



Covenant & Conversation



Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

EIKEV • עֵקֶב

BASED ON THE TEACHINGS OF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS 7"צז

COVENANT & CONVERSATION SUMMARY

The Morality of Love

Hashem is the God of love. However much we love Him, He loves us more. One place we see this is at the beginning of Parshat Eikev:

"If you pay attention to these laws and are careful to follow them, then the Lord your God will keep His covenant of love [et ha-brit ve-et ha-chessed] with you, as He swore to your ancestors. He will love you and bless you and increase your numbers." (Devarim 7:12-13)

This is one example, but **the entire book of Devarim is infused with the language of love.** In fact, the Hebrew root *a-h-v* (love) appears in Shemot twice, Vayikra twice, Bamidbar not at all - but in Devarim, it appears 23 times. The book of Devarim is a text on societal wellbeing and the transformative power of love.

An age-old Christian claim is that Judaism is all law and retribution while Christianity is about love and forgiveness. Nothing could be more misleading. In fact, when the New Testament speaks of love, it quotes directly from Vayikra ("Love your neighbour as yourself") and Devarim ("Love the Lord your God with all your heart...").

Simon May wrote, "If love in the Western world has a founding text, that text is Hebrew." Harry Redner describes four ethical traditions in history. The fourth, which he simply calls Morality, comes from Vayikra and Devarim and is based on love. He defines it as a *"supremely altruistic love... to love one's neighbour as oneself means to act for them as naturally as one would for oneself."*

This idea is radical. First, the Torah teaches that the universe is not hostile or indifferent - we are here because Someone loves us and wants our good. Second, the love God

shows us is meant to shape how we treat others:

"He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the stranger... So you must love the stranger, for you were strangers in Egypt." (Dev. 10:18-19)

God created the world in love and forgiveness, and asks us to love and forgive others. I believe that is the most profound moral idea in human history.

So why does love only become a central theme in Devarim?

Because, like forgiveness, love must be modelled among humans before it becomes part of the Divine-human relationship. Bereishit is full of loving relationships - Avraham for Yitzchak, Yaakov for Rachel - but this kind of love can lead to tension. It often divides as well as unites. Therefore personal, passionate love alone is not enough to build a just society.

Only in Devarim do love and justice combine into a full social vision. The word *tzedek* (justice) is another key word in this final book of the Torah. *Tzedek* appears 18 times in Devarim - far more than in the earlier books.

It appears only four times in Shemot, not at all in Bamidbar, and in Vayikra only in chapter 19, the only chapter that also contains the word 'love.' In other words, in Judaism love and justice go hand in hand. This is not cold justice, but justice shaped by love and compassion.

Love without justice leads to rivalry, and eventually to hate. Justice without love is devoid of the humanising forces of compassion and mercy. We need both. **This unique ethical vision – the love of God for humans and of humans for God, translated into an ethic of love toward both neighbour and stranger – is the foundation of Western civilisation and its abiding glory. It is born here in the book of Devarim, the book of law-as-love and love-as-law.**

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



In a Nutshell

Moshe continues his final speech, promising that if the people follow the mitzvot of the Torah, they will flourish in the Land of Israel as Hashem swore to their ancestors. He reminds them of their past failings, including the Golden Calf, Korach's rebellion, and the sin of the spies, but also of Hashem's forgiveness and the giving of the Second Tablets. Their forty years in the desert, sustained by manna, were to teach that "man does not live on bread alone." Moshe describes Canaan as rich and blessed with the seven species. Eikev also includes the second paragraph of the Shema.



Around the Shabbat Table

1. Why do you think love, when unbalanced by justice, can lead to rivalry and conflict, as seen in the book of Bereishit?
2. How is the Torah's idea of love different from romantic or emotional love?
3. How do we balance compassion with fairness in everyday life?



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ON THE PARSHA • WRITTEN BY SARA LAMM

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

PHILOSOPHY OF RABBI SACKS



Delving Deeper

Rabbi Sacks raises the question, why does love, which plays so great a part in the book of Devarim, not feature heavily in the earlier books too? His simple, radical answer is that humanity was not yet ready for it.

He then cites the concept of forgiveness as a parallel example. In the stories of Bereishit, humanity takes a long time to learn to forgive. Bereishit ends with Yosef forgiving his brothers for their betrayal. Only thereafter does God forgive human beings for their sins.

Judaism is where forgiveness was born. But not immediately. A key example of Divine forgiveness for the people appears after the Golden Calf, through the institution of Yom Kippur. Now the people are more mature, able to forgive, and be forgiven.

The same is true of love. Almost all the loves in Bereishit turn out to be divisive. They lead to tension between brothers, sisters, and wives. Implicit in Bereishit is a profound observation: real love, personal and passionate, the kind of love that suffuses much of the prophetic literature as well as *Shir HaShirim*, the greatest love song in Tanach, is not sufficient as a basis for society. The reason being that it can divide as well as unite.

But in the book Devarim, love figures as a major motif: Bnei Yisrael have reached the stage of an integrated social-moral-political vision which combines love with justice.

Once love and justice are set up hand in hand in society, we have a recipe for a thriving society. From then on, love is all around.



Parsha Activity

I forgive you but...

One player is chosen as the Forgiver and goes around the circle, hearing confessions to different ridiculous "crimes" from each person, like, "I used your socks as a challah cover," or "I swapped the kugel with turnips while you were eating it." The Forgiver must respond with a direct look, a straight face, and a term of endearment, like: "I forgive you 'my love', but I just can't smile." If either person smiles or laughs while facing each other, they're out!

How can you strike the balance between love, justice, and the sometimes-tricky path to forgiveness?

A STORY FOR THE AGES



Returning the goods

Late one night, the renowned Jerusalem Tzaddik, Rabbi Aryeh Levin, received a knock at his door. Standing outside were two men who informed him that at that very moment, somebody was stealing the entire contents of a shop in the Machane Yehuda market. Afraid to confront the criminal (or gang of criminals) themselves, they had come to ask for Rabbi Levin's help.

Rabbi Levin quickly dressed and hurried to the scene. When he arrived, he saw a single thief. He had already emptied the shelves and was preparing to carry everything away.

Rabbi Levin was an unusual man.

He had that rare ability to influence others with gentleness and sincerity. With a calm yet firm voice, Rabbi Levin asked the thief, "Tell me please, how can you do this? How can you steal, knowing that the Torah forbids it?"

The thief was so struck by the combination of compassion and truth in the rabbi's words that he immediately saw his actions with a new moral clarity, and regretted raiding the shelves. He looked at the man standing graciously before him and asked, "What can I do to make this right?" Rabbi Levin replied that he must return all the items to



their proper places, and that he would help him do it.

Together they carefully put everything back on the shelves, and then Rabbi Levin recited a heartfelt *mi sheberach* for the man who had so nobly fulfilled the mitzvah of returning stolen property.

• Why do you think Rabbi Levin's words and voice were so influential to the thief?



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THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

ON THE HAFTARA • WRITTEN BY RABBI BARRY KLEINBERG

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

HAFTARA SUMMARY



The Haftara in a Nutshell

Isaiah 49:14-51:3

In our Haftara the prophet offers comfort and reassurance to Zion (Jerusalem), when they feel abandoned by God. God responds with deep compassion, declaring that He could no more forget His people than a mother could forget her child. He promises to restore Zion, gather her scattered children, and reverse her desolation. Though once despised, Zion will be honoured by nations and kings.

God assures the people that He will rescue them, defeat their oppressors,

and lead them back with joy. The prophet then calls on Zion to awaken and trust in God's power, remembering His past acts of salvation, like the redemption from Egypt.

The section closes with a message of hope: the exiled will return to Zion in gladness, and God will comfort His people, making their wilderness like Eden. It emphasises God's enduring love, power to save, and the coming renewal of Israel's joy and dignity.



Points to Ponder

1. How do we understand our relationship with God as a parallel to a parent's relationship to their child?
2. Can you see why this metaphor brings comfort to Isaiah's followers?



TANACH CONNECTIONS



Parsha and Haftara Links

In the Haftara, the prophet Isaiah makes a reference to Zion: "Your walls are always before Me" (Isaiah 49:16) These words echo a verse found in the Parsha: "The eyes of the Lord your God are always upon



it" (Devarim 11:12).

We can also note that the general theme of the Parsha is the Jewish people's belief in God and His laws. In the Haftara, Isaiah speaks to the true believers (Isaiah 51:1) "You who seek the Lord." This belief in God, wrote Rabbi Sacks, is central to the survival of a just society.

"Only faith in God can lead us to honour the needs of others as well as ourselves. Only faith in God can motivate us to act for the benefit of a future we will not live to see. Only faith in God can stop us from wrongdoing when we believe that no other human will ever

find out. Only faith in God can give us the humility that alone has the power to defeat the arrogance of success and the self-belief that leads, as Paul Kennedy argued in *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (1987), to military overstretch and national defeat."

- After everything Bnai Yisrael witnessed in Egypt, and all that they experienced in the desert, why do you think they needed these reminders to believe in God?



Rabbi Sacks on living in Israel

The book of Devarim marks the final days of the people’s journey towards the Land of Israel, and the Haftarat that accompany the Parshiyot often focus on some of the inevitable occurrences during this life in Israel, and the future of the people, if they transgress when living in the Promised Land.

Reflecting on Eikev, Rabbi Sacks writes about the challenges of living in the Land of Israel and how to be successful in that endeavour: **“We do not live in an age of Prophets. Yet Israel exists today in the same circumstances as those which gave birth to the Prophets. As I write these words, the state is 59 years old. But it is also more than three thousand years old. The terms of its existence have not changed. Israel always longed for security but rarely found it. Neither its climate nor its geography were made for an easy life. That is the nature of Jewish faith - not security but the courage to live with insecurity, knowing that life is a battle, but that if we do justice and practice compassion, if we honour great and small, the powerful and the powerless alike, if our eyes do not look down to the earth and its seductions but to heaven and its challenges, this small, vulnerable people is capable of great - even astonishing - achievements”** (see *Geography and Destiny, Eikev, Covenant & Conversation*).




Further Ponderings

How do you think love could be further invested in your local community or society?



Quote of the Week

“...the momentous project the book of Devarim is proposing [is]: the creation of a society capable of defeating the normal laws of the growth-and-decline of civilisations.”

Why Civilisations Fail, Eikev, 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