



Covenant & Conversation



Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

כי תבוא • KI TAVO

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

Listening and Law

The Torah often uses the Hebrew verb meaning “to command”. This is necessary, for there are 613 commandments - mitzvot - in the Torah. Strangely though, there is no verb in Biblical Hebrew that means “to obey.” How can we have the idea of commands without the concept of obeying them? The answer is simple. Instead of using the word obey, the Torah uses another word: *shema*.

The root *sh-m-a* is a keyword in Devarim, appearing 92 times. But this word does not mean blind obedience. It has many shades of meaning: to hear, to listen, to understand, to be willing to obey, and to respond in action. Tradition understood *Na'aseh ve-nishma* (“we will do and we will understand”) as: first we act, then we seek to understand.

The fact that *shema* carries all these meanings suggests that in the Torah there is no concept of automatic, mindless obedience. Commanders and masters order, and their soldiers and slaves obey without question. But God created us in His image, with freewill and the power to think for ourselves. He does not want slaves of the mind. **He wants us to listen, reflect, and understand.**

The Ralbag noted that this is what makes the Torah different: “Our Torah contains nothing that does not originate in equity and reason. The laws of other nations... people obey because of compulsion. Our Torah attracts by virtue of its essence.”

The Torah shows in several ways that its laws are not arbitrary. First, it often provides reasons: the Israelites knew what it felt like to be oppressed, so they were commanded to create a society that protects the stranger, frees slaves, and feeds the poor. Second, it often connects law with narrative. For example, the law of tzitzit follows the story of the spies,

to teach us how we see with faith instead of with fear. Third, **the Torah links law to creation itself.** The priestly laws of holiness, like the separation of meat and milk or wool and linen, mirror the separations of Genesis 1, showing a deep respect for nature, its structure and boundaries.

As Moshe nears the end of his life, he becomes an educator. Again and again he explains that God’s laws are not arbitrary decrees. They make sense. They uphold dignity, honour creation, give the land rest, protect against tyranny, and create the foundations of freedom. Follow them, he says, and you will prosper. Abandon them, and you will fall. That is why Devarim repeatedly uses the verb *shema*. Moshe asks the Israelites to “obey,” but not blindly. They had seen for themselves that God had freed them, sustained them, and brought them to this land. God gave the Torah not for His sake but for theirs. The Torah invites us to see the benefit of following it, giving us dignity and a sense of partnership when we keep the law. That is the meaning of Moshe’s words, “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.”

Keeping the commands is not blind submission. It is listening in all its senses - paying attention, reflecting, remembering, and understanding. It means humility, gratitude, and memory of what it felt like to be a slave in Egypt. But it does not mean silencing the mind.

God is not a tyrant but a teacher. He seeks not just our obedience but also our understanding. **Many nations have laws, but few set it their highest task as understanding why the law is as it is. That is what the Torah means by the word *shema*.**

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

In a Nutshell

Moshe instructs Bnai Yisrael that when they settle in the Promised Land, they are to bring their first fruits, called *bikkurim*, to the Temple as a sign of gratitude. He also gives the laws of tithes, which are to be given to the Levites and the poor, and describes the ceremony of blessings and curses that will take place on Har Gerizim and Har Eival. Moshe reminds the nation that they are God’s chosen people, just as they have chosen Him. The parashah concludes with blessings for obedience and harsh warnings of illness, exile, and hardship for disobedience. Moshe declares that only now, after forty years, have the people truly gained understanding.



Around the Shabbat Table

1. How might the Torah’s idea of *shema* shape the way we approach learning in school or listening to our 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?



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ON THE PARSHA • WRITTEN BY SARA LAMM

INSPIRED BY THE TEACHINGS OF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS 7"57



Delving Deeper

It is a surprising fact that in the Torah, there is no word for “to obey.” But with our key verb being *shema*, meaning to listen, to pay attention, to understand, and to respond, we can learn a lot about Judaism.

This way of accepting the laws reflects a radically different vision of the relationship between God and His people than that of any other religion. Unlike systems built on blind submission or fear, the Torah invites thought, memory, and moral awareness.

God does not want us to be robots, obediently complying to ever rule. Rather, he asks for an engaged

partnership: to hear His words, reflect on them, and act with understanding. By connecting law with reason, history, and human dignity, the Torah shapes a society where freedom, justice, and compassion are possible. To live by God’s commands is not to silence the mind, but to bring heart, intellect, and action together in response.

- What is one way you feel like you can do both - live by the Torah’s rules, also keeping in mind your own intellect and creativity?



Parsha Activity

Anti-Simon Says

Let’s play a game of Simon Says with a twist, exploring the idea of rebelling against laws. In this version of the game, everyone must do the opposite of the command. If the leader says, “Simon says, wave your right hand,” players raise their left. If the leader says, “Simon says jump forward,” they jump backwards. If the leader forgets to say “Simon says,” players must freeze!

Note: You may find different players interpret how to ‘disobey’ the commands from Simon in different ways. That’s great, and creative, as long as they do *something* and react.



Freedom Flies

Long ago there was a girl named Leora who lived in a faraway land. Her country was beautiful, full of clear lakes, purple mountains and blossom trees. But Leora lived under a dark cloud, for she was bound by a terrible curse: whatever she was commanded, she was forced to obey, no matter who ordered her, and no matter what she really wanted to do.

Imagine living with a curse like that? If someone said, “Bring me some water,” she *had* to run and fetch it. If they said, “Give me your coat,” she had to hand it over, even if it was her only one. Once, her uncle was in a cranky mood, and told her to “Get away from here” and she found herself forced to travel 50 miles before the command lifted and she was able to return to her home.

Life was hard because anyone could take advantage of her, and she often felt she had no voice and no choice of her own.

One day, a bullying child ordered Leora to give up her mother’s special necklace. Her heart pounded, and she felt the curse pulling her to obey, as always. Leora desperately wanted to resist, more than ever before. This time she stopped, took a deep breath, and mustered every bit of strength she had. She thought of her mother, of love, and of how important it was for her to keep the pendant safe. With her voice steady, she locked eyes with the bully and declared, “No! I will not do that!”

In that instant, the curse shattered. The bully’s power vanished, and Leora realised she was



obey blindly. She was able to listen, to think, and to choose for herself.

Outwardly, very little changed. She did not start breaking all the rules, and ignoring everyone’s wishes. But now Leora carried her freedom like a shield, never forgetting the strength she had found within herself.

- What do you think life would be like if you were compelled to follow every command, and never able to choose?



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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 60:1-22

This passage from the book of Isaiah contains a prophetic vision of Zion's future glory and restoration. It opens with the call, "Rise, give light, for your light has come," as God's presence radiates over Jerusalem.

Though darkness covers the earth, nations and kings will be drawn to Zion's Divine light. The city will be enriched by the wealth of nations, and exiled sons and daughters will return joyfully. Foreigners will rebuild Zion's walls and serve her, and former enemies

will show honour. The gates of Jerusalem will remain open, symbolising peace and abundance. Instead of being despised, Zion will become the pride of all generations. Violence and ruin will end, and God will be her everlasting light and glory.

The chapter closes with the promise of renewed strength and growth: the smallest will become a mighty nation. God will accomplish all of this in His perfect time, assuring transformation, hope, and Divine favour.



Points to Ponder

1. Why will the non-Jewish nations be drawn to Israel in the future?

2. Have you ever spent time in Jerusalem?

- If you have, how did you feel when you walked around in the old city?

- If you haven't visited Jerusalem, how do you feel when visiting ancient sites of interest?



Parsha and Haftara Links

There are two links between the Parsha and Haftara this week:

1) Both speak of the spiritual pre-eminence of Israel. In the Parsha God promises to make Israel high above all the nations that He has made (Devarim 26:19) and in



the Haftara, Isaiah tells us that the nations will walk by Israel's light (Isaiah 60:30).

2) In contrast to the Parsha, which promises that Israel will be scattered amongst the nations (Devarim 28:64), the Haftara makes the opposite promise, that the exiles will return to Zion (Isaiah 60:4).

Rabbi Sacks once noted that the Havdallah candle, with its intertwined wicks and single flame, symbolises our **"partnership with God in the work of creation."** There is no more beautiful image of how God empowers us to

join Him in bringing light to the world."

HaRav Yaakov Medan notes that "Our prophecy [in the Haftara] begins and ends with one message: God will be an eternal light for His people Israel. This light not only enables the power of sight, but constitutes salvation and comfort for an anguished people whose years of exile are coming to an end, and who are returning at last to the land of their forefathers."

• Why is light such a powerful metaphor for redemption?



Rabbi Sacks on Jerusalem

Rabbi Sacks wrote the following about visiting Jerusalem: "...a place of such beauty it takes your breath away. Jerusalem is the place where all the prayers of all the Jews across all the centuries and from all the continents meet and take flight on their way to heaven. It is the place where you feel brushed by the wings of the Shechinah.

"We have had the privilege to be born in a generation that has seen Jerusalem reunited and rebuilt. We have seen the Jewish people come home. Today God is calling on us all to be Guardians of Zion. Never has this been more important. We must all stand up for the one home our people has ever known and the one city our people has loved more than any other. We are all shagrireiy medinat Yisrael (ambassadors for the State of Israel) and we must all make Israel's case in a world that sometimes fails to see the beauty we know is here. Let us all take on that task. With Hashem's help, we will succeed, and we pray may the world make its peace with Israel so that Israel - and Israel's God - can bring peace to the world."



Further Ponderings

How would you describe visiting Jerusalem to non-Jewish friends, neighbours, or colleagues?



Quote of the Week

"There are moments that make Jerusalem feel like no other place on earth; when you feel yourself lifted beyond time and space and embraced, as it were, by *zreuoit olam*, the arms of eternity."

We Never Forget Jerusalem

from Rabbi Sacks' acceptance speech upon receiving the Guardian of Zion Award at Bar-Ilan University

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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