



Covenant & Conversation



Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

DEVARIM • דברים

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

COVENANT & CONVERSATION SUMMARY

Profits and Prophets

There are few more blazing passages in religious literature than the first chapter of Isaiah, with the "vision" (or "chazon") that gives its name to the Shabbat before Tisha B'Av, the saddest day of the Jewish year. It is more than powerful poetry, and conveys one of the great prophetic truths, that **a society cannot flourish without honesty and justice.** This is an eternal truth.

The Talmud (Shabbat 31a) says that when we reach the World to Come, we will be instructed to reflect on how we spent our lives, with five revealing questions to answer. As important as prioritising Torah learning is, this is not the first question we will be asked (although it is one of the five). The very first question will be: "Did you act honestly [*b'emunah*] in all your business dealings?"

The rabbis may have drawn this insight from Isaiah, who lamented Jerusalem before it fell:

"See how the faithful city has become a disgrace! ... Your silver has become dross, your best wine diluted with water. Your rulers are rebels, companions of thieves... They do not defend the cause of the fatherless."

Jerusalem's fate was sealed by the failure of its residents to act honestly. People diluted the wine they sold, and mixed with base metals. Leaders chased bribes, and the vulnerable were ignored. Isaiah doesn't reveal any new information here; he gives voice to what people already sensed: widespread corruption was destroying public trust.

Isaiah taught that dishonesty and greed eat away at society. They divide rich and poor, breed cynicism, and break down the will to work for the common good. Accepting corruption in the leaders was another sign of the moral decline.

Even religion, Isaiah said, can become part of the problem.

People begin to believe that attending services or offering *korbanot* can cancel out unethical conduct. But God will not be bribed:

"The multitude of your sacrifices - what are they to Me? ... Stop bringing meaningless offerings! ... I cannot bear your evil assemblies. ... When you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide My eyes from you."

Once people become corrupt and adept at deceiving others, they convince themselves they can even deceive God. But when business and politics abandon moral standards, society becomes unbalanced and unstable. As the Sages said: *adam bahul al mamono* - "money makes us do wild things." Eventually it all comes crashing down, and those who suffer most are often those who deserve it least.

Isaiah's prophetic voice speaks to our times. The market economy is and must be a moral enterprise. Absent that, and eventually it will fail. Without trust, even the most brilliant financial systems can fall apart.

The key word is *emunah* - faithfulness, integrity, trust. Isaiah twice calls Jerusalem *kiryat ne'emanah*, the "faithful city." That's why the Sages said the first question in heaven is: Did you conduct your business *b'emunah*?

A society built only on contracts and regulations, rather than conscience, will never truly be safe. There will always be those who find loopholes. The strongest safeguard is a moral one: the voice of God within, telling us not to do what we know is wrong.

Isaiah's warning still echoes. When morality disappears and self-interest rules economics and politics, trust fails and the fabric of society unravels. That is how all great superpowers began their decline. There is no exception. Which is why the evidence shows that - in the long term - **it is sounder to follow prophets than profits.**

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

In a Nutshell

Parshat Devarim begins with Moshe addressing Bnai Yisrael on the first day of Shvat, 37 days before his death. He reviews their 40 year journey, reminding them of their missteps and urging them to follow Hashem's commandments in the land they are about to enter. Moshe recalls appointing judges, the sin of the spies, and Hashem's decree that even he will not enter the land. He recounts recent events, including battles with Sichon and Og and the settlement of Reuven, Gad, and part of Menasheh. Moshe encourages Yehoshua, assuring him that Hashem will fight for them.

Around the Shabbat Table

1. Can you think of a time when you experienced someone's dishonesty affecting a group or team? What happened next?
2. When no one is watching, what helps you decide what's right or wrong?
3. Can you think of a leader who you trust? What makes them trustworthy?





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

Towards the end of the 20th century, American banks began to engage in complicated, dishonest practices, particularly when it came to the way they set up mortgages on homes. They were warned that this could lead to mass financial destruction. But profits were rising, so no-one listened.

In 2008, the inevitable financial crisis came. Many people couldn't pay back their loans, and 10 million people in the U.S. lost their homes in the years that followed. House prices crashed. Suddenly, investments that had been called "safe" were worthless. Banks had borrowed money based on these loans, and so they crashed.

It was the trust that really broke

things apart. Because banks didn't trust each other anymore, they stopped lending money. This froze the economy. People couldn't get loans, businesses closed, and jobs disappeared. Around the world, over 30 million people lost their jobs, and millions more were plunged into debt. The whole thing showed what can happen when people are greedy and ignore the risks. It was the worst financial crisis since the 1930s.

Yishayahu's searing rebuke of Jerusalem exposes a timeless truth: a society cannot thrive without integrity. When trust erodes through deceit, greed, and exploitation, collapse follows.



Parsha Activity

Trusty Messenger

Ask for a volunteer to leave the room. The others then agree upon a silly task, like "Give Mum a spoon, and sing." When the Messenger returns, s/he must perform their task without any verbal instructions. The other players can only direct the Messenger by applauding when the action is veering onto the right track, and cheering when any section of the task is correctly performed. Everyone must be encouraging to the Messenger, rooting for them.

What different kinds of trust are being played out here?



False or True?

There is a place known far and wide. Sometimes it is called "The Faithful City". It earned its name many generations ago, for its people were known for their honesty, fairness, and compassion. Markets were always bustling, full of banners, cheery voices, friendly faces, and fair trade. The leaders were respected, even beloved, and citizens helped one another without question.

But over time, something shifted. The silver traders discovered how to stretch their profits by mixing in cheaper metals and raising prices. The winemakers watered down their barrels of wine. Judges began to favour those who brought them gifts. Although no one said it out loud, people started to notice the

shift. They feared being taken advantage of and the changes seeped into other behaviours. Help for those stranded on the road was no longer likely. Correct change was often 'mishandled' at stalls, and lost property was rarely returned.

"It's not right," one merchant whispered to her son as she shortchanged a customer, "but if I don't do it, someone else will."

The city still looked the same on the outside. People still lit their lamps, gathered for festivals, and sang the old songs. But behind closed doors, the poor were ignored, the powerful grew bolder, and trust - once the city's strongest currency - grew scarce. Everyone kept going. The markets stayed open. The coins



still changed hands. And maybe, just maybe, each person wondered in the quiet of their own mind if what they were doing was right. But no one said anything. Not yet. The city still called itself Faithful. And the banners still waved, though if you looked closely, the edges were starting to fray.

What would it take for someone to speak up? And would anyone listen?

• How might this story end if things continue along this trajectory?



Covenant & Conversation



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

Isaiah 1:1-27 (Ashkenazim and Sephardim)
Isaiah 1:21-31 (Yemenites)

Isaiah 1:1-27 opens the book of Isaiah (Yishayahu) with a powerful prophetic message against Judah and Jerusalem, delivered during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. God laments that His children have rebelled despite His care. The nation is morally corrupt - full of injustice, violence, and false worship. Religious rituals are condemned as meaningless without righteousness. God calls for repentance: "Wash yourselves clean... cease to do evil, learn to do good."

Through Isaiah, God urges the

people to pursue justice, defend the oppressed, and care for orphans and widows. If they repent, they will be forgiven and blessed; if not, they will face judgment.

Yet the chapter ends with hope: Zion will be purified through judgment, and righteousness will be restored. God promises that justice will someday dwell in Jerusalem once more; the repentant will be redeemed, while rebels will be broken.

This message blends rebuke with a call to renewal.



Point to Ponder

Don't all people stray sometimes?
Why do judges need *absolute* integrity?



Parsha and Haftara Links

This week's Haftara is always read on the Shabbat before Tisha b'Av and thus has no direct link with the Parsha, for it was selected because of its relevance in the Jewish calendar.

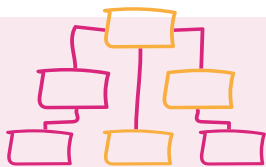
We can nevertheless find a connection to this week's Parsha. Moshe mentions in Parshat Devarim that the *shoftim* (judges) of Bnei Yisrael must be people of absolute integrity (Devarim 1:16-17). This is paralleled with Isaiah's prophecy of the restoration of the judges (Isaiah 1:26-27).

A note from Rabbi Sacks on the *shoftim* from the Tanach period:
"The 'judges' referred to were not

mere judges in the contemporary sense. They were military leaders who emerged from time to time when the Israelites – then a loose confederation of tribes rather than a nation – came under attack from enemy forces. One of the most successful was Gideon, who led the people to victory against the Midianites. So impressive was his campaign that the people asked him to become their king. He replied, in words that go to the heart of the matter, 'I will not rule over you, nor will my son rule over you. The Lord will rule over you' (Judges 8:23).

Incidentally, Bnai Yisrael are not the only nation expected to elect judges in the legal sense. Rambam lays it out thus: "[All peoples] are required to establish judges and officers in every area of habitation, to rule in accordance with the enforcement of the other six [Noachide] laws, to warn the citizenry concerning these laws and to punish any transgressor..." (Laws of Kings, 9, 14)

Why this emphasis on legal systems? Without judges and courts of justice, it is easy for a society to fall apart. And equally, if the courts are not upright in their morality, justice cannot be trusted.



On the Book of Devarim

As we begin the reading of this final book of the Torah, it is worth noting its significance.

Rabbi Sacks, in his introduction to the book of Devarim, discusses **“the place of Devarim in Tanach as a whole. It is the axis on which all Jewish history turns. Had the generation who left Egypt the faith and courage to enter the promised land, all Jewish history would turn on the revelation at Sinai. In fact, though, the episode of the spies showed that that generation lacked the spirit to do so. Therefore the critical moment came for the next generation, when Moses - at the end of his life - renewed the covenant with them as the condition of their inheritance of the land. The four previous books of the Torah lead up to this moment, and all the other books of Tanach are a commentary to it – an account of how it worked out in the course of time.**

“Devarim is the book of the covenant, the centre-point of Jewish theology, and the project it defines is unique. For it aims at nothing less than the construction of a society that would moralise its members, inspire others, and serve as a role-model of what might be achieved were humanity as a whole to worship the one God who made us all in His image.”



Further Ponderings

If you have an important message for a large group of people, how would you ensure that you include everyone when addressing them?



Quote of the Week

“God did not choose, nor did He make a covenant with, individuals as individuals – the righteous, the holy, the pure, the innocent, the upright. He made a covenant with an entire people, righteous and not-yet-righteous alike.”

The Birth of a Nation, Devarim, Covenant & Conversation

Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

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