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 LEARNING RESOURCE FOR THE RABBI SACKS GLOBAL DAY OF LEARNING
 

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## TORAH AS *Conversation*

**Conversation was central to the life and teachings of Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks zt"l. He exemplified Ben Zoma's teaching: "Who is wise? One who learns from every person." (Pirkei Avot 4:1)**

For Rabbi Sacks, conversation was how we engage with God, through prayer and the study of Torah. He understood the mitzvah of Torah study as a form of ongoing dialogue across generations, as each one engages with the sacred texts and the voices of those who came before, as well as with contemporary voices of our own generation.

This year's Global Day of Learning marks Rabbi Sacks' fifth yahrzeit with the theme "Torah as Conversation", and celebrates the posthumous publication of his commentary in the Koren Shalem H'mash – a powerful expression of his lifelong mission to bring Torah into conversation with the world.

## The Torah as a *Conversation*

Source 1: Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *Covenant & Conversation: Genesis*, Introduction

Time and again, in the midst of troubled times or facing difficult decisions, I've found the words of the weekly *parsha* giving me guidance – or, conversely, the events themselves granting me deeper insight into the Torah text. For that is what “Torah” means: teaching, instruction, guidance. **Torah is a commentary on life, and life is a commentary on Torah. Together they constitute a conversation, each shedding light on the other.** Torah is a book not only to be read but to be lived. One of the things that gives us the courage and wisdom to chart our way through the wilderness of life is knowing that we are not alone, that God goes before us in a pillar of cloud and fire, signalling the way. The way He does so for us is through the words of the Torah, to which every Jewish life is a commentary, and each of us has our own annotation to write...

I have called these studies **Covenant & Conversation** because this, for me, is the essence of what Torah learning is – throughout the ages, and for us, now. The text of Torah is our covenant with God, our written constitution as a nation under His sovereignty. **The interpretation of this text has been the subject of an ongoing conversation for as long as Jews have studied the Divine word, a conversation that began at Sinai thirty-three centuries ago and has not ceased since.** Every age has added its commentaries, and so must ours. **Participating in that conversation is a major part of what it is to be a Jew.** For we are the people who never stopped learning the Book of Life, our most precious gift from the God of life.



### Points to Ponder

1. How can one have a conversation with a text?
2. What do you think Rabbi Sacks means by “**Torah is a commentary on life, and life is a commentary on Torah**” and how does this constitute a conversation?
3. Who are the participants in the conversation Rabbi Sacks is discussing in this quote? Have you ever participated in this conversation?
4. Do you think this conversation is important? Why?
5. What are the values at the heart of this conversation?

## Conversation as a *Spiritual Value*

Source 2: Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference*, Chapter 4

How do we live with moral difference and yet sustain an overarching community? The answer, I have already suggested, is *conversation* – not mere debate but the **disciplined act of communicating** (making my views intelligible to someone who does not share them) **and listening** (entering into the inner world of someone whose views are opposed to my own). **Each is a genuine form of respect, of paying attention to the other, of conferring value on his or her opinions even though they are not mine.** In a debate, one side wins, the other loses, but both are the same as they were before. **In a conversation neither side loses and both are changed, because they now know what**

**reality looks like from a different perspective.** That is not to say that either gives up its previous convictions. That is not what conversation is about. It does mean, however, that I may now realise that I must make space for another deeply held belief, and if my own case has been compelling, the other side may understand that it too must make space for mine.



### Points to Ponder

1. What is the difference between a debate and a conversation?
2. Which is more worthwhile? Why?
3. What is the value in a conversation if there is no clear consensus at the end?
4. Why is it important to make space for people and opinions you do not agree with?
5. What are the values at the heart of conversation (as opposed to debate)?

### Source 3: Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *Covenant & Conversation*: Chayei Sarah – “Isaac and Prayer”

Isaac is ‘*meditating*’ in the field – but the word *sichah* in modern Hebrew means not only meditation but also, and primarily, conversation. When the Talmud says, in the context of Isaac, *ein sichah ela tefillah*, we could translate this phrase as “conversation is a form of prayer” – and in a profound sense it is so. **Prayer is a conversation (between heaven and earth). But conversation is also a prayer – for in true conversation, I open myself up to the reality of another person.** I enter his or her world. I begin to see things from a perspective not my own. In the touch of two selves, both are changed.

A genuine human conversation is therefore a preparation for, and a microcosmic version of, the act of prayer. For in prayer I attend to the presence of God, listening as well as speaking, opening myself up to a reality other and infinitely vaster than my own, and I become a different person as a result. Prayer is not monologue but dialogue.



### Points to Ponder

1. What do you think Rabbi Sacks means when he says, “**prayer is a conversation**”?
2. What do you think Rabbi Sacks means when he says, “**conversation is a prayer**”?
3. What can we learn about conversations with another human being from prayer?
4. What can we learn about prayer from conversations with another human being?
5. What values are at the heart of both of these types of conversations?

## Judaism is the Religion of *Listening*

### Source 4: Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *Studies in Spirituality*: Bereishit – “The Art of Listening”

**Judaism is a religion of listening, not seeing.** That is not to say there are no visual elements in Judaism. There are, but they are not primary. Listening is the sacred task. The most famous command in Judaism is *Shema Yisrael*, “Listen, Israel.” What made Abraham, Moses, and the

prophets different from their contemporaries was that they heard the voice that to others was inaudible. In one of the great dramatic scenes of the Bible God teaches Elijah that He is not in the whirlwind, the earthquake, or the fire, but in the “still, small voice” (I Kings 19:12).

It takes training, focus, and the ability to create silence in the soul to learn how to listen, whether to God or to a fellow human being. Seeing shows us the beauty of the created world, but **listening connects us to the soul of another, and sometimes to the soul of the Other, God as He speaks to us, calls to us, summoning us to our task in the world... Jewish spirituality is the art of listening.**

**Source 4: Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *Studies in Spirituality*:  
Eikev – “The Spirituality of Listening”**

**Judaism is a religion of listening.** This is one of its most original contributions to civilization. The twin foundations on which Western culture was built were ancient Greece and ancient Israel. They could not have been more different. Greece was a profoundly visual culture. Its greatest achievements had to do with the eye, with seeing. It produced some of the greatest art, sculpture, and architecture the world has ever seen. Its most characteristic group events – theatrical performances and the Olympic Games – were spectacles: performances that were watched. Plato thought of knowledge as a kind of depth vision, seeing beneath the surface to the true form of things.

This idea – that knowing is seeing – remains the dominant metaphor in the West even today. We speak of *insight*, *foresight*, and *hindsight*. We offer an *observation*. We adopt a *perspective*. We *illustrate*. We *illuminate*. We *shed light* on an issue. When we understand something, we say, “*I see.*” Judaism offered a radical alternative. It is faith in a God we cannot see, a God who cannot be represented visually...

**Jews and Judaism taught that we cannot see God, but we can hear Him and He hears us. It is through the word – speaking and listening – that we can have an intimate relationship with God as our parent, our partner, our sovereign, the One who loves us and whom we love.** We cannot demonstrate God scientifically. We cannot prove God logically. These are Greek, not Jewish, modes of thought. I believe that from a Jewish perspective, trying to prove the existence of God logically or scientifically is a mistaken enterprise. God is not an object but a subject. The Jewish mode is to relate to God in intimacy and love, as well as awe and reverence.



**Points to Ponder**

1. How does listening connect us to the soul of the other and the Other (God)?
2. How does one listen to God?
3. Why is Judaism mistrusting of the visual?
4. How is listening a medium for connection and relationship with God?
5. How do these sources connect to the previous ones on conversation?



## The Shema: *Listen, Israel*

Source 5: Devarim 6:4-9

(Translation and commentary by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *The Koren Shalem Humash*)

שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל ה' אֶלֹהֵינוּ ה' אֶחָד. וְאַהֲבַתְּ אֶת ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּכָל לִבְבְּךָ וּבְכָל נַפְשְׁךָ וּבְכָל מְאֹדְךָ. וְהָיוּ הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי מְצַוְךָ הַיּוֹם עַל לִבְבְּךָ. וְשָׁנַנְתָּם לְבָנֶיךָ וְדִבַּרְתָּ בָם בְּשִׁבְתְּךָ בְּבֵיתְךָ וּבְלִכְתְּךָ בַּדֶּרֶךְ וּבְשֹׁכְבְּךָ וּבְקוּמְךָ. וְקִשְׁרָתָם לְאוֹת עַל יָדְךָ וְהָיוּ לְטֶטֶפֶת בֵּין עֵינֶיךָ. וְכָתַבְתָּם עַל מְזוֹזֹת בֵּיתְךָ וּבְשַׁעְרֶיךָ.

Listen, Israel: the Lord our God – the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might. Let these words that I charge you with today remain impressed upon your heart. Teach them to your children, speaking of them when you sit at home and when you travel on the way, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign upon your hand, and have them as an emblem between your eyes. Write them on the doorposts of your houses and on your gates.

**Listen, Israel, the Lord our God – the Lord is one** – These words are the supreme testimony of Jewish faith. The key-word of Judaism is Shema. God is not something we see, but a voice we hear. The patriarchs and prophets did not see God; they heard Him.

This has implications for the whole of Judaism. It is a way of understanding the world. Judaism, with its belief in the invisible God who transcends the universe, and its prohibition against visual representations of God, is supremely a civilization of the ear. To give dramatic force to the idea that God is heard, not seen, we cover our eyes with our hand as we say these words.

The verb *lishmoa* is a key term of the book of Deuteronomy, where it appears in one or other form some ninety-two times. It conveys a wide range of meanings, clustered around five primary senses:

1. To listen, to pay focussed attention, as in “Be still and listen (*u’shema*), Israel” (Deut. 27:9)
2. To hear, as in “I heard (*shamati*) Your voice in the garden and I was afraid” (Gen. 3:10)
3. To understand, as in “Let us go down and confuse their language so that one will not understand (*yishme’u*) the speech of another” (11:7)
4. To internalise, register, take to heart, as in “As for Yishmael – I have heard you” (17:20), meaning, “I have taken into account what you have said; I will bear it in mind; it is a consideration that weighs with Me”

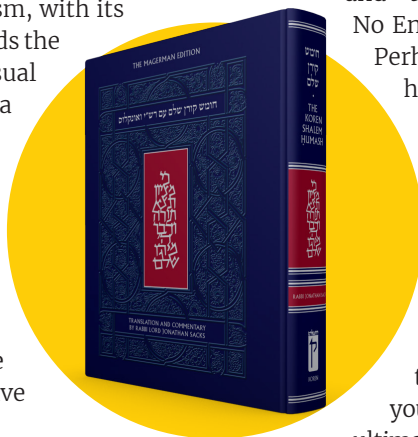
5. To respond in action, as in “Avram listened (*vay-ishma*) to Sarai” (16:2). This last sense is the closest *shema* comes to meaning “to obey.”

It has yet other meanings in Rabbinic Hebrew, such as “to infer,” “to accept,” “to take into account as evidence,” and “to receive as part of the Oral Tradition.”

No English word has this range of meanings. Perhaps the closest are “to hearken” and “to heed” – neither of them terms in common use today.

*Shema Yisrael*, then, does not mean “Hear, Israel.” It means something like: “Listen. Concentrate. Give the word of God your most focussed attention. Strive to understand. Engage all your faculties, intellectual and emotional. Make His will your own. For what He commands you to do is not irrational or arbitrary but for your welfare, the welfare of your people, and ultimately for the benefit of all humanity.”

In Judaism, faith is a form of listening – to the song creation sings to its Creator, and to the message history delivers to those who strive to understand it. That is what Moshe says time and again in Deuteronomy: Stop looking; listen. Stop speaking; listen. Create a silence in the soul. Still the clamour of instinct, desire, fear, anger. Strive to listen to the still, small voice beneath the noise. Then you will know that the universe is the work of the One beyond the furthest star yet closer to you than you are to yourself – and then you will love your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your might. In God’s unity you will find unity, within yourself and between yourself and the world, and you will no longer fear the unknown.





### Points to Ponder

1. Why do you think the Torah uses the word “*Shema*/Listen” in Devarim 6:4?
2. How do the six definitions of the word “listen” brought by Rabbi Sacks (five biblical and one from the Oral Tradition) connect to the sources we have discussed above?
3. What is the connection between listening and faith?
4. Can you hear the “**song creation sings to its Creator**” and the “**message history delivers**”? What are they telling you?
5. Why do you think these verses are central to prayer in Judaism (despite not being a prayer in the conventional sense)?

**With all your heart** – It is said that the Rebbe Menachem Mendel of Kotzk once asked his disciples, “Where does God live?” The disciples were perplexed. “What does the Rebbe mean, where does God live? Where does God not live? Surely we have been taught that no place is devoid of His presence? He fills the heavens and the earth.” The Rebbe replied, “You have not understood. God lives *where we let Him in*.”

On another occasion, he asked, “Why does it say in the Shema: ‘Let these words... remain impressed upon your heart’? Why ‘upon’ and not ‘in’?” He answered: “The heart is not always open. Therefore the Torah says: Lay these words on your heart, so that when your heart opens, they will be there, ready to fall in.” In Judaism, spirituality means openness. To one who is open, God is closer than we are to ourselves. To one who is closed, He is farther away than the most distant galaxies. A question, asked with sincerity, is an opening in the soul. The task of

education is to teach a child to be open – to the voice of God and the miracle of existence.

**Teach them to your children** – Rashi translates this verb as “you shall sharpen” (compare Deut. 32:41). Education, in Judaism, is active, not passive. It is about honing the mind, sharpening the intellect, through question and answer, challenge and response. Four times the Torah refers to children asking questions (the “four sons” of the Haggada). Against cultures that see unquestioning obedience as the ideal behaviour of a child, Jewish tradition regards the child “who does not know how to ask” as the lowest, not the highest, stage of development.

Judaism is God’s perennial question mark against the condition of the world. That things are as they are is a fact, not a value. Should it be so? Why should it be so? Only one who asks whether the world should be as it is, is capable of changing what it is.



### Points to Ponder

1. How do the stories Rabbi Sacks quotes help us understand the words “With all your heart”?
2. Does this connect at all to sources 4 and 5 above?
3. Why is asking questions an important part of education?
4. How does asking questions relate to the value of conversation as discussed above?
5. How is Seder Night a paradigm of all of the ideas we have been exploring today?



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 at [www.rabbisacks.org](http://www.rabbisacks.org), and follow The Rabbi Sacks Legacy on social media @RabbiSacks.