



Covenant & Conversation



Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

MATOT-MASEI • מטות-מסעי

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

COVENANT & CONVERSATION SUMMARY

The Prophetic Voice

During the Three Weeks (from the fast of 17 Tammuz until the fast of Tisha b'Av) we remember and mourn the destruction of the Beit HaMikdash and the second Beit HaMikdash. During this annual period, we always read powerful messages from the prophets, specifically from Yirmiyahu and Yishayahu, as our Haftara readings. **At perhaps no other time of the year are we so acutely aware of the enduring force of ancient Israel's great visionaries.**

The prophets had no power. They were not kings or members of the royal court. They weren't elected by vote, and they were often disliked in their time. Yirmiyahu, for example, was arrested, beaten, and almost killed for speaking his mind. But while kings ruled for a short time, the words of prophets lived on and shaped Jewish history and thought.

The prophets weren't special because they could predict the future. What made them unique was their ability to warn people about what could happen if they didn't change their ways. They didn't bless or curse people like others did. Instead, they warned about the consequences of turning away from God and from moral behaviour.

One of the most important things about the prophets was how they saw history. Unlike others who saw time as moving in circles - like the seasons that repeat every year without any change to the cycle - the prophets saw history as a drama between God and humans. The consequences were clear. If the people were faithful to God, they would succeed. But if they turned away from God, disaster would follow. This is what Yirmiyahu kept telling his people.

Another key idea we can learn from the prophets was the link between belief in one God (monotheism) and morality.



In a Nutshell

Matot-Masei is oftentimes read as a double Parsha. Moshe teaches the tribal leaders the laws about annulling vows. Bnai Yisrael wage war against Midian in response to their earlier scheme to morally corrupt the nation; the spoils are divided among the soldiers, the people, the Leviim, and the Kohen Gadol. The tribes of Reuven and Gad, later joined by half of Menashe, request to settle east of the Jordan. Moshe agrees, but they must first join the battles in the west. The Parsha lists 42 journeys from Egypt, outlines Israel's borders, sets cities of refuge, and resolves inheritance laws.

The prophets believed that idolatry and the worship of many gods, didn't just lead to false beliefs - it led to bad behaviour. In a world where many gods fought each other, people believed that power was more important than kindness. The strongest survived, and the weak didn't matter. But the prophets strongly disagreed. For them, the most important thing about God wasn't His power, but His justice. Because God saved Israel, they owed Him loyalty. If they turned away from God, they also became dishonest and

cruel to each other. Yirmiyahu once said it was hard to find even one honest person in Jerusalem. The consequence was exile.

The prophets also believed that a nation's strength didn't come from its army or leaders. Instead, it came from how morally good the people were.

They didn't talk much about politics or government. What mattered most to them was how people treated one another and stayed true to God.

Without that, no amount of power could save them. Jeremiah said people would turn to false gods for help, but those gods would offer false comfort.

Even though Jeremiah is often called the prophet of doom, he was also a prophet of hope. While others gave up, he believed the Jewish people would return to their land and rebuild.

In fact, during a time of war, he even bought a field to show his belief in the future. He never lost faith in God, even when he lost faith in people.

Prophecy ended during the Second Temple Era. But the prophetic truths live on. By being faithful to God, people stay faithful to one another. **Only by being open to a power greater than themselves do people become greater than themselves. Only by understanding the deep forces that shape history can a people defeat the ravages of history. It took a long time for us to learn these truths, return to the land, and re-enter the arena of history. We must never forget them again.**

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

Around the Shabbat Table

1. The prophets said strength comes from being good, not from being powerful. What do they mean?
2. How can someone feel both hopeless and hopeful at the same time, like Jeremiah did?
3. Why do you think we read these heavy prophecies during the Three Weeks? What do they help us remember?





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ON THE PARSHA • WRITTEN BY SARA LAMM

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



Delving Deeper

Rabbi Sacks offers three ways that time is typically understood. With **cyclical time** there is the cycle of birth, growth, decline and death, and the ever-turning of the seasons. Cyclical time is time as it occurs in nature. Some trees have long lives; most fruit flies have short ones; but all that lives, dies. The species endures, individual members do not.

With **linear time** there is an inexorable sequence of cause and effect.

Finally, there are some who view time as a mere **sequence of events** with no underlying plot or theme.

Each of these has its place, the first in biology, the second in physics, the third in secular history, but none was

time as the prophets understood it. The prophets saw time as the arena in which the great drama between God and humanity was played out, especially in the history of Israel. In **covenantal time**, if Israel was faithful to its mission, its covenant, then it would flourish. If it was unfaithful it would fail. It would suffer defeat and exile. That is what Yirmiyahu never tired of telling his contemporaries.

The prophets understood time not as a cycle or fate, but as a story shaped by choices. Their message still stands today: when we stay rooted in faith and ethics, we become stronger than history itself.

• What makes a message last beyond its time?



Parsha Activity

Time Guide

One person takes on the Time Guide role and announces a future year - real or silly (like 2095 or "when people live on the moon"). Everyone acts out what life is like in that future space, thinking about specifics like how we will travel, eat, play, or learn. The Time Guide asks follow-up questions to help players imagine details and possibilities, to continue building the scene. Then a new Time Guide steps into the role with a new era to announce.

This should be a creative, open-ended discussion, and perfect for sparking futuristic fun!



Virtual Strangers

No one, not even a prophet, could have predicted what 2020 would bring. As COVID swept around the world, offices, schools and shuls closed, and people had to find creative ways to stay connected.

In the city of Baltimore, USA, at the height of this turbulence, Ari and Sarah became parents to a baby girl. They would have loved to announce her name in their synagogue, but of course it was not possible. Their shul - like all the shuls - was closed.

Desperate for a minyan, they searched far and wide, and finally found one 20,000 km away in Perth, Australia, where lockdowns had been lifted. Carmel, a Jewish high

school, was holding daily prayers and offered to host the baby naming during Shacharit.

And so it came to pass that Australian students were the first to hear the American parents announce their baby's new name on a video call. As the new father, Ari, said, "May her name be called in Israel... Liba!" the students sang Siman Tov u'Mazal Tov and broke into a dance in honour of baby Liba.

Then Mr Lawrence, the teacher leading the prayers, turned back to the emotional parents who had watched all this through the screen. He wished them mazal tov and told them, "We are with you in heart and



soul. *Am Yisrael Chai!*"

It was a year defined by distance, but that day, a Jewish school in Perth welcomed strangers, celebrated a new life, and embodied the values of unity and kindness. Just two weeks later, Mr Lawrence learned that the baby was actually related to him - she was a distant cousin by marriage! But he had already known that they were not really strangers, for we are all, in truth, one big Jewish family.



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



The Haftara in a Nutshell

Matot - Jeremiah 1:1-2:3

Jeremiah 1:1-2:3 introduces the prophet Jeremiah, son of Hilkiyahu, from the priestly town of Anatot. His prophetic ministry begins during the reign of King Yoshiyahu and continues through the fall of Jerusalem. God calls Jeremiah to be a prophet to the nations, even before his birth, but Jeremiah protests that he is too young and unskilled. God assures him, saying, "Do not be afraid, for I am with you," and touches his mouth to give him Divine words. Jeremiah is commissioned to uproot and plant, to destroy and to build.

God then shows him two visions: a branch of an almond tree (symbolising vigilance) and a boiling pot facing north (foretelling invasion from the north). In 2:1-3, God recalls Israel's early devotion, describing them as His "first fruits" - holy and beloved

- though soon to be contrasted with their later unfaithfulness. The passage sets the tone for Jeremiah's mission of warning and hope.

Masei - Jeremiah 2:4-28

Ashkenazim end on 3:4, Sephardim add 4:1-2, and Minhag Anglia read all of the above. Yemenites read Isaiah 1:21-20

Jeremiah 2:4-28 is a prophetic indictment in which God, through Jeremiah, rebukes Israel for abandoning Him after all He has done for them. God recalls how He led them out of Egypt and through the desert, yet they turned away and defiled the land He gave them. The priests, rulers, and prophets are all accused of spiritual failure - they no longer seek the Lord but follow worthless idols, becoming



Point to Ponder

Why do you think we read the Haftara from Masei rather than the usual Haftara for an upcoming Rosh Chodesh?

Hint: think about *which* Rosh Chodesh it is.

worthless themselves.

God questions what fault the people found in Him to justify such betrayal. Israel is compared to a wild vine that has become corrupt. Despite suffering from foreign oppression, Israel refuses to return to God. They seek help from Egypt and Assyria, demonstrating misplaced trust. God condemns their idolatry, saying their own idols will not save them in times of trouble. The passage is a powerful call to recognise and repent from spiritual infidelity and ingratitude.



Parsha and Haftara Links

As this week is Shabbat Rosh Chodesh, we would normally read the Haftara from Isaiah 66:1-24. Please see the Family Edition on Parshat Noach for an overview of this Haftara. However, on Shabbat Rosh Chodesh Av we read the Haftara from Parshat Masei.

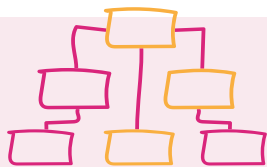
In this week's Parsha, there is an emphasis on unity within the people, which is also a key theme for our Haftara. The tribes who wish to settle far from the others agree to

first of all support the rest of Bnei Yisrael as they enter the land and prepare to stake their claim.

However, this week's Haftara has not been selected as a counterpart to our Parsha but rather as a message for us at this time of mourning. Now that we have entered the Three Weeks, our Haftara matches the mood and message of this time period. As Rabbi Sacks explains, "**Masei always occurs at the heart of the Three Weeks. This is the**

time when we engage in an act of collective recall of our two greatest defeats as a nation."





On the Book of Jeremiah

Many people think of prophecy as a prediction of the future that will come true, no matter what we try to do to avoid it. This is the approach to prophecy as seen in Greek myths, and other ancient stories, but this is not the Jewish way.

Rabbi Sacks famously wrote this about the role of the prophets: “**What was distinctive about the prophet was not that he foretold the future. The ancient world was full of such people: soothsayers, oracles, readers of runes, shamans and other diviners, each of whom claimed inside track with the forces that govern fate and “shape our ends, rough-hew them how we will.”**

Judaism has no time for such people. The Torah forbids “who practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, or casts spells, or who is a medium or spiritist or who consults the dead” (Devarim 18:10-11). It disbelieves such practices because it believes in human freedom.

The future is not pre-scripted. It depends on us and the choices we make. If a prediction comes true it has succeeded; if a prophecy comes true it has failed. The prophet tells of the future that will happen if we do not heed the danger and mend our ways. He (or she – there were seven biblical prophetesses) does not predict; he or she *warns*.”



Further Ponderings

What would you do if you knew a terrible outcome that would occur if your friends did not change their ways? Would you be nervous to warn them?



Quote of the Week

“Only by being faithful to God do people stay faithful to one another. Only by being open to a power greater than themselves do people become greater than themselves.”

The Prophetic Voice, Matot, Covenant & Conversation

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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