



Covenant & Conversation



Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

VAYELECH • וַיֵּלֶךְ

BASED ON THE TEACHINGS OF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS וַיֵּלֶךְ

COVENANT & CONVERSATION SUMMARY

The Heart, the Home, the Text

Moshe had given 612 commands to Bnei Yisrael. Now he would give the last of his life, the final mitzva of the Torah:

"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."

The Oral Tradition understood this to mean that each Israelite should take part in writing a Sefer Torah. Rambam ruled that *"even if a person has inherited a Torah scroll, it is still a mitzva to write one for oneself, and then it is like they have received the Torah from Har Sinai. One who does not know how to write may commission a scribe, and whoever corrects even one letter is as if they have written a whole scroll."*

There is something poetic in the fact that Moshe left this law until the end, and taught them to take the Torah he had given them, and make it new in every generation. And so Jews did.

The whole of Judaism is an extended love story between a people and a book. 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 before a king. On Simchat Torah, they danced with it as with a bride. If it fell, they fasted. If it was no longer usable, they buried it like a relative.

For a thousand years they wrote commentaries in the rest of Tanach. Malachi, the last prophet, closed with the words: *"Remember the Torah of My servant Moshe."* Then, for another thousand years, they wrote commentaries to the commentaries – Midrash, Mishnah, and Talmud. Then for a further thousand years, Gaonim, Rishonim, and Acharonim wrote biblical commentaries, codes, and philosophies. Until modern times almost 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, His marriage contract with them, the bond He would never break. When they were exiled, it became their portable homeland. Heinrich Heine's phrase captured it perfectly: *"the portable homeland of the Jew."*

Dispersed, powerless, landless, so long as Jews had the Torah, they were at home – spiritually if not physically. Sometimes it was all they had. Hence the haunting words of the Yom Kippur prayer: *Ein lanu shiur rak haTorah hazot* – "We have nothing left except this Torah."

It was their world. A Midrash said: "God looked in the Torah and created the Universe." Another taught that the whole Torah was a single name of God. Rabbi Jose ben Kisma, burned alive wrapped in a Torah scroll, said with his last breath: "I see the parchment burning but the letters flying [back to heaven]." The Romans could burn scrolls, but the Torah was indestructible.

So it is powerful that, as Moshe reached the end of his life, the final command was to keep writing and teaching Torah so that it would never be forgotten. God's word would live within them, giving them life.

The Torah ends with this last command – to keep writing and studying it. One way we follow this mitzva is the beautiful custom on Simchat Torah, moving immediately from the end of the Torah back to the beginning. The last word of the Torah is Yisrael, ending with a *lamed*. The first word is Bereishit, beginning with a *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.

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



In a Nutshell

Moshe spends his final day addressing the people. At 120 years old, he tells them he can no longer lead and passes his leadership to Yehoshua. He completes the writing of the Torah and gives it to the Leviim to be placed in the Aron. The people are commanded to observe *hak'hel*, a gathering every seven years when the king will publicly read from the Torah. The portion closes with a warning that Israel will one day abandon the covenant and God will hide His face, yet it also assures that the Torah will never be forgotten by their descendants.



Around the Shabbat Table

1. What does making the Torah new in every generation mean to you?
2. What do you think of Heinrich Heine's comment about the "portable homeland of the Jew"?
3. Why would the Torah end with this mitzva? Would you have picked something different for the 613th mitzva?



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ON THE PARSHA • WRITTEN BY SARA LAMM

INSPIRED BY THE TEACHINGS OF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS זצ"ל



Delving Deeper

The Talmud tells an intriguing story about King David. As he got older, he asked God to tell him how long he would live. God refused to tell him, but He did reveal that he would die on a 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 found David learning incessantly, and was unable to take him – the Torah being a form of undying life. Eventually the angel was forced to devise a plan. 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 he ceased learning. In that moment he died.

What is this story about? At the deepest level it seems to be saying that as long as the Jewish people never stop learning, they will always survive. The general rule that all nations - however great - eventually decline and fall does not apply to a people who never ceases to study, never forgetting who they are and why. The Torah is eternal, and it also makes us eternal.

• **What's something you are willing to do to keep the Torah alive today?**



Parsha Activity

The Torah Chain

Everyone stands in a circle or line, holding hands or linking elbows to form an unbroken chain. The first player begins by saying a short, well-known Torah phrase, such as *Shema Yisrael* or *Torah tziva lanu Moshe*, and adds a simple motion like clapping or stomping. The next person repeats the phrase and motion, then adds their own new action. Each player follows, always repeating the entire sequence before adding one more. If someone forgets, the group helps, so the chain is never broken. The goal is to keep the Torah chain alive, together.



Echoes of Memory

Every Friday night in my childhood in Vienna, Austria, our father would raise the silver kiddush cup in his palm, and with his eyes half-closed he would recite the blessing over the wine. Then we all sipped from the cup, marking Shabbat as families had for generations. But on one particular Friday in June 1939, something changed.

That night the atmosphere was heavy. My sister and I would soon be leaving for England on the Kindertransport, leaving our parents behind, as we were sent to a safer life. This would be our last Shabbat together as a family.

My mother filled the house with the smell of challah and cakes, but we could all see that inside her heart

was breaking. At the train station, our parents fought back tears as the whistle blew. My mother ran alongside the train until she could no longer keep up. My father, wounded from the First World War, could no longer run, but we knew he would if he could. He was endlessly resourceful, and he had taken our picture that morning, writing *Der Abschied* - "the farewell" - on the negative side - something to hold onto, and never forget.

Nineteen years later, at my wedding in New York aboard the SS Zion, my sister handed me a gift she had saved: our father's kiddush cup. Unbeknownst to her, he had hidden it in her clothing, ensuring that even if our parents did not survive,



the cup would continue on, passed down to the next generation of our family.

Since receiving that gift on my wedding day, I honour them every Shabbat. I raise that same cup and bless the wine, remembering my parents' love, and their sacrifice.

Adapted from Alfred Traum, "The Kiddush Cup," USHMM Echoes of Memory (2011).

• **What relics do you have in your family that help keep the generational chain strong?**



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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

Shabbat Shuva – Vayelech

Askenazim – Hosea 14:2-10 and Joel 2:15-27. (Some begin at 2:11) some also read Micah 7:18-20

Minhag Anglia reads in the order: Hosea, Micah, Joel

Sephardim – Hosea 14:2-10 and Micah 7:18-20

Yemenites – Hosea 14:2-10

Hosea 14:2-10 and Micah 7:18-20 both emphasise God's mercy and Israel's return.

Hosea calls the people to do *teshuvah*, urging them to bring words of confession instead of sacrifices, acknowledging God alone as Saviour. God responds with compassion, promising to heal their waywardness, love them freely, and bless them abundantly. Israel will flourish like a tree, rooted in Divine care, and the wise are

urged to walk in God's ways.

Micah echoes this message, proclaiming God's uniqueness in pardoning sin and showing enduring mercy. God does not hold anger forever but delights in steadfast love, casting sins into the depths of the sea.

Together, these passages affirm God's readiness to forgive, restore, and renew His people when they sincerely return to Him.



Point to Ponder

How can we understand the analogy of the Jewish people flourishing like a tree?

(Hint: Think about the different parts of trees, and the functions of trees in the world.)



Parsha and Haftara Links

This week's Haftara is always read on Shabbat Shuva, the Shabbat that falls during the days between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. The



opening word of the Haftara - "Shuvah" (return/repent) - gives this special Shabbat its name and is fitting to be read during the Ten Days of Repentance (the *Asseret Yamei HaTeshuvah*).

While this week's Parsha talks about the Jewish People worshipping idols, the Haftara refers to the *relinquishing* of idols. The Parsha refers to a partial repentance, and the Haftara offers a view of a more complete repentance.

Unlike other weeks where the Haftara mirrored the Parsha, or in some cases opposed the Parsha, we see in this week's Haftara a continuation, a progression of the themes found in the Parsha.



On the 10 Days of Repentance

Rabbi Sacks powerfully described this important period in the Jewish calendar:

“These days constitute a courtroom drama like no other. The Judge is God Himself, and we are on trial for our lives. It begins on Rosh Hashanah, with the sounding of the shofar, announcing that the court is in session. The Book of Life, in which our fate will be inscribed, now lies open. As we say in prayer, “On Rosh Hashanah it is written, and on Yom Kippur it is sealed, who will live and who will die.” At home, we eat an apple dipped in honey as a symbol of our hope for a sweet new year.

“On Yom Kippur, the atmosphere reaches a peak of intensity in a day of fasting and prayer. Repeatedly we confess our sins, whole alphabetical litanies of them, including ones we probably had neither the time nor the imagination to commit. We throw ourselves on the mercy of the court, which is to say, on God Himself. Write us, we say, in the Book of Life.

“And at the end of a long and wrenching day, we finish as we began ten days earlier, with the sound of the ram’s horn - this time not with tears and fears but with cautious yet confident hope. We have admitted the worst about ourselves and survived.”



Further Ponderings

How can you make your Yom Kippur more meaningful this year?

Quote of the Week

“To ask these questions once a year in the company of others publicly willing to confess their faults, lifted by the words and music of ancient prayers, knowing that God forgives every failure we acknowledge as a failure, and that He has faith in us even when we lose faith in ourselves, can be a life-changing experience. That is when we discover that God is still there, open to us whenever we are willing to open ourselves to Him...”

The Wall Street Journal article, 16 September 2017

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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