



Covenant & Conversation



Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

NITZAVIM • נצבים

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

COVENANT & CONVERSATION SUMMARY

Why Be Jewish?

In the last days of his life, Moshe renews the *brit* between God and Israel. The entire book of Devarim has been an account of how this *brit* came about, what its terms are, and why it is the core of Israel's identity as an *am kadosh*, a holy people. Now comes the moment of renewal itself, a national commitment to Jewish life under God's law. Moshe makes it clear that the *brit* is both with those there that day, and also with all future generations.

He says: *"It is not with you alone that I am making this sworn covenant, but with whoever is standing here with us today before the Lord our God, and with whoever is not here with us today."* (Devarim 29:13–14)

"Whoever is not here" refers to generations not yet born. This *brit* binds all Jews from that day to today. As the Talmud says, we are all *mushba ve-omed meHar Sinai* - "foresworn from Sinai." By agreeing to be God's people, our ancestors obligated us all.

This is a crucial point about Judaism. Apart from those who convert, Jews do not choose to be Jewish. We are instead born into the covenant. A bat or bar mitzvah is not voluntary acceptance of Judaism. That choice took place more than three thousand years ago when Moshe spoke those words, for all future generations. **But how can this be so?** A basic principle of Judaism is that there is no obligation without consent. How can we be bound today by an agreement made by our ancestors long ago?

This is the question of questions of Jewish identity. If Jewishness were simply ethnic, we could understand it. But being Jewish is not about race; it is about obligations. And obligations usually require consent.

In our long history, Jews rarely asked "Why should we be Jewish?" Jewish identity was not a decision, it was simply given: *my parents are Jewish, so I am Jewish*. Yet at moments

of crisis – in Babylonian exile, under Hellenistic and Roman pressure, and in fifteenth-century Spain – Jews did ask the question. Then, thinkers like Ezekiel, Abarbanel, and Arama grappled with how the covenant still binds us.

Ezekiel's answer was blunt: Jews might try to abandon their destiny, but they would fail. Even against their will they would still be known as Jews. History proved him

right in ages of assimilation when Jews still suffered antisemitism, no matter how they self-identified.

The Sages offered a mystical answer: the souls of all future Jews were present at Sinai and gave their consent. In essence they meant that deep down, Jews know they are Jews, even if they are assimilated.

It may seem odd to expect people to feel obligated to something they did not personally agree to. But the truth is that some obligations come automatically with birth. A crown prince or princess does not choose to be heir to the throne; it is their destiny. So it is with Jews, of whom God said, "My child, My firstborn, Israel." To be Jewish is both a privilege and a burden, but it is a fate inseparable from who we are. We do not choose many of the most important facts about ourselves: not our parents, not our time and place of birth. Yet each shapes our identity. So too with being Jewish.

We are part of a story that began long before we were born and will continue long after we are gone. The question for us is: Will we continue the story? The hopes of a hundred generations rest on our willingness to do so. Deep in our collective memory, Moshe's words still echo: "It is not with you alone that I am making this sworn covenant, but with ... whoever is not here with us today." **We are each a key player in this story. We can live it. We can abandon it. But it is a choice we cannot avoid, and it has immense consequences. The future of the covenant rests with us.**

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



In a Nutshell

Parshat Nitzavim presents foundational truths of Jewish belief. Moshe gathers all of Bnai Yisrael, from leaders to labourers, men, women, and converts, to stand before him in his final days, and he speaks emphatically of the unity of the nation before God. He warns of exile and devastation if they turn away from the Torah, yet promises ultimate redemption: God will forgive, gather them, and return them to their land. Moshe assures them that the Torah is for everyone, and he teaches that life and death, blessing and curse, are before them, and they should choose life.



Around the Shabbat Table

1. Which aspects of you were pre-determined? Which aspects did you choose?
2. How do you see your role in the eternal Jewish story that began thousands of years ago?
3. Why do you think the temptation to "be like the nations" was so strong in the days of Babylon, and is it still strong today?



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ON THE PARSHA • WRITTEN BY SARA LAMM

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



Delving Deeper

When Moshe gathers all of Israel together to renew the *brit* for themselves and for every generation of Jews yet to come, it was an act of utmost importance, and it should be noted that he did this as the final act of his life. But such an act raises the question: how can people be held to a decision their ancestors made centuries earlier on their behalf?

The Sages wondered whether even those who stood at Sinai were truly free to choose, since a Midrash says God held the mountain over their heads and told them that if they did not accept it the Torah, this would be their burial-place. If even *they* did

not freely accept the Torah, but did so under duress, how can we be bound to keep it?

The truth is that this *brit* is not a contract of convenience but a destiny - similar to how a royal is born into a life of duty. Being Jewish carries both privilege and responsibility, shaping lives in ways both joyful and demanding. It is a story handed down across the ages, and each generation must choose how to carry it forward and give it new meaning.

• How does the idea of destiny challenge or strengthen your sense of Jewish identity?



Parsha Activity

Pathways

Clear a space in the middle of the room and set up pillows, chairs, or other markers as different “paths.” Everyone begins on the same side. Then, the leader calls out directions such as take the zigzag path, hop three times, crawl under a chair, and each player chooses how to move forward. Everyone will ultimately reach the same finish line. After a full round, family members can create new paths for each other.

In what ways might this game help us think about destiny and the different paths people take to reach it?



The Life of a Leader

From the very beginning, Moshe’s life required some big decisions. Pharaoh did not intend to allow any Hebrew boys to live, so Moshe’s parents, in an act of faith and courage, placed him in a basket on the Nile river. As he floated away, Moshe’s very existence was bound up with Divine protection and the trust that his life would serve a greater purpose.

Against all odds, Moshe was raised as a prince of Egypt, enjoying education, status, and privilege far beyond the reach of his enslaved people. Yet with this privilege came responsibility: he soon learned to recognise the suffering of his brethren and to act with justice.

Seeing an Egyptian beating a Hebrew slave, he intervened, placing

his conscience above his comfort. This choice marked the beginning of his lifelong obligation to stand against oppression.

Moshe then fled to Midian, losing the power and privilege of Egypt but gaining the opportunity to grow in humility and faith. In Midian, tending sheep and living quietly, he learned patience and compassion - qualities that would prepare him for leadership.

When God called to Moshe at the Burning Bush, he faced the weighty obligation of representing his people and confronting Pharaoh. Moshe felt unworthy, hesitant, and fearful, but the opportunity to be God’s messenger was placed in his hands. With this privilege came the responsibility to speak truth



to power and to trust that God’s presence would guide him, even when his own strength seemed insufficient.

Throughout his life, and at every turn, Moshe took the opportunity to rise above personal comfort, dedicating his entire being to God and to Israel’s destiny. Moshe Rabbeinu - our leader and teacher, led a life that can be an example to us all. What responsibilities and opportunities will you step forward to welcome?



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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 61:10–63:9 (Ashkenazim and Sephardim)

Isaiah 61:9–63:9 (Yemenites)

Isaiah 61:10–63:9 is a powerful blend of praise, promise, and Divine justice. The speaker rejoices in God, who clothes him with salvation and righteousness, like a bridegroom or bride in finery. God promises to make righteousness and praise spring up before all nations, and vows never to abandon Zion. Watchmen are appointed to remind God of His promises until Jerusalem shines with salvation.

In Isaiah 63, the prophet sees a Divine figure coming from Edom, his garments stained red - not

from wine, but from treading the nations in judgment. This figure, understood as God or God's agent, has acted alone to deliver justice.

The section ends with a reflection on God's mercy and faithfulness. Despite Israel's disobedience, God has been a redeemer, identifying with their suffering and saving them in love and compassion. It expresses the deep bond between God and His people, marked by both justice and mercy.



Points to Ponder

1. Where else in Tanach is the colour red mentioned?
2. Does red always relate to a negative trait?



Parsha and Haftara Links

In this week's Parsha and Haftara we can find a clear contrast in relation to the holy Land of Israel.



In the Parsha (Devarim 29:21-22 and 29:27) we are told about the future destruction of the land. However, in the Haftara (Isaiah 62:4) Isaiah states that Jerusalem will no longer be called forsaken nor the Holy Land desolate.

The Parsha later speaks of God turning Israel's captivity and bringing them back from the lands of their dispersion (Devarim 30:3), which is a clear parallel with the Haftara.

This is the last of the "Seven Haftarot of Consolation," and also the Haftara read on the last Shabbat of the Jewish year.

We read these passages just as we are about to usher in the New Year and the High Holy Days season, and while the Parsha contains Moshe's final speech to the Children of Israel as they are on the cusp of entering the Promised Land, we complete this Parsha and Haftara at the close of our calendar, the shofar ringing in our ears.



On the High Holy Days

Rabbi Sacks noted that Nitzavim is always read the Shabbat before Rosh Hashana, at a time when we are engaged in the mitzvah of teshuvah (Repentance). “...

teshuvah is two things: a religious-metaphysical experience of sin and atonement (Maimonides), and an ethical-historical drama of exile and return (Nachmanides). For nearly two thousand years, the former predominated while the latter was no more than a distant memory and a pious hope. The Temple was gone, and so too were the Prophets. But whereas there was a substitute for the Temple (the synagogue as *mikdash me’at*, “a temple-in-microcosm”) there was no real substitute for Israel as a nation-among-nations in the arena of history.

“In the course of the twentieth century, that changed. Jews returned. The State of Israel was reborn. The promise of the Prophets, millennia ago, came true. Yet the word teshuvah – in the sense meant by Moses in this week’s sedra, and by Nachmanides in his construal of the command – has not yet been fully realised. There has been a physical homecoming to the land, but not yet a spiritual homecoming to the faith.”



Further Ponderings

How can we inspire a nation to a ‘spiritual homecoming to the faith?’



Quote of the Week

“The best way to stay young is never to forget ‘the devotion of our youth,’ the defining experiences that made us who we are, the dreams we had long ago of how we might change the world to make it a better, fairer, more spiritually beautiful place.”

How to Renew a Nation

Nitzavim, 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