



# Covenant & Conversation



Jonathan Sacks  
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

PINCHAS • פִּנְחָס

BASED ON THE TEACHINGS OF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS זצ"ל

COVENANT & CONVERSATION SUMMARY

## The Zealot

Pinchas is the first example of a zealot seen in the Torah. His story is later echoed in the life of Eliyahu HaNavi, the only other figure in Tanach described this way. But who was Pinchas? As we read last week in Parshat Balak, after Bilaam failed to curse the Israelites, he persuaded the Moabite women to seduce Israelite men, and then lead them into idolatry. God's anger flared, and a deadly plague began. Then, Zimri, a leader from the tribe of Shimon, publicly brought a Midianite woman into the camp and sinned with her in front of everyone. Perhaps sensing Moshe's hesitation - after all, he too had married a Midianite woman - Pinchas took action. He killed both Zimri and the woman, and the plague ended. God later gives Pinchas a "covenant of peace," with the message that he will never need to act with violence again.

The story of Eliyahu, our other zealot, begins with King Ahab and Queen Izevel, who introduced Baal worship into the kingdom. Eliyahu stepped in to discredit the Baal worshippers (For more on Eliyahu's story, please page 3).

Pinchas and Eliyahu were both religious heroes. They acted during crises when no one else dared. They risked their lives and acted for the sake of God and the people. **Yet the treatment of both zealots is deeply ambivalent.**

What can we learn from this? Should we be wary of zealotry, or should we look up to these men as role-models? After all, God Himself is called "zealous" in the Torah.

In the story of Eliyahu, God shows him a whirlwind, an earthquake, and a fire, and then comes a still, small voice. The message is that this quiet voice is where He is to be found. God then asks Eliyahu why he is there. Eliyahu answers, "I have been very zealous for the Lord." But he has not understood. God is showing him that He is not to be found

in violence, but in gentleness. God then tells Eliyahu to appoint Elisha as his successor. Pinchas and Eliyahu are both both gently rebuked by God for their zealous acts.

Why such moral caution? Because the zealot steps outside normal legal boundaries. Eliyahu offered a sacrifice outside the Temple, usually forbidden. Pinchas was neither a king nor a judge, yet he took justice into his own hands. Jewish law allows this only in the most urgent cases - and only as a last resort. Halachically, Pinchas' act is lawful but not encouraged. The Talmud calls this halachah

*ve-ein morin kein* - "a law that is not taught."

For if Zimri had turned and killed Pinchas in self-defence, he would not be guilty.

If Pinchas had asked a court if he could act, they would have said no. And if he had waited to strike until they were no longer in the act of sinning, it would have been considered murder. A zealot is in effect acting on behalf of God by acting out of righteous vengeance. As Rashi says, commenting on the phrase, "Pinchas ... has turned My anger away from the Israelites by being zealous with My zeal."

He "executed My vengeance and showed the anger I should have shown" (Rashi to Bamidbar 25:11). This is where we must be careful. As Jews we are told to "walk in God's ways"

and emulate the attributes we learn from Him. "Just as He is merciful and compassionate, so you be merciful and compassionate." But this does not apply to vengeance. God may judge without trial - we may not. For what if we are wrong? **There are forms of justice that belong to God alone.**

The zealot walks a dangerous path. Only the holiest may take it, and only once in a lifetime, when the entire people are at risk and no other option exists. **Nothing in religious life is more risk-laden than zeal, and as God taught Eliyahu, He is not to be found in the use of force but in the still, small voice that turns the sinner from sin. As for vengeance, that belongs to God alone.**

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



### In a Nutshell

Pinchas, Aharon's grandson, is rewarded with a covenant of peace and the priesthood for his zealous act of killing Zimri and a Midianite woman. In a census, 601,730 men aged twenty to sixty are counted. God instructs Moshe to divide the Land of Israel by lottery. The daughters of Tzelofchad successfully petition to get their father's portion of the land, establishing a new law of inheritance. Moshe appoints Yehoshua as his successor. Our Parsha concludes with a detailed list of the daily offerings and additional *korbanot* for Shabbat, Rosh Chodesh, and the major *chaggim* throughout the year.

## Around the Shabbat Table

1. How do you tell the difference between doing what's right and just acting out of anger?
2. Why might someone like Pinchas not be chosen as a leader, even if they did something heroic?
3. What makes a good leader?





# Covenant & Conversation



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

There is a time and a place for zealotry, but those moments are exceedingly rare. Zealots helped destroy Jerusalem by fighting one another instead of the Romans. In this case, though each man was they were convinced they acted for justice, their zealotry was misplaced. Furthermore, shedding blood is not compatible with holy service - even King David was not allowed to build the Temple for this reason.

This is why, as Rabbi Menahem Mendel of Kotzk noted, a zealot cannot be a leader. Though both Pinchas and Eliyahu acted boldly to defend God's honour during times of national crisis and were praised for their courage, they were also

gently rebuked. Pinchas executed judgment without trial, which is not something we should - in any normal circumstances, be doing. Eliyahu was later taught that God is found not in fire or fury but in a still, small voice.

A zealot acts out of righteous anger, but anger nonetheless. Halachically, their actions are recognised but not encouraged; zealotry is seen as dangerously close to being lawless. True leadership and holiness lie in restraint, compassion, and adherence to process - not in righteous violence.

• In which circumstances is it justified to act in a zealous way, like Eliyahu and Pinchas?



## Parsha Activity

### Simon Feels

A variation of Simon Says, here the commands are feelings or reactions: "Simon says, act really annoyed!" or "Simon says, look super proud!" or "Feel like you're standing up to a bully!" This version of Simon Says lets you express big feelings in silly ways, and reminds us that standing up for what's right doesn't always mean being serious; sometimes, it just means showing your passion with courage and heart.

*What feelings were easiest for you to express in the game? What emotions are more challenging to show?*



## Crossing a Line

Noa was never sure what Jordan might do next. He seemed to think he was the most important student in seventh grade. The little things he did - tossing other kids' footballs out of reach, laughing at kids in class if they made a mistake, and pushing past the smaller ones on the school bus - bothered her to no end, but she knew there was nothing she could do about it.

One day at lunch, he jumped in front of the last four kids who had been waiting patiently and helped himself to all the cookies left on the counter. Every last one. Yael, the quiet new girl, surprised everyone

by speaking up. "Um, Jordan ... I think that's really unfair." Jordan turned, towering over her. "Who cares what *you* think?"

Noa's heart pounded. She didn't know Yael very well, but she knew it wasn't right to let her stand alone against a bully. "I do," she said. "Yael's right. You can't just push in like that. Plus you took all five cookies. It should be one for everyone." "It's lunch, not the law," Jordan scoffed.

Fingers barely trembling, Noa moved to the front of the line and faced Jordan. She picked up four of the five cookies from his tray, and



handed them to the waiting kids, nodding to Yael as she did so.

Jordan scoffed and walked off. And that was that. Noa hadn't yelled. She hadn't used violence. She'd simply taken a step forward for justice. Sometimes, she thought as she sat back down, it's important to speak up. Then she smiled at Yael, who came to sit beside her.

• In what kinds of social situations is it harder to do the right thing?



# Covenant & Conversation

FAMILY EDITION

Jonathan Sacks  
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

ON THE HAFTARA • WRITTEN BY RABBI BARRY KLEINBERG

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

HAFTARA SUMMARY



## The Haftara in a Nutshell

I Kings 18:46-19:21

This week's Haftara follows the prophet Elijah (Eliyahu) after his dramatic victory over the prophets of Baal.

Empowered by the Lord, Elijah outruns King Ahab's chariot to Yizre'el. But when Queen Jezabel (Izevel) threatens his life, Elijah flees in fear to the wilderness, where he becomes despondent and prays for death. An angel provides him with food and water, and he journeys for forty days to Mount Horev.

Reaching Horev, Elijah hides in a

cave and experiences a theophany: God is not in wind, earthquake, or fire, but in a still, small voice. God reassures Elijah and gives him a mission: to anoint Hazael as king of Aram, Yehu as king of Israel, and Elisha as his prophetic successor.

Elijah leaves the cave and finds Elisha ploughing and calls him to follow him. Elisha leaves everything behind to follow Elijah, marking the beginning of a new prophetic generation.

Do you know any of the miraculous stories about Elijah and Elisha?



## Points to Ponder

1. Does the number of days of Elijah's journey to Horev remind you of anything?
2. How can God be in a "still, small voice"? What does this mean?

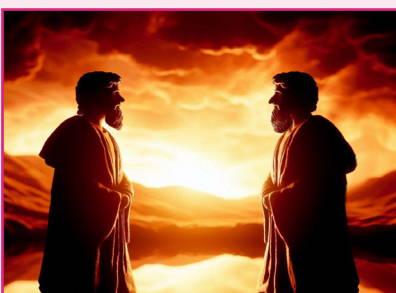


TANACH CONNECTIONS



## Parsha and Haftara Links

The clear connection between the Parsha and Haftara this week is zeal, with both Pinchas and Eliyahu displaying unprecedented zeal for Hashem. In rabbinic literature it is also worth noting that "Pinchas is Elijah". It is not entirely clear what this means. It could simply mean that both men exhibited the



same qualities. Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch states that the spirit of zeal displayed by Pinchas lived on immortally in Eliyahu. One standout difference between the two zealots, however, is that Pinchas is rewarded whilst Eliyahu is not.

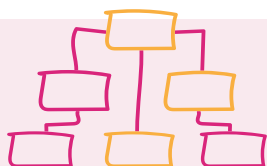
Another link between the Parsha and Haftara is a request to God to appoint a new leader. Moshe requests that Hashem appoint a new leader for after his death. Eliyahu asks for his life to be taken and that Elisha be anointed as his successor.

However, there are some notable differences between the two narratives. Moshe is told he will die, whereas Eliyahu asks for his life

to be taken. Moshe requests that a successor be appointed, as opposed to Eliyahu who is commanded to appoint a successor.

The way Moshe and Eliyahu's lives end are also interesting to compare. As the Torah ends, Moshe dies on a mountaintop, and it is noted that nobody knows, or will ever know, the exact location of his grave (Dev. 34:6). Eliyahu is taken up to heaven in a whirlwind, accompanied by a chariot and horses of fire. It is said that he will one day return to prepare the way for Mashiach. He also appears in many aggadic stories, a guiding presence with wisdom to share.





# On the Book of Kings

When Eliyahu served as prophet to the Jewish People, it was a period of deep religious crisis and political instability. After King Solomon's reign, the kingdom split into northern (Israel) and southern (Judah) kingdoms. King Jeroboam I institutionalised the idolatry of golden calves, and by King Ahab's reign, idolatry was no longer just tolerated, it was dominant. This is likely why Elijah took such a forceful approach. He saw the need for a dramatic change.

Rabbi Sacks often quoted the verse from this week's Haftara that God is to be found in the 'still, small voice.' He wrote that **"God was saying to Elijah: false prophets believe in power... Elijah had to learn that zealotry is profoundly dangerous... [It] wins the battle but not the war. It creates fear, not love. It risks desecrating the very cause it seeks to sanctify. Faith speaks in an altogether different voice, urging us, in Robert Kennedy's fine phrase, to 'tame the savageness of man and make gentle the life of this world'.**

**"Religion fails when it seeks to impose truth by force, whatever the truth, whatever the force. Only when it divests itself of earthly power does faith learn to speak the healing truths of heaven..."**

**"Until we understand this, good men and women will do evil for altruistic reasons, turning people away from the very God they seek to serve. The purity of their motives will not cleanse the blood they seek to shed."**



## Further Ponderings

How can we teach people to hear God, not in the whirlwind but in the "still, small voice"?



## Quote of the Week

**"From time to time we need to step back from the noise and hubbub of the social world and create in our hearts the stillness of the desert where, within the silence, we can hear the kol demah dakah, the still, small voice of God, telling us we are loved, we are heard, we are embraced by God's everlasting arms, we are not alone."**

*The Sound of Silence, Bamidbar, 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