



# Covenant & Conversation

Jonathan Sacks  
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

VA'ETCHANAN • ואתחנן

FROM THE TEACHINGS AND WRITINGS OF **RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS** ז"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 ז"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.

## A Tiny, Treasured People

There is a statement made towards the end of Parshat Va'etchanan, and it is so inconspicuous that we can sometimes miss it, but it is a statement with such far reaching implications that it challenges the impression that has prevailed thus far in the Torah, giving an entirely new complexion to the biblical image of the people Israel.

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.

Deut. 7:7

This is not what we have heard thus far. In Bereishit, God promises the patriarchs that their descendants will be like the stars of the heaven, the sand on the sea shore, the dust of the earth, uncountable. Abraham will be the father, not just of one nation but of many. At the beginning of Exodus we read of how the covenantal family, numbering a mere seventy when they went down to Egypt, were "fertile and prolific, and their population increased. They became so numerous that the land was filled with them" (Ex. 1:7).

Three times in the book of Deuteronomy, Moses describes the Israelites as being "as many as the stars of the sky" (Deut. 1:10, Deut. 10:22, Deut. 28:62). King Solomon speaks of himself as set among "the people you have chosen, a great people, too numerous to count or number" (1 Kings 3:8). The prophet Hosea says that "the Israelites will be like the sand on the seashore, which cannot be measured or counted" (Hos. 2:1).

In all these texts - and others - it is the size, the numerical greatness, of the people that is emphasised. What then are we to make of Moses' words that speak of its smallness? Targum Yonatan interprets it not to be about numbers at all but about self-image. He translates it not as "the fewest of peoples" but as "the most lowly and humble of peoples." Rashi gives a similar reading, citing Abraham's words "I am but dust and ashes," and Moses and Aaron's, "Who are we?"

Rashbam and Chizkuni give the more straightforward explanation that Moses is contrasting the Israelites with the seven nations they would be fighting in the land of Canaan/Israel. God would lead the Israelites to victory despite the

fact that they were outnumbered by the local inhabitants.

Rabbenu Bachya quotes Maimonides, who says that we would have expected God, King of the Universe, to have chosen the most numerous nation in the world as His people, since “the glory of the king is in the multitude of people” (Prov. 14:28).

God did not do so. Thus Israel should know they are a people extraordinarily blessed that God chose them, despite their smallness, to be His *am segulah*, His special treasure.

Rabbenu Bachya finds himself forced to give a more complex reading to resolve the contradiction of Moses, in Deuteronomy, saying *both* that Israel is the *smallest* of peoples, *and also* “as many as the stars of the sky.” He turns it into a hypothetical subjunctive, meaning: God *would still have chosen you, even if you had been the smallest of the peoples.*

Sforno gives a simple and straightforward reading: God did not choose a nation for the sake of His honour. Had He done so He would undoubtedly have chosen a mighty and numerous people. His choice had nothing to do with honour and everything to do with love. He loved the patriarchs for their willingness to heed His voice; therefore He loves their children.

Yet there is something in this verse that resonates throughout much of Jewish history. Historically Jews were and are a small people: today less than a fifth of one per cent of the population of the world. There were two reasons for this. First is the heavy toll taken through the ages by exile and persecution, directly by Jews killed in massacres and pogroms, indirectly by those who converted – in fifteenth century Spain and nineteenth century Europe – in order to avoid persecution (tragically, even conversion did not work; racial antisemitism persisted in both cases). The Jewish population is a

mere fraction of what it might have been had there been no Hadrian, no crusades, and no antisemitism.

The second reason is that Jews did not seek to convert others. Had they done so they would have been closer in numbers to Christianity (2.2 billion) or Islam (1.3 billion). In fact, Malbim reads something like this into our verse. The previous verses have said that the Israelites are about to enter a land with seven nations, Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites. Moses warns them against intermarriage with them, not for racial but for religious reasons: “they will turn your children away from following Me to serve other gods.” Malbim interprets our verse as Moses 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.’

There was a moment when Jews might have sought to convert others (to be sure, there was one instance when they did. The Hasmonean priest-king John Hyrcanus I forcibly converted the Edomites, known as the Idumeneans. Herod was one of their number). The period in question was the Roman Empire in the first century. Jews numbered some 10 per cent of the empire, and there were many Romans who admired aspects of their faith and way of life. The pagan deities of the Hellenistic world were losing their appeal and plausibility, and throughout the centres of the Mediterranean, individuals were adopting Jewish practices. Two aspects of Judaism stood in their way: the commandments and circumcision. In the end, Jews chose not to compromise their way of life for the sake of making converts. The Hellenistic people who sympathised with Judaism mostly adopted Pauline Christianity instead. Consistently throughout history, Jews have chosen to be true to themselves and to stay small rather than make concessions for the sake of increasing numbers.

Why have Divine Providence or human choice or both, eventuated in the sheer smallness of the

Jewish people? Could it be, quite simply, that through the Jewish people God is telling humankind that you do not need to be numerous to be great. Nations are not judged by their size but by their contribution to the human heritage. Of this the most compelling proof is that a nation as small as the Jews could produce an ever-renewed flow of prophets, priests, poets, philosophers, sages, saints, halachists, aggadists, codifiers, commentators, rebbes and *roshei yeshivot*; that they could also yield some of the world's greatest writers, artists, musicians, film-makers, academics, intellectuals, doctors, lawyers, businesspeople and technological innovators. Out of all proportion to their numbers Jews could and can be found working as lawyers fighting injustice, economists fighting poverty, doctors fighting disease, and teachers fighting ignorance.

You do not need numbers to enlarge the spiritual and moral horizons of humankind. You need other things altogether: a sense of the worth and dignity of the individual, of the power of human possibility to transform the world, of the importance of giving everyone the best education they can have, of making each of us feel part of a collective responsibility to ameliorate the human condition,

and a willingness to take high ideals and enact them in the real world, unswayed by disappointments and defeats.

Nowhere is this more in evidence today than among the people of Israel in the state of Israel: traduced in the media and pilloried by much of the world, yet still, year after year, producing human miracles in medicine, agriculture, technology, the arts, as if the word “impossible” did not exist in the Hebrew language. When, therefore, we feel fearful and depressed about Israel's plight, it is worth returning to Moses' words:

“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.”

Small? Yes. Still surrounded, as the Israelites were then, by “nations larger and stronger than you.” But that small people, defying the laws of history, outlived all the world's great empires, and still has a message of hope for humanity. You don't have to be large to be great. If you are open to a power greater than yourself, you will become greater than yourself. Israel today still carries that message to the world.



## 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?

● 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/devarim/profits-and-prophets/>