



Covenant & Conversation

Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

VAYELECH • וַיֵּלֶךְ

FROM THE TEACHINGS AND WRITINGS OF **RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS** זצ"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 זצ"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.

The Heart, the Home, the Text

By now Moses had given 612 commands to the Israelites. But there was one further instruction he still had to give, the last of his life, the final mitzva in the Torah.

Now therefore write this song and teach it to the people of Israel. Put it in their mouths, that this song may be My witness against the people of Israel.

Deut. 31:19

The Oral Tradition understood this to command that each Israelite should take part in the writing of a Sefer Torah. Here is how Maimonides states the following law:

Every male Israelite is commanded to write a Torah scroll for himself, as it says, "Now therefore write this song," meaning, "Write for

yourselves [a complete copy of] the Torah that contains this song," since we do not write isolated passages of the Torah [but only a complete scroll]. Even if one has inherited a Torah scroll from his parents, nonetheless it is a mitzva to write one for oneself, and one who does so is as if he had received [the Torah] from Mount Sinai. One who does not know how to write a scroll may engage [a scribe] to do it for him, and whoever corrects even one letter is as if he has written a whole scroll.

Laws of Tefillin, Mezuzah and Sefer Torah 7:1

There is something poetic in the fact that Moses left this law until the last. For it

was as if he were saying to the next generation, and all future generations: Do not think it is enough to be able to say, 'My ancestors received the Torah from Moses.' You must take it and make it new in every generation.

And so Jews did.

The Koran calls Jews "the People of the Book." That is a great understatement. The whole of Judaism is an extended love story between a people and a book – between Jews and the Torah. Never has a people loved and honoured a book more. They read it, studied it, argued with it, lived it. In its presence they stood as if it were a king. On Simchat Torah, they danced with it as if it were a bride. If – God forbid – it fell, they fasted. If one was no longer fit for use it was buried as if it were a relative that had died.

For a thousand years they wrote commentaries to it in the form of the rest of Tanach (there were a thousand years between Moses and Malachi, the last of the prophets, and in the very last chapter of the prophetic books Malachi, says in the name of God, "Remember the Torah of My servant Moses, the decrees and laws I gave him at Horeb for all Israel"). Then for another thousand years, between the last of the prophets and the closure of the Babylonian Talmud, they wrote commentaries to the commentaries in the

form of the documents – Midrash, Mishna, and Gemara – of the Oral Law. Then for a further thousand years, from the Gaonim to the Rishonim to the Acharonim, they wrote commentaries to the commentaries to the commentaries, in the form of biblical exegesis, law codes, and works of philosophy. Until the modern age virtually every Jewish text was directly or indirectly a commentary to the Torah.

For a hundred generations it was more than a book. It was God's love letter to the Jewish people, the gift of His word, the pledge of their betrothal, the marriage contract between heaven and the Jewish people, the bond that God would never break or rescind. It was the story of the people and their written constitution as a nation under God. When they were exiled from their land it became the documentary evidence of past promise and future hope. In a brilliant phrase the poet Heinrich Heine called the Torah "the portable homeland of the Jew." In George Steiner's gloss, "The text is home; each commentary a return."¹

Dispersed, scattered, landless, powerless, so long as a Jew had the Torah he or she was at home – if not physically then spiritually. There were times when it was all they had. Hence the lacerating line in

¹ George Steiner, "Our Homeland, the Text," in *The Salmagundi Reader*, pp. 99–121.

one of the liturgical poems in Neilah at the end of Yom Kippur:

“Ein lanu shiur rak haTorah hazot.”

“We have nothing left except this Torah.”

It was their world. According to one Midrash it was the architecture of creation: “God looked in the Torah and created the Universe.” According to another tradition, the whole Torah was a single, mystical name of God. It was written, said the sages, in letters of black fire on white fire. Rabbi Jose ben Kisma, arrested by the Romans for teaching Torah in public, was sentenced to death, wrapped in a Torah scroll that was then set on fire. As he was dying his students asked him what he saw. He replied, “I see the parchment burning but the letters flying [back to heaven]” (Avodah Zarah 18a).

The Romans might burn the scrolls, but the Torah was indestructible.

So there is immense power in the idea that, as Moses reached the end of his life, and the Torah the end of its narrative, the final imperative should be a command to continue to write and study the Torah, teaching it to the people and “putting it in their mouths” so that it would not abandon them, nor they, it. God’s word would live within them, giving them life.

The Talmud tells an intriguing story about King David, who asked God to tell him how long he would live. God answered him, that is something no mortal knows. The most God would disclose to David was that he would die on Shabbat. The Talmud then says that every Shabbat, David’s “mouth would not cease from learning” during the entire day.

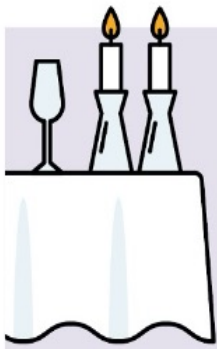
When the day came for David to die, the Angel of Death was despatched, but finding David learning incessantly, was unable to take him – the Torah being a form of undying life. Eventually the angel was forced to devise a stratagem. He caused a rustling noise in a tree in the royal garden. David climbed up a ladder to see what was making the noise. A rung of the ladder broke. David fell, and for a moment ceased learning. In that moment he died (Shabbat 30a-b).

What is this story about? At the simplest level it is the sages’ way of re-envisioning King David less as a military hero and Israel’s greatest king than as a penitent and Torah scholar (note that several of the Psalms, notably 1, 19 and 119, are poems in praise of Torah study). But at a deeper level it seems to be saying more. David here symbolises the Jewish people. *So long as the Jewish people never stop learning, it will not die.* The national equivalent of the Angel of Death – the law that all nations, however great, eventually decline and fall – does not apply to a

people who never cease to study, never forgetting who they are and why.

Hence the Torah ends with the last command – to keep writing and studying Torah. And this is epitomised in the beautiful custom, on Simchat Torah, to move immediately from reading the end of the Torah to reading the beginning. The last word in the Torah is *Yisrael*; the last letter is a *lamed*. The first word of the Torah is *Bereishit*; the first letter is *beit*. *Lamed* followed by *beit* spells *lev*, “heart.”

So long as the Jewish people never stop learning, the Jewish heart will never stop beating. Never has a people loved a book more. Never has a book sustained a people longer or lifted it higher.



Around the Shabbat Table

1. What does making the Torah new in every generation mean to you?
2. What do you think of Heine's comment about the “portable homeland of the Jew”?
3. Why would the Torah end with this mitzvah? Would you pick a different mitzvah as the final one?

● 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/nitzavim/why-be-jewish/>