



Covenant & Conversation

Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

KI TAVO • כי תבוא

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.

Listening and Law

It would be reasonable to assume that a language containing the verb "to command" must also contain the verb "to obey." The one implies the other, just as the concept of a question implies the possibility of an answer. We would, however, be wrong. *There are 613 commandments in the Torah, but there is no word in Biblical Hebrew that means "to obey."* When Hebrew was revived as a language of everyday speech in the 19th century, a word, *letsayet*, had to be borrowed from Aramaic. Until then there was no Hebrew word for "to obey."

This is an astonishing fact and not everyone was aware of it. It led some Christians (and secularists) to misunderstand the nature of Judaism: very few Christian thinkers fully appreciated the concept of *mitzva* and the idea that God might choose to reveal Himself in the form of laws. It also led some Jews to think about *mitzvot* in a way more appropriate to Islam (the word *Islam* means "submitting" to God's law) than to

Judaism. What word does the Torah use as the appropriate response to a *mitzva*? *Shema*.

The root *sh-m-a* is a keyword in the book of Deuteronomy, where it occurs 92 times, usually in the sense of what God wants from us in response to the commandments. But the verb *sh-m-a* means many things. Here are some of the meanings it has in Genesis:

1. "To hear" as in: "Abram *heard* that his relative [Lot] had been taken captive" (Gen. 14:14).
2. "To listen, pay attention, heed" as in: "Because you *listened* to your wife and ate fruit from the tree" (Gen. 3:17) and "Then Rachel said: God has vindicated me; He has *listened* to my plea and given me a son" (Gen. 30:7).
3. "To understand" as in "Come, let Us go down and confuse their language so they will not *understand* each other" (Gen. 11:7). This is how tradition understood the later phrase

Naaseh ve-nishma (Ex. 24: 7) to mean, “first we will do, then we will understand.”

4. “To be willing to obey” as the angel’s words to Abraham after the Binding of Isaac, “Through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you were *willing to obey Me*” (Gen. 22:18), when Abraham was about to obey God’s command, and at the last moment an angel called upon him to stop.

5. “To respond in deed, to do what someone else wants” as in “Do whatever Sarah tells you” – *sh’ma bekolah* (Gen. 21:12).

It is in this last sense that the verb *sh-m-a* comes closest in meaning to “obey.” The fact that *it* means all these things suggests that in the Torah there is no concept of blind obedience. In general, a commander orders and a soldier obeys. A slave-owner orders and the slave obeys. There is no active thought-process involved. The connection between the word of the commander and the deed of the commanded is one of action-and-reaction, stimulus-and-response. For practical purposes, the soldier or slave has no mind of his own. As Tennyson described the attitude of the soldiers before the Charge of the Light Brigade, “Ours not to reason why; ours but to do or die.”

That is not how the Torah conceives the relationship between God and us. God, who created us in His image, giving us freedom and the power to think, wants us

to *understand* His commands. Ralbag (Gersonides, 1288–1344) argues that it is precisely this that makes the Torah different:

Behold our Torah is unique among all the other doctrines and religions that other nations have had, in that our Torah contains nothing that does not originate in equity and reason. Therefore this Divine Law attracts people in virtue of its essence, so that they behave in accordance with it. The laws and religions of other nations are not like this: they do not conform to equity and wisdom, but are foreign to the nature of man, and people obey them because of compulsion, out of fear of the threat of punishment but not because of their essence.¹

Along similar lines, the modern scholar David Weiss Halivni speaks of “the Jewish predilection for justified law,” and contrasts this with other cultures in the ancient world:

Ancient law in general is apodictic, without justification and without persuasion. Its style is categorical, demanding, and commanding ... Ancient Near Eastern law in particular is devoid of any trace of desire to convince or to win hearts. It enjoins, prescribes, and orders, expecting to be heeded solely on the strength of being an official decree. It solicits no consent (through justification) from those to whom it is directed.²

¹ Gersonides, Commentary to Va-etchanan, par. 14.

² David Weiss Halivni, *Midrash, Mishnah, Gemara: the Jewish predilection for justified law*, Harvard University Press, 1986, 5.

The Torah uses at least three devices to show that Jewish law is not arbitrary, a mere decree. First, especially evident throughout the book of Devarim, is the giving of *reasons for the commands*. Often, though not always, the reason has to do with the experience of the Israelites in Egypt. They know what it feels like to be oppressed, to be a stranger, an outsider. I want you to create a different kind of society, says God through Moses, where slavery is more limited, where everyone is free one day a week, where the poor do not go hungry, and the powerless are not denied justice.

The second, most notably in the book of Bamidbar, is *the juxtaposition of narrative and law*, as if to say, the law is best understood against the backdrop of history and the experience of the Israelites in their formative years. So the law of the Red Heifer – for purification from contact with the dead – occurs just before the death of Miriam and Aaron, as if to say, bereavement and grief interfere with our contact with God but this does not last forever. We can become pure again. The law of *tsitsit* occurs after the story of the spies because (as I explained in an earlier *Covenant & Conversation*) both have to do with ways of seeing: the difference between seeing-with-fear and seeing-with-faith.

The third is *the connection between law and metaphysics*. There is a strong connection between Genesis 1, the story of creation, and the laws of *kedushah*, holiness. Both belong to *torat kohanim*, the priestly voice, and both are about order and the maintenance of boundaries. The laws against mixing meat and milk, wool and linen, and so on, are about

respecting the deep structure of nature as described in the opening chapter of the Torah.

Throughout Devarim (Deuteronomy), as Moses reaches the summit of his leadership, he becomes an educator, explaining to the new generation who will eventually conquer and inhabit the land, that the laws God has given them are not just Divine decrees. They make sense in human terms. They constitute the architectonics of a free and just society. They respect human dignity. They honour the integrity of nature. They give the land the chance to rest and recuperate. They protect Israel against the otherwise inexorable laws of the decline and fall of nations.

Only by recognising God as their sovereign will they guard against overbearing kings and the corruptions of power. Time and again Moses tells the people that if they follow God's laws they will prosper. If they fail to do so they will suffer defeat and exile. All this can be understood in supernatural terms, but it can be understood in natural ways also.

That is why Moses, consistently throughout Devarim, uses the verb *sh-m-a*. He wants the Israelites to obey God, but not blindly or through fear alone. God is not an autocrat. The Israelites should know this through their own direct experience. They had seen how God, creator of heaven and earth, had chosen this people as His own, brought them from slavery to freedom, fed, sustained and protected them through the wilderness, and led them to victory against their enemies. God had not given the Torah to Israel for His sake but for

theirs. As Weiss Halivni puts it: the Torah “invites the receiver of the law to join in grasping the beneficent effect of the law, thereby bestowing dignity upon him and giving him a sense that he is a partner in the law.”³

That is the meaning of Moses’ great words in this week’s Parsha:

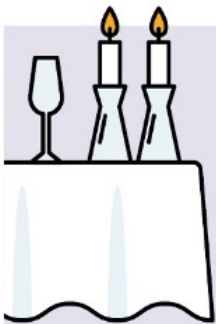
“*Be silent, Israel, and listen!* You have now become the people of the Lord your God. *Listen* to the Lord your God and follow His commands and decrees that I give you today.”

Deut. 27:9-10

Keeping the commands involves an act of listening, not just submission and blind obedience – listening in all its multiple senses of attending, meditating and reflecting of the nature of God through

creation, revelation, and redemption. It means trying to understand our limits and imperfections as human beings. It means remembering what it felt like to be a slave in Egypt. It involves humility and memory and gratitude. But it does not involve abdication of the intellect or silencing of the questioning mind.

God is not a tyrant⁴ but a teacher.⁵ He seeks not just our obedience but also our understanding. All nations have laws, and laws are there to be obeyed. But few nations other than Israel set it as their highest task to understand *why* the law is as it is. That is what the Torah means by the word *shema*.



Around the Shabbat Table

1. How might the Torah’s idea of *shema* shape the way we approach other opportunities, such as learning in school or listening to parents?
2. What happens to people or societies when they follow rules without thinking?
3. Do you think faith should be more about trust, or more about understanding? Why?

● 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/ki-teitse/letting-go-of-hate/>



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³ Ibid., 14.

⁴ Avodah Zarah 3a.

⁵ Tamhuma (Buber), Yitro, 16.