



Covenant & Conversation



Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

SHOFTIM • שופטים

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

COVENANT & CONVERSATION SUMMARY

Greatness is Humility

There is a fascinating detail about the king in this week's parsha. We learn that he must write out his own Torah scroll - and "read it all the days of his life" - so that he will be God-fearing and faithful to Torah law, and so that "his heart be not haughty over his brothers." In essence, the king had to have humility. Even the highest in the land should not feel himself above the people.

This is hugely significant in terms of the Jewish understanding of political leadership. Looking at the other mitzvot directed specifically to the king - he must not accumulate too many horses, too many wives, or excessive wealth - these are all temptations to someone with power. There is always the risk that a king will feel he is above the law, and succumb to such temptations. As the rabbis observed, Shlomo HaMelech, wisest of men, broke all three of these royal laws, beginning the decline of the monarchy. Shlomo justified his actions, believing he could avoid the pitfalls, only to fall into the very traps Torah warned against. **The arrogance of power is its downfall. Hubris leads to nemesis.**

Hence the Torah's insistence on humility, not as a nicety but as essential. The king was to be treated with honour, yet inwardly he was to remain lowly. Rambam puts it beautifully:

"Just as the Torah grants the king great honour and obliges everyone to revere him, so it commands him to be lowly... He should be gracious and merciful to the small and the great, involving himself in their good and welfare. He should protect the honour of even the humblest of men... He should always conduct himself with great humility. There was none greater than Moshe, our teacher..." (Laws of Kings 2:6).

The ultimate role-model we have in Judaism is Moshe. One

of the key reasons is that he was "very humble, more so than any person on the face of the earth." Humility here does not mean weakness, timidity, or lacking in self-confidence. It is not about being meek. Moshe was none of these. It means honouring others and regarding them as no less important than you are. It means what Ben Zoma said: "Who is honoured? One who honours others."

This idea finds voice in one of the great rabbinic teachings: "Wherever you find the greatness of the Holy One, blessed be He, there you find His humility." Immediately after declaring God "great, mighty and awe-inspiring," the Torah adds that He "upholds the cause of the orphan and widow, and loves the stranger." This is no coincidence. God cares for all regardless of rank. Greatness is humility.

A striking modern-day example came in 2005, at the 60th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz. Queen Elizabeth met with a group of British Holocaust survivors, remaining long past her scheduled departure and giving each survivor her full attention. One after another was blown away by her actions, telling Rabbi Sacks, "Sixty years ago I did not know if I would be alive tomorrow, and here I am today talking to the Queen."

Having once been treated as less than human, they were honoured as dignitaries. That was humility: not holding yourself low, but holding others high. And where you find humility, you find greatness.

It is a lesson for us all. Rabbi Shlomo of Karlin taught that, "The greatest source of sin is to forget we are children of the king." There is a famous prayer in which we call God 'Avinu Malkeinu' ('Our Father, our King'). If God, our King, is also our Father, follows that we are all members of a royal family and must act as such. And the mark of royalty is humility.

The real honour is not the honour we receive but the honour we give.

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

In a Nutshell

Moshe directs Bnai Yisrael to establish judges and officers throughout their settlements, for justice is a high value. Legal cases will also need at least two reliable witnesses for any conviction. Moshe explains that each generation will have sages to interpret Torah law. Their rulings must be followed precisely. He also discusses refuge cities for accidental kills, rules for kings, and laws against idolatry and witchcraft. Military laws exempt newlyweds, new homeowners, vineyard planters, and the fearful from battle. Armies cannot destroy valuable resources during sieges and must offer peace before any attacks.

Around the Shabbat Table

1. How can someone in a position of power stay humble?
2. What's one way you can practice humility this week at home, in school, or with friends?
3. What other leaders from Tanach carried the same qualities of humility as Moshe?





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ON THE PARSHA • WRITTEN BY SARA LAMM

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



Delving Deeper

The Torah's laws for kings are striking in what they require: humility. Even a king, surrounded by honour, must guard his heart against feeling above the law.

In Jewish law, only a king may not renounce the honour due to his role (Kiddushin 32a-b). Yet there is to be a complete contrast between the external trappings of the king and his inward emotions.

Rambam teaches that true greatness is not in lowering yourself but in lifting others up, as Moshe did, bearing the people's burdens and speaking with respect. In Jewish thought, the higher your position,

the greater your duty to honour those around you.

The story of Queen Elizabeth taking the time to listening to Holocaust survivors' stories, treating each person as if they were a visiting head of state, is an example of a royal monarch lifting up others, rather than herself. Sixty years earlier, these people had been mistreated so badly, they felt they weren't even seen as human beings. That day, they were given royal honour.

The lesson is timeless: real honour lies not in what we receive, but in what we give, especially to those the world tends to overlook.



Parsha Activity

Royal Service Relay

Before Shabbat, prepare a list of 10–20 "royal service" actions. Examples: bow to someone, fan a player, bring 3 matching objects to a person, or crown another player. When it comes time to play, take turns being King/Queen during which time you are given a sequence of 3 actions from the list, each directed toward someone in the group. You have 60 seconds to memorise and perform them in order. Forgetting, mixing the order, or running out of time resets the sequence. Continue until everyone has a turn, or play that the entire group must create a successful sequence, everyone fulfilling their role correctly at the right time.



A Host does the most

It was the wedding of Rabban Gamliel's son, a day when he and his family were surrounded by joy, music, and honoured guests. The hall was full, the tables set, and the celebration underway.

Rabban Gamliel was not just the father of the *chatan*, he was also the *nasi*, a wise and distinguished teacher and the leader of the Jewish People. You might have expected to see him seated at the head table, receiving greetings and blessings, while others attended to the guests. But Rabban Gamliel was not at the head table. He was moving quietly among the guests, carrying trays of food, pouring wine, and making sure everyone had enough. He spoke to

each person directly, asking "Do you have what you need? Can I bring you more?" He spoke without formality or distance, taking care of every person he encountered.

Some of his students stood watching him in motion and were uneasy. "Is it right for the *nasi* of Israel to serve like a waiter?" they asked, surprised to see the most respected man in the room doing such work.

Rabbi Yehoshua, who was another great teacher and worked closely with Rabban Gamliel, heard the students and saw their confusion. He went over to talk to them, and said, "Our father Avraham, the greatest of our people, personally



served his guests, standing near them as they ate. If Avraham could serve others with his own hands, then surely Rabban Gamliel can do the same."

Then the students understood. What they were seeing was not a lowering of the leader's dignity, it was the very thing that gave him dignity.

• How could the students have used their status to bestow dignity upon others?



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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 51:12-52:12

This week's Haftara continues God's message of comfort and deliverance to His people. God reassures Israel not to fear human oppressors, for He is their eternal comforter and defender. The people have suffered greatly - Jerusalem is depicted as a woman who has drunk deeply from the cup of God's wrath and lies desolate. But God promises to remove this cup and give it instead to those who oppressed her.

In chapter 52, Jerusalem is called

to awake, rise, and clothe herself in strength and splendour, for her time of humiliation is ending. The people will be freed from exile and will know God's name and presence among them.

A beautiful proclamation is made: "How lovely upon the mountains: the steps of the bringer of tidings, resounding with peace" (Isaiah 52:7) announcing peace and salvation. The section ends with a promise of a safe and glorious return, led by the Lord Himself.

Why does the message of peace come from over the mountains?



Point to Ponder

Martin Luther King's famous speech references a future where "every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low...and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed" (quoting Isaiah 40:4-5). Why did he talk about having been to the mountaintop and seeing the promised land?



The Haftarot of Consolation

This week's Haftara is the fourth of the seven consecutive Haftarot of Consolation, also known as the Sheva D'Nechemta.

This particular prophecy of



consolation is similar to two of its predecessors (the Haftarot for Va'etchanan and Eikev) in that it focuses on the defeated mood of the people, who are mourning their situation in the wake of the destruction of the Temple or in the wake of the harsh Assyrian subjugation in the days of Menashe son of Chizkiyahu. They are unable to raise themselves up to the belief that God is capable and willing to redeem them after they have suffered their punishment.

Yeshayahu describes a redemption that is not carried out in haste, when the nations support

the people of Israel on their way to their land and in the building of their land. The nations will run to the king of Israel "for the sake of the Lord your God" (Is. 55:5); that is, they will come to the Temple, as in the vision of the end of days, to learn the ways of God - "for teaching will come forth from Zion, from Jerusalem, the Lord's word."

• Do you see any links with this week's Parsha?

• Why do you think we have seven Haftarot of Consolation?



Rabbi Sacks on Dreams

Our Haftara envisions a dreamy message of hope for the future. Rabbi Sacks wrote the following about dreams:

“In this age of artificial intelligence people sometimes ask me what makes us human, and I reply: the ability to dream. We have the unique capacity to imagine a future different from the present, and act to bring it about. From Joseph in the Bible, who dreamed dreams and interpreted the dreams of others, to Martin Luther King, whose greatest speech was ‘I have a dream,’ heroes of the human spirit have taken dreams seriously and used them to widen our horizons of possibility.

“The prophet Joel foresaw a time when “your old people will dream dreams, and your young will see visions.” The ability to dream and the gift of finding people who help us realise our dreams are what liberate us from the prison of fate. So never take dreams lightly. They are our route from the depressing world that is, to the hopeful world that might yet be.”



Further Ponderings

What is a dream of yours that you haven't yet put into action, that could put something good into the world?



Quote of the Week

“The most important thing is to dream. Dream about what you would like to do, to be, to achieve. Dream about the chapter you would like to write in the story of our people. Dream about what difference you would like to make to the world... [Dreams] are where we start thinking about the future. They signal the direction of our journey.”

The Two Journeys, Bamidbar, Covenant & Conversation, Judaism's Life-Changing Ideas

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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