



# Covenant & Conversation



Jonathan Sacks  
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

VA'ETCHANAN • ואתחנן

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

COVENANT & CONVERSATION SUMMARY

## A Tiny, Treasured People

There is a statement made toward the end of Va'etchanan that has far-reaching implications, though it is easily missed.

*The Lord did not set His affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you are the fewest of all peoples. (Devarim 7:7)*

This seems to contradict earlier parts of the Torah. In Bereishit, God promises Bnai Yisrael will be as numerous as the stars in the sky and the sand on the shore.

In Shemot we read how the small family of seventy who went down to Egypt became a vast people. Devarim, Hoshea, and King Shlomo all echo this analogy. So what does Moshe mean when he calls Israel "the fewest of all peoples"?

Targum Yonatan and Rashi interpret it as referring not to literal numbers, but to humility. Others like Rashbam and Chizkuni say Moshe means Israel is outnumbered by the nations they will face in Canaan, yet God will lead them to victory. Malbim adds that Moshe was warning Israelites not to justify intermarriage by saying it would grow their numbers. **God is not interested in numbers. He is interested in faithfulness.**

Rabbeinu Bachya, quoting Rambam, notes that a king would normally choose the largest nation, to bring him glory. God did the opposite. Thus Israel should know they are a people extraordinarily blessed, for God chose them despite their smallness to be His *am segulah*, His special treasure. Rabbeinu Bachya also resolves the contradiction of Moshe, who calls Israel both the smallest of peoples, and also "as many as the stars," explaining that God would still have chosen Israel *even if* they had been the smallest of nations.

But Jews have always been a small people. **Today, we are less than 0.2% of the world's population.** Partly due to the heavy toll of exile, massacres, and forced conversions. Partly

because Jews never sought to convert others. Had they done so, their numbers might have rivalled Christianity or Islam. For instance, many Romans in the first century admired aspects of the Jewish faith and way of life, and had Jews recruited them, they would have grown considerably. But we could not compromise the covenant, and the laws that they wanted to reject. Throughout history, the Jewish people remained loyal to its path, even at the cost of size.

So why has the Jewish people remained so small? Perhaps God is teaching the world that you do not need to be numerous to be great. Nations are not judged by their size, but by their contribution to humanity. The Jewish People, despite being relatively tiny, have made an impact. They've fought injustice, cured disease, and lifted others through education and hope. Jewish prophets, poets, sages, codifiers, rebbes, teachers, writers, artists, doctors, lawyers, and innovators have all made their mark. For you don't need numbers to enlarge the moral and spiritual horizons of humankind. You need values: human dignity, hope, education, responsibility, and the courage to enact ideals in the real world.

Nowhere is this more true today than in the people of Israel in the State of Israel - often misunderstood and criticised, yet year after year achieving wonders in medicine, agriculture, technology, and the arts. But whenever we feel fearful about Israel's challenges, surrounded by large, hostile nations, we should remember what Moshe teaches in this week's Parsha: "...you are the fewest of all peoples."

Small? Yes. Surrounded by powerful nations? Yes again. But this small people has outlived empires, bringing a message of hope to the world: **You don't have to be large to be great. If you are open to something greater than yourself, you will become greater than yourself. Israel today still carries that message to the world.**

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

### In a Nutshell

God denies Moshe's pleas to enter the Land of Israel. Instead, He instructs Moshe to view it from a mountain. Moshe continues recounting Bnai Yisrael's journey, highlighting the Exodus and the Giving of the Torah at Har Sinai, unparalleled events in human history, when the people heard God's Voice. He warns that future generations will turn to idolatry, leading to exile, but assures that they will eventually return to God. He repeats the Ten Commandments and introduces the Shema, teaching us that love of God, Torah study, tefillin, and mezuzot are all central expressions of faith.

## Around the Shabbat Table

1. Can you think of a time when being different felt like a strength instead of a weakness?
2. When have you seen someone stand by their values even when it wasn't popular?
3. How does Israel's story inspire you today?





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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

Moshe's statement about the size of Bnai Yisrael reframes how we understand our role in the world: God did not choose us because of our great size or strength, quite the opposite. While elsewhere the Torah celebrates Israel's future numerical growth, here Moshe reminds us that greatness was never about numbers. Instead, it's about purpose, faithfulness, and moral clarity.

Throughout history, Jews have chosen to remain small and true to their mission. It was never our goal to convince others to convert to Judaism. Had we chosen to convert others, our numbers today would have been closer to Christianity (2.2 billion) or Islam (1.3 billion). But that

would have changed Judaism to be something different altogether.

Earlier in Va'etchanan, Bnai Yisrael are about to enter the land of Canaan where seven nations dwell. Moshe warns them against intermarrying with the residents, not for racial but for religious reasons: "they will turn your children away from following Me to serve other gods." Malbim interprets this verse as Moshe saying to the Israelites, "Don't justify outmarriage on the grounds that it will increase the number of Jews. God is not interested in numbers. He is interested in quality, not quantity."

For a tiny, special people can have an impact beyond measure.



## Parsha Activity

### Underdogs

In our Underdogs game, players face off in uneven matchups. One player will be asked to stacking cups with one hand versus the next player using two cups, or a hopping versus walking race. The "underdog" always goes first, and the others try to beat their score or their time. The underdog will be at a disadvantage each time, but winning doesn't always come from strength, but from focus, creativity, and courage.

*What surprised you when playing this game?*



## David stepped up

Bnai Yisrael were frozen with fear. Every day, a giant named Goliath marched out from the Plishit camp and shouted across the valley, daring someone to fight him. He was massive, covered in bronze, with a spear like a tree trunk, and no one wanted to be the one to take him on. King Sha'ul wished for a hero, but it seemed impossible that any one man could be equal to such a giant.

Then a boy called David stepped up. He wasn't a warrior. He wasn't even old enough to be in the army. He was just a shepherd boy, sent by his father to bring food to his older brothers. But when he heard Goliath mocking God and the people of Israel, David couldn't stay quiet.

"I'll fight him," the shepherd boy

said. They laughed. His brothers rolled their eyes. However, he was the sole volunteer, and their only chance.

King Sha'ul offered him armour, but when he put it on, David couldn't barely walk in the heavy, stiff suit. Nor could he lift the sword he was offered. So David selected five smooth stones from the ground, and went out just as he was, carrying his sling.

As he approached, Goliath looked him up and down, sneering. "You're just a boy!" David stood tall. Well, as tall as he could. He mustered all his courage and called out, "You come with a sword and spear. I come with the name of God."

Then David put a stone in his



sling, took aim, and let it fly. One hit. Right in the forehead. With an almighty crash, Goliath toppled to the ground.

David was victorious, and the Bnai Yisrael could not have been more relieved. A great cheer rose all around, and hearts were lifted.

Sometimes, the smallest person carries the greatest power, not in strength, but in faith.

• Can you think of any other stories in Tanach where the theme of "tiny but mighty" is prevalent?



# 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

Isaiah 40:1-26 (Ashkenazim and Sephardim)  
Isaiah 40:1-27 and 41:17 (Yemenites)

Isaiah 40:1–26 begins a new section of the book, offering comfort and hope to Israel after suffering and exile. God declares that the people's sins have been forgiven, and their punishment completed. A voice calls to prepare the way for the Lord, who is coming in glory. All humanity will see His revelation.

The passage emphasises the power and reliability of God's word compared to the frailty of human life. God is portrayed as a mighty shepherd,

tenderly gathering His people. The prophet affirms God's greatness as Creator and ruler of the universe, far above nations and idols.

Through vivid imagery - measuring the seas, heavens, and mountains - Isaiah portrays God's infinite wisdom and strength. The message reassures Israel that despite their weaknesses, God remains sovereign and everlasting, and He will lead and sustain them with unmatched care and power.



## Points to Ponder

1. Why does the prophet use natural imagery to portray God's qualities?
2. How does the imagery of a shepherd and a flock help us to understand God's relationship with the Jewish people?



## Parsha and Haftara Links

The main theme connecting Parshat Va'etchanan to the Haftara seems to be that of opposition to idol worship. Va'etchanan contains several warnings given by Moshe relating to idolatry. The Jewish people are warned against making a graven image, against worshipping useless idols, and



against going after other gods. They are also commanded to destroy all idolatrous symbols. In the Haftara, Isaiah talks about the absurdity of representing God in the form of an idol and the utter folly of such worship, underlining a practice that has long been forbidden.

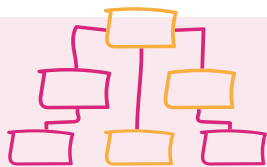
A further link between the Parsha and the Haftara is found in the comfort that the prophet delivers at the end of the Haftara. This mirrors Moshe's words in the Parsha regarding God's compassion and mercy. Moshe says, "*your God is a compassionate God, who will not fail you nor let you perish; He will not forget the covenant made on oath with*

*your fathers*" (Devarim 4:31).

In a pre-Rosh Hashanah shiur, Rabbi Sacks said, "**I call Isaiah the Poet Laureate of Hope.**" In a striking inversion to the sin of making idols, he went on to discuss how Isaiah, at the end of his book, defends the people for all their sins, comparing God to a potter who created the people out of clay, flaws and all. "**We're Your creation, we're Your children, we are what You made us. We are merely the clay and You are the Potter.**"

- Why do you think we are commanded to destroy idols? Surely not worshipping them would be enough?





# On **idolatry** in our times

Throughout this year-long study of Haftarat, we have seen the prophets repeatedly warn the people against turning away from God and towards idolatry. The warnings and punishments, atonements and periods of peace are a consistent cycle throughout Nach, to the point where we might question why the people never truly learned the lesson.

Rabbi Sacks noted the relevance of idolatry, even in modern times: **“Idol worship and magical thinking happen when we believe some institution or person will bend the world to our desires, making problems vanish without effort on our part. The idol can be liberal democracy, the consumer society, science, medicine, or genetic engineering. Religious faith says all these things can be a blessing or a curse, depending on whether they are used with humility, restraint, concern for the common good, and care for long-term consequences.”**

**“Religion is not myth or magic. It is the recognition of how small we are in the scheme of things, and how great is our responsibility to others. It is the still, small voice reminding us that there is no achievement without sacrifice, no freedom without self-restraint. Those who worship the idols of the age perish with the age, while the worship of eternity lives on.”**



## Further Ponderings

What is one thing you could do each week to increase your support of others, to utilise your freedom and serve the common good?



## ≡ ☞ Quote of the Week

**“Humility involves the recognition that there is something greater than us to whom we are accountable. Restraint means that not everything we *can* do we *should* do.”**

*Challenging the Idols of the Secular Age*  
Published in *The Times*, 15th June 2013

*Jonathan Sacks*  
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

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