



Covenant & Conversation



Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

RE'EH • ראה

BASED ON THE TEACHINGS OF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ר"צ

COVENANT & CONVERSATION SUMMARY

The Politics of Freedom

Moshe set out the broad principles of the *brit* in recent chapters. He now turns to the details, which extend over several parshiyot (Devarim. 11:26–30:19). Moshe begins, *“The laws that will govern Israel in its land begin and end with a momentous choice: See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse – the blessing if you obey the commands of the Lord your God... the curse if you disobey...”* He ends with the words, *“See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil... I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live.”*

Rambam sees these two passages as proof of our belief in freewill. We get to choose. But they are also a political statement, because **if humans are free, they need a free society to exercise their freedom. Devarim is the first attempt in history to create such a society.**

Moshe's vision is deeply political, but in a unique way. It is not politics as a pursuit of power, empire, or national glory. He does not praise Israel's greatness. Instead, he reminds them of their mistakes, when they sinned, rebelled and lost faith. Moshe would never have won an election. He was not the kind of leader that sought popularity.

His words summon the people to humility and then to responsibility. He says God is giving us a chance to create a new kind of society. Not an empire like Egypt, divided into rulers and overruled people. And if we truly believe in God, our only sovereign, we can do great things – not in conventional terms, but in moral terms. For if all power and wealth belong to God, none of these can set us apart. We are charged to feed the poor, care for the widow, orphan, Levite, and stranger, and create a just society that honours human

dignity and freedom.

Moshe insists on three things. First, that **we are free**. Blessing or curse? Good or evil? Faith or faithlessness? The choice is ours. Nations as well as individuals must take responsibility. There is no defence in blaming others, or God. For God does not remove human responsibility; He makes it central. If we are faithful to God, says Moshe, we will prevail.

If not, nothing – not even military strength nor alliances – will help our nation survive.

Second, **we are collectively responsible**.

“All Israel are responsible for one another.”

The fate of Israel depends on all Israel, and every individual counts. Unlike all other nations in the ancient world, and most nations still today, Israel's destiny is not determined by kings or elites, but by every person as a moral agent. This is democracy in the biblical sense.

Third, **it is a God-centred politics**. We must be “one nation under God,” and a nomocracy – the idea is that we should be ruled by laws, not men. Biblical Israel was the first attempt in history to create a free society.

It was an answer to the question: *how can freedom and responsibility be shared equally by all?*

How can limits be placed on the power of rulers to turn the mass of people into slaves – not necessarily literally slaves but as a labour force to be used to build monumental buildings or engage in empire-building wars?

It is a beautiful, challenging idea: If God is our only Sovereign, then all human power is delegated, limited, and morally bound. Jews were the first to believe an entire nation could govern itself in freedom and equal dignity. Jews never fully achieved the vision, but never ceased to be inspired by it. Moshe's words still challenge us today. **God has given us freedom. Let us use it to create a just, generous, gracious society. God does not do it for us, but He has taught us how to do it. As Moshe said: The choice is ours.**

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

In a Nutshell

Moshe urges the Israelites to obey God's mitzvot, choosing blessing over curse. The mitzvot will be proclaimed on Har Gerizim and Har Ebal upon entering the Land. Sacrifices may only be brought to the place God chooses for His name; elsewhere, animals may be slaughtered for food but not as offerings. Re'eh also outlines laws about false prophets, kosher animals, charity, and tithes. Loans are forgiven in the Sabbatical year, and servants are freed after six years. It ends with instructions for the pilgrimage festivals, Pesach, Shavuot, and Succot, when all must appear before God.

Around the Shabbat Table

1. What does it mean to “choose life” in your daily decisions?
2. What role does faith play in building a strong society?
3. What would a modern version of Moshe's vision look like?





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ON THE PARSHA • WRITTEN BY SARA LAMM

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



Delving Deeper

It was the great 19th century historian Lord Acton who saw that freedom was born in biblical Israel: *The government of the Israelites was a Federation, held together by no political authority, but by the unity of race and faith, and founded, not on physical force, but on a voluntary covenant... the example of the Hebrew nation laid down the parallel lines on which all freedom has been won.*

Moshe's vision in Devarim offers a radical blueprint for a society built not on power, hierarchy, or conquest, but on responsibility, freedom and collective moral will.

True freedom, Moshe teaches, is not merely personal but national: a

covenantal call to build a community governed by Divine law and mutual accountability. It's not about fame or empire, but humility, equality, and faithfulness.

This vision remains a timeless challenge. It has nothing to do with political structures (monarchy, oligarchy, democracy - Jews have tried them all), and everything to do with collective moral responsibility. Jews never quite achieved the vision, says Rabbi Sacks, but they never ceased to be inspired by it.

Can we, as a people, choose life, not just for ourselves, but for the kind of society we create together? How?



Parsha Activity

Value Charades

This is a charades-style game with a twist. One player at a time steps forward as the actor. They must think of - and then silently act out - either a good value (like kindness, honesty, humility) or a negative one (like jealousy, greed, cruelty), while the others guess what is being mimed.

After guessing, the group votes: is this a value that brings a blessing or a curse? Then take a moment to discuss why.



The King of Restraint

After Shaul HaMelech took matters into his own hands, against direct instructions from the prophet Shmuel, it was decreed that his children and grandchildren would not follow in his footsteps as king. Instead, a young shepherd boy named David was anointed by Shmuel to be the future king of Israel. In the meantime, Shaul was allowed to continue to rule as king, and David remained loyal to him. But as time marched on, Shaul became more jealous and resentful of the boy, and it wasn't long before his paranoia led him to order his men to hunt down and kill David.

Fearing for his life, David went on the run. But while in hiding, there

were several times when David was given the opportunity to kill Shaul and take the throne by force. In one dramatic story, David found himself face to face with Shaul in a cave, and saw that the king was completely vulnerable.

What would you do in such a situation? David chose restraint. He cut just a little material from the king's cloak, and spared Shaul's life, saying, "I will not stretch out my hand against my master, for he is the Lord's anointed" (I Samuel 24:11).

David's humility and moral strength in that moment left Shaul stunned. Shaul wept and said, "You are more righteous than I... you have dealt well with me, while I have dealt



wickedly with you."

Instead of grabbing power, David showed that true greatness lies in honouring God, exercising self-control, and waiting patiently. His humility, not his military strength, is what ultimately earned him the crown, the people's trust, and the eternal legacy. To this day we still sing about *David, Melech Yisrael*.

- When have you had the chance to "win" but chose to hold back?
- What did that reveal about you?



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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 54:11-55:5

Our Haftara offers a message of hope, restoration, and Divine compassion to a once-suffering and abandoned Zion. God promises to rebuild the city with precious stones and establish its foundations in peace and righteousness. Though Zion had experienced affliction and storms, God now assures her that no weapon formed against her will succeed, and her children will be taught by the Lord.

In chapter 55, the invitation to spiritual renewal is extended:

"Come, all who are thirsty." God offers free sustenance - water, wine, and milk - symbolising grace that is not bought but freely given. The people are urged to listen and receive life through a renewed everlasting covenant, like the one made with King David. Israel's transformation will be so profound that other nations will be drawn to her, recognising the Lord's glory.

The passage highlights Divine generosity, redemption, and Israel's renewed global role.

Why do you think the prophet refers back to the *brit* made with David?



Points to Ponder

1. Why do you think God asks us to allow Him to make a covenant with us?
2. What are the limitations of a relationship based only on covenant?
3. How do you understand a relationship of *chesed* between God and the Jewish people?



Parsha and Haftara Links

We can find a connection between the Parsha and the Haftara in relation to God's offer (in Re'eh) to the Jewish people to choose between blessings and curses. The same choice can be seen in the Haftara, *"You who are thirsty all, come to water; you who have no silver, come, take food and eat; come and take food without silver, wine, and milk without cost, for why should you weigh out your silver for no bread, your labour bringing you no fullness? Listen – listen to me: let goodness nourish you, and let your souls delight in plenty. Turn your ear to Me and come; listen that your souls may live, let me forge an everlasting covenant with you"*

(Isaiah 55:1-3).

Rabbi Sacks noted that covenant is not enough in our relationship with God: **"Every covenant is inherently vulnerable. That is what Moses emphasised**



throughout Devarim. Don't take the land or its blessings for granted. If you do well, things will go well, but if you do badly, great dangers lie in store... That is covenant. Chesed, in contrast, has no if-then quality. It is given out of the goodness of the giver, regardless of the worth of the recipient. God will never break the covenant, even if we do, because of His chesed... [His] unconditional grace. In chesed God created the universe. In chesed we create moments of moral beauty that bring joy and hope where there was darkness and despair."



Rabbi Sacks on Tzedakah

The need for a just society, where the poor and weak members are provided and cared for is a common theme in the Haftarah. Although only mentioned briefly in this week's Parsha, it is a core Jewish value running through much of the underlying messaging of the book of Devarim.

Rabbi Sacks wrote the following about the mitzvah of Tzedakah:

"The nearest English equivalent to tzedakah is the phrase that came into existence alongside the idea of a welfare state, namely social justice (significantly, Friedrich Hayek regarded the concept of social justice as incoherent and self-contradictory). Behind both is the idea that no one should be without the basic requirements of existence, and that those who have more than they need must share some of that surplus with those who have less. This is fundamental to the kind of society the Israelites were charged with creating, namely one in which everyone has a basic right to a dignified life and equal worth as citizens in the covenantal community under the sovereignty of God. Tzedakah concerns not just physical needs but psychological ones also."



Further Ponderings

How can you provide tzedakah in relation to non-physical needs?



Quote of the Week

"To know God is to act with justice and compassion, to recognise His image in other people, and to hear the silent cry of those in need."

Tzedakah: The Untranslatable Virtue
Re'eh, 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.

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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