



Covenant & Conversation



Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

HA'AZINU • האזינו

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

COVENANT & CONVERSATION SUMMARY

Moshe the Man

The last chapters of the Torah give us an account of the final days of the life of the greatest hero the Jewish people has ever known: Moshe, the leader, the liberator, the lawgiver, the man who brought a group of slaves to freedom, turned a fractious collection of individuals into a nation, and so transformed them that they became the people of eternity.

It was Moshe who mediated with God, performed signs and wonders, gave the people its laws, fought with them when they sinned, prayed for Divine forgiveness, gave his life to them, and had his heart broken when they repeatedly failed to live up to his expectations.

Each age has had its own image of Moshe. For the sages, he was the man who ascended to Heaven to receive the Torah, where he argued with the angels who opposed its being given to mortals. "Do angels work that they need a day of rest? Do they have parents to honour? Do they have an evil inclination that they need to be told, 'Do not commit adultery?'" Moshe the man out-argued the angels.

For Philo, a 1st century Jewish philosopher from Alexandria, Moshe was a philosopher-king. He was great because of his actions and achievements - he governed the nation, organised its laws, instituted its rites and conducted himself with dignity; he was wise, stoical and self-controlled. This is the ancient Greek view of Moses.

Yet what is most moving about Moshe in the Torah is that he appears as quintessentially human. He despairs, loses his temper, and begs to cross the Jordan. Moshe is the hero of those who wrestle with the world as it is, knowing that "It is not for you to complete the task, but neither are you free to stand aside from it."

The Torah insists that "to this day no one knows where his grave is" (Devarim 34:6), lest it become a place of worship.

Moshe is not an object of veneration but a role-model. "Every human being," writes Maimonides, "can be as righteous as Moshe or as wicked as Jeroboam." His titles in the Torah – "the man Moshe," "God's servant," "a man of God" – are impressive in their modesty.

In 1968, Martin Luther King gave his final sermon, evoking Moshe on the mountain-top: "I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight that we, as a people, will get to the promised land." The next day he was assassinated. At the end, this young Christian preacher identified not with a Christian figure but with Moshe.

Why was Moshe not allowed to enter the Land? Perhaps because "each generation has its leaders," and the one who leads a people out of slavery is not the one to take them into their next challenge. Kafka saw it differently: "Moses fails to enter Canaan not because his life was too short but because it is a human life."

What does Moshe's story tell us? That it is right to fight for justice even against powers that seem indestructible. That God is with us when we stand against oppression. That change, though slow, is real, and that people are lifted by high ideals even if it takes centuries.

The Torah states: "Moshe was one hundred and twenty years old when he died, yet his eyes were undimmed and his strength unabated" (Devarim 34:7). **Why was his strength unabated? Because his eyes were undimmed – he never lost the ideals of his youth.**

That is Moshe, the man who refused to "go gently into that dark night," the eternal symbol of how a human being, without ever ceasing to be human, can become a giant of the moral life. That is the greatness and the humility of aspiring to be "a servant of God."

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

In a Nutshell

Moshe delivers a powerful farewell song to Bnai Yisrael on the last day of his life. He calls Heaven and Earth as witnesses and urges the people to remember their history: how God found them, formed them into a nation, chose them as His own, and brought them into a rich and fruitful land. He also warns that prosperity can lead to arrogance and forgetfulness, turning away from God. Such betrayal will bring disaster. Yet even after judgment, Moshe assures the people that God will ultimately defend them. Ha'azinu ends with God's command for Moshe to go up to Har Nevo, where he will see (but not enter) the Land of Israel.

Around the Shabbat Table

1. Which lesson from Moshe's life do you think is most important for people today?
2. Does seeing Moshe's human side make him less impressive to you, or more relatable?
3. Martin Luther King Jr. compared himself to Moshe. What does that tell us about the universal power of his story?





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ON THE PARSHA • WRITTEN BY SARA LAMM

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



Delving Deeper

Many Sages saw Moshe first and foremost as Rabbeinu, “our rabbi” – not a king, a political or military leader, but a scholar and master of the law, a role which they invested with astonishing authority. When telling the story of Moshe asking God to forgive the people for the Golden Calf, they wrote that God replied, “I cannot, for I have already vowed, “One who sacrifices to any God shall be destroyed”, and I cannot revoke My vow.” Moshe replied, “Master of the Universe, have You not taught me the laws of annulling vows? One may not annul his own vow, but a sage may do so.” *Moshe then annulled God’s vow.*

For Rambam, Moshe was radically different from all other prophets in four key ways. First, others received their prophecies in dreams, while Moshe was always awake. Second, to the others God spoke in parables, but to Moshe He spoke directly and lucidly. Third, the other prophets were terrified when God appeared to them but “God used to speak to Moshe face to face, as a man speaks to his friend”.

Fourth, other prophets needed much preparation to hear God, but Moshe spoke to God whenever he wanted or needed to, because he was “always prepared, like one of the ministering angels.”



Parsha Activity

Imposter

Before Shabbat, make cards with names of Torah figures and words like Moshe, Shabbat, or Sinai. If there are 10 players, *each* round will need nine cards of the same word, and one blank card for the Imposter. Players select a card, then go around each giving one-word related clues. If the word is Moshe, people might say “staff,” “Egypt,” or “leader.” The Imposter, who doesn’t know the word, must also invent a clue while trying not to be discovered. After each round, the group votes on who they think the Imposter is. If caught, the group wins - unless the Imposter correctly guesses the word first.



The Life of a Leader

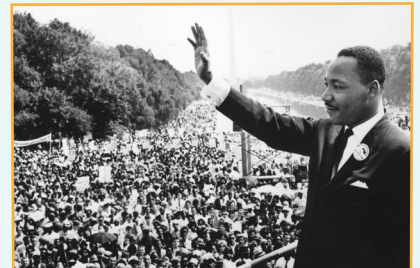
Martin Luther King Jr. was born in Atlanta in 1929. His father was a Baptist minister, and his mother was a choir director and an American civil rights organiser. From childhood, he not only listened to his father preach but also watched his parents lead from the front, and protest injustices.

Although it had been decades since America had fought against itself in a Civil War, ultimately abolishing slavery, there were still many unfair laws that denied Black people basic rights, treated them if they were lower, and kept them separate.

Once, while buying shoes, his father refused to sit in the back of the store, declaring he would never accept segregation. That small act of courage left a deep impression on young Martin. In his youth, King questioned

religion, but he later became a minister himself. He witnessed the struggles and discrimination faced by Black Americans but he believed that justice belonged to all people, and he became an inspirational leader of thousands who opposed the injustices of their country.

King was a strong supporter of Israel, and he once said that going against Zionism was the same as being antisemitic. In his famous “I Have a Dream” speech, he spoke of a better world. Having endured jail cells and humiliation himself, he insisted that “the bank of justice was not bankrupt.” “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.” His hope rested both on America’s founding promise of equality and on the vision of the Jewish prophets he had studied



as a child. His message was shaped by Yishayahu’s call for *tzedek* and *mishpat*, and Amos’ vision of justice rolling like water.

On 3 April 1968, King made a speech where he said he felt like Moshe. He had seen “the Promised Land”, even if he would not enter it. The very next day, he was killed. King’s words continue to inspire generations with faith, hope, and courage.

• Can you think of any modern-day leaders who carry similar traits to Moshe?



Covenant & Conversation

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

II Samuel 22:1-51 (Ashkenazim and Sephardim)
Ezekiel 17:22-18:32 (Yemenites)

II Samuel 22:1-51 records David's song of thanksgiving to God for deliverance from his enemies and from Saul. David declares the Lord his Rock, Fortress, and Saviour, praising Him for answering his cries in distress.

He poetically describes God's mighty intervention - earth shaking, thunder, lightning, and rescue from overwhelming waters. David acknowledges that God rewards him for his righteousness and faithfulness, contrasting this

with God's dealings with the wicked.

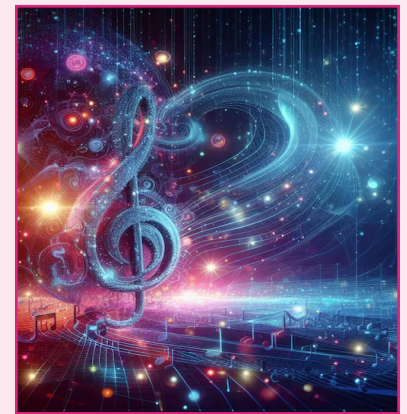
He thanks God, who strengthens him for battle, giving him victory over nations and making him head over peoples. David exults that the Lord subdues his enemies and grants him enduring success.

The song closes with praise to God for His steadfast love to David and his descendants forever, celebrating Divine power, faithfulness, and kingship.



Points to Ponder

1. What other songs did King David write? What common themes do they share?
2. What is your favourite song and how does it make you feel? Is it a Jewish song?



Parsha and Haftara Links

The link between the Parsha and the Haftara is less about the content of the texts but rather lies in the fact that both are songs. Furthermore, both are explicitly *called* songs.

Rabbi Sacks wrote about music's power and importance:



"Faith is more like music than science. Science analyses, music integrates. And as music connects note to note, so faith connects episode to episode, life to life, age to age in a timeless melody that breaks into time. God is the composer and librettist. We are each called on to be voices in the choir, singers of God's song. Faith is the ability to hear the music beneath the noise."

"So music is a signal of transcendence. The philosopher and musician Roger Scruton writes that it is "an encounter

with the pure subject, released from the world of objects, and moving in obedience to the laws of freedom alone."

"He quotes Rilke: "Words still go softly out towards the unsayable / And music, always new, from palpitating stones / builds in useless space its godly home." The history of the Jewish spirit is written in its songs."

- Which part of prayer do you find most uplifting? Is it usually sung?



The Spirituality of Song

Music was something that Rabbi Sacks returned to time and again, in his writings, speeches, and personal time. He explained why here:

“There is something profoundly spiritual about music. When language aspires to the transcendent, and the soul longs to break free of the gravitational pull of the earth, it modulates into song. Jewish history is not so much read as sung.”

“The rabbis enumerated ten songs at key moments in the life of the nation. There was the song of the Israelites in Egypt (see Is. 30:29), the song at the Red Sea (Ex. 15), the song at the well (Num. 21), and Ha’azinu, Moses’ song at the end of his life. Joshua sang a song (Josh. 10:12-13). So did Deborah (Jud. 5), Hannah (I Sam. 2) and David (II Sam. 22). There was the Song of Solomon - Shir HaShirim - about which Rabbi Akiva said, “All songs are holy but the Song of Songs is the holy of holies.”

“The tenth song has not yet been sung. It is the song of the Mashiach.”



Further Ponderings

If you were writing a song about the Jewish experience over the last couple of years, what would your song focus on?



Quote of the Week

“We lose physical possessions, but not spiritual ones. We lost the physical Moses. But we still have the song.”

The Spirituality of Song
Ha’azinu, Covenant & Conversation

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THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

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