant there... We can't attack those people; they are stronger than we are... All the people we saw there are of great size. We saw the titans there... We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and so we seemed in theirs" (Num. 13:28-33).

They were terrified of the inhabitants of the land, and entirely failed to realise that the inhabitants were terrified of them. Rahab, the prostitute in Jericho, tells the spies sent by Joshua a generation later: "I know that the Lord has given you this land and that a *great fear of you has fallen on us*, so that all who live in this country are *melting in fear* because of you ... *our hearts melted in fear and everyone's courage failed* because of you, for the Lord your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below" (Joshua 2:10-11).

The truth was the exact opposite of the spies' report. The inhabitants feared the Israelites more

than the Israelites feared the inhabitants. We hear this at the start of the story of Bilaam:

"Now Balak son of Zippor saw all that Israel had done to the Amorites, and Moab was *terrified* because there were so many people. Indeed, Moab was *filled with dread* because of the Israelites."

Num. 22:2-3

Earlier the Israelites themselves had sung at the Red Sea:

"The people of Canaan will *melt away; terror and dread will fall on them.*"

Ex. 15:15-16

How then did the spies err so egregiously? Did they misinterpret what they saw? Did they lack faith in God? Did they – more likely – lack faith in themselves? Or was it simply, as Maimonides argues in *The Guide for the Perplexed*, that their fear was inevitable given their past history? They had spent most of their lives as slaves. Only recently had they acquired their freedom. They were not yet ready to fight a prolonged series of battles and establish themselves as a free people in their own land. That would take a new generation, born in freedom.

Humans change, but not that quickly (See *Guide for the Perplexed* III, 32).

Most of the commentators assume that the spies were guilty of a failure of nerve, or faith, or both. It is hard to read the text otherwise. However, in the Hassidic literature – from the Baal Shem Tov to R. Yehudah Leib Alter of Ger (*Sefat Emet*) to the Lubavitcher Rebbe, R. Menachem Mendel Schneerson – an entirely different line of interpretation emerged, reading the text against the grain to dramatic effect so that it remains relevant and powerful today. According to their interpretation, the spies were well-intentioned. They were, after all, “princes, chieftains, leaders” (Num. 13:2-3). They did not doubt that Israel could win its battles with the inhabitants of the land. *They did not fear failure; they feared success.* Their concern was not physical but spiritual. They did not want to leave the wilderness. They did not want to become just another nation among the nations of the earth. They did not want to lose their unique relationship with God in the reverberating silence of the desert, far removed from civilisation and its discontents.

Here they were close to God, closer than any generation before or since. He was a palpable presence in the Sanctuary in their midst, and in the Clouds of Glory that surrounded them. Here His people ate manna from heaven and water from the rock and experienced miracles daily. So long as they stayed in the desert under God’s sheltering canopy, they did not need to plough the earth, plant seeds, gather harvests, defend a country, run an economy, maintain a welfare system, or shoulder any of the other earthly burdens and distractions that take peoples’ minds away from the Divine.

Here, in no-man’s-land, in liminal space, suspended between past and future, they were able to live with a simplicity and directness of encounter they could not hope to find once they had re-entered the gravitational pull of everyday life in the material world. Paradoxically, since a desert is normally the exact opposite of a garden, the wilderness was the Israelites’ Eden. Here they were as close to God as were the first humans before their loss of innocence.

If that comparison is too discordant, recall that Hosea and Jeremiah both compared the wilderness to a honeymoon. Hosea said in the name of God: “I am now going to allure her; I will lead her into the wilderness and speak tenderly to her” (Hos. 2:16), implying that in the future God would take the people back there to celebrate a second honeymoon. Jeremiah said in God’s name, “I remember the devotion of your youth, how as a bride you loved me and followed me through the wilderness, through a land not sown” (Jer. 2:2). For both prophets, the wilderness years were the time of the first love between God and the Israelites. That is what the spies did not want to leave.

Clearly this interpretation is not the plain sense of the narrative, but we should not dismiss it on that account. It is, as it were, a psychoanalytical reading, an account of the unconscious mindset of the spies. They did not want to let go of the intimacy and innocence of childhood and enter the adult world. Sometimes it is hard for parents to let go of their children; at others it is the other way round. But there must be a measure of separation if children are to become responsible adults. Ultimately the spies feared freedom and its responsibilities.

But that is what Torah is about. Judaism is not a religion of monastic retreat from the world. It is supremely a religion of engagement with the world. The Torah is a template for the construction of a society with all its gritty details: laws of warfare and welfare, harvests and livestock, loans and employer-employee relationships, the code of a nation in its land, part of the real world of politics and economics, yet somehow pointing to a better world where justice and compassion, love of the neighbour and stranger, are not remote ideals but part of the texture of everyday life. *God chose Israel to make His presence visible in the world, and that means that Israel must live in the world.*

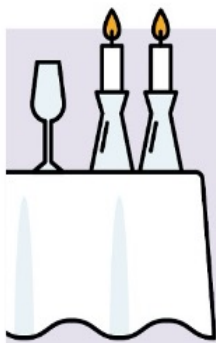
To be sure, the Jewish people were not without their desert-dwellers and ascetics. The Qumran sect known to us from the Dead Sea Scrolls was such a group. The Talmud speaks of R. Shimon bar Yochai in similar terms. Having lived for thirteen years in a cave, he could not bear to see people engaged in

such earthly pursuits as ploughing a field. Maimonides speaks of people who live as hermits in the desert to escape the corruptions of society (*Laws of ethical character*, 6: 1; *Eight Chapters*, ch. 4). But these were the exceptions, not the rule. This is not the destiny of Israel, to live outside time and space in ashrams or monasteries as the world's recluses. Far from being the supreme height of faith, such a fear of freedom and its responsibilities is – according to both the Gerer and Lubavitcher Rebbe – the sin of the spies.

There is a voice within the tradition, most famously identified with R. Shimon bar Yochai, that regards engagement with the world as fundamentally incompatible with the heights of spirituality. But the mainstream held otherwise. “Torah study without an occupation will in the end fail and lead to sin” (*Avot* 2:2). “One who makes his mind up to study Torah and not to work but to live on charity, profanes the name of God, brings the Torah into contempt, extinguishes the light of religion, brings evil upon himself, and deprives himself of life hereafter” (Maimonides, *Laws of Torah Study* 3:10).

The spies did not want to contaminate Judaism by bringing it into contact with the real world. They sought the eternal childhood of God’s protection and the endless honeymoon of His all-embracing love. There is something noble about this desire, but also something profoundly irresponsible that demoralised the people and provoked God’s anger. For the Jewish project – the Torah as the constitution of the Jewish nation under the sovereignty of God – is about building a society in the land of Israel that so honours human dignity and freedom that it will one day lead the world to say, “Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people” (*Deut.* 4:6).

The Jewish task is not to fear the real world but to enter and transform it. That is what the spies did not understand. Do we – Jews of faith – understand it even now?



## Around the Shabbat Table

1. Why do you think the spies were so afraid after seeing the land’s beauty and bounty?
2. The spies want to stay in the desert - or even go back to Egypt. Can you think of a time when staying comfortable felt safer than growing?
3. What does ‘a Judaism engaged with the world’ look like to you?

● 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 <https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation-family-edition/shelach-lecha/the-real-world/>