



Covenant & Conversation



Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

BEREISHIT · בראשית

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

A Living Book

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

Bereishit begins with the most famous, majestic, and influential opening lines of any book in the world. *"When God began creating heaven and earth, the earth was void and desolate... God said, 'Let there be light.' And there was light."* (Bereishit 1:1-3)

What is strange is how Rashi, the most beloved of Jewish commentators, begins his in-depth Chumash commentary. He asks why the Torah doesn't instead start with *"This month shall be to you the first of the months"* (Shemot 12:2), which is the first mitzva given to Bnei Yisrael.

Should the Torah really have missed out the creation of the universe, and all the stories of our ancestors? Without the full story of Bnei Yisrael, and their time as slaves in Egypt, how could we understand their struggles as they journeyed through the desert to become a nation and reach a homeland? And without the stories of Avraham and Sarah and their children, how could we comprehend the nation built from Yaakov and his sons? Similarly, how could we have understood those narratives without first seeing God's repeated disappointment with Adam and Chava, Kayin, the generation of the Flood, and the Tower of Babel builders?

The fifty chapters of the book of Bereishit and the start of Shemot are the foundation of biblical faith. They provide the philosophical basis of Judaism. So what did Rashi mean when he suggested the Torah should have left this all out?

He meant something profound, something which we often forget. To understand a book, we need to know which genre it belongs in. Is it history or legend, chronicle or myth, satire, non-fiction or fiction? Beyond that, what question does it answer? A history book answers the question: what happened? A book of cosmology – be it science or myth – answers the question: how did it happen? But the Torah is Torah – instruction, teaching, guidance. It answers a different question: **"How shall we live?"** That's why Rashi wonders

why it doesn't begin with the very first mitzva.

The Torah is not a science book (although Bereishit 1 did inspire the scientific mindset). It's not merely history (although it contains history). It is, first and last, the definitive book about how to live. Everything it contains – mitzvot but also narratives, including the narrative of Creation itself – is there solely for the sake of ethical and spiritual instruction.

The Torah moves from grand visions of the universe to the finest details of daily life, always focusing on the same questions: **What shall I do? How shall I live? What kind of person should I become?** Our parsha begins with the key question that must precede all these other questions. Namely, **what is a human being?**

We read in Bereishit that God created humans "in His image". Yet God has no image! God transcends nature, and is free from its laws. So what does this mean? It means that our Creator gave us the ability (and responsibility) to be free. We are the only beings capable of creativity, morality, and change. We were created in God's image, to be creators ourselves.

The Torah's emphasis on choice, freedom and responsibility is one of the most distinctive features of Jewish thought. And the Torah's opening chapter gives a unique account of God, and of humans. We have the capacity to grow, and make change. We are free to shape our own lives, but also responsible for what we make of that freedom.

Our sages said: *"Why were human beings created last? In order to say – if you are worthy – all creation was made for you; but if you are unworthy, you will be told: even a gnat preceded you."*

The Torah is God's supreme call to humankind to freedom and creativity on the one hand, and on the other, to responsibility and restraint – becoming God's partner in the work of creation.

Around the Shabbat Table



1. What is a human being? How does Bereishit answer this question?
2. How does seeing the Torah as "teaching" instead of history or science change the way you read Bereishit?
3. Do you think faith should be more about trust, or more about understanding? Why?

A Takeaway Thought

Bereishit's famous beginning shows us this is not a history or science textbook, but guidance for life. It teaches us that to be human is to share in God's freedom, with the ability to choose and to take responsibility, and the power to help shape creation.



Exploring the Parsha

WITH SARA LAMM

BASED ON THE TEACHINGS OF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS 7"א



The Parsha in a Nutshell

Bereishit opens with God's creation of the universe. It takes six days for God to create light and darkness, separate the heavens from waters, establish land and seas with vegetation, position celestial bodies for timekeeping, create sea-creatures and birds, then land animals, then humans. At the end of day six, God sanctifies the seventh day for rest, creating Shabbat.

God also forms the first human from dust, and breathes Divine life into him. Then He creates Chava, the first woman, forming her from Adam's rib. They live as husband and wife in Gan Eden, with one rule: do not eat

from the Tree of Knowledge.

One day, a serpent deceives Chava into eating the forbidden fruit, which she shares with Adam. This disobedience introduces suffering, and the concept of human death, and God banishes them from paradise.

Out of Eden, Chava gives birth to two sons: Kayin and Hevel. Jealousy drives Kayin to murder his brother, and God exiles him as punishment. Through their third son Sheth's lineage emerges Noah, ten generations later. Noah stands as the sole righteous person in a corrupt world that God observes with growing concern.



Parsha Activity

Show, Then Tell

One person is chosen as the Caller, and it is their job to shout out situations such as, "Someone takes your toy!" or "You want to eat but are supposed to wait!" Everyone freezes and then silently acts out how they would choose to respond. Some might pretend to walk away, others might cross their arms, tap their watches, smile or shrug. Then everyone unfreezes and explains their choice. Use silly prompts as variations, and change the situations to challenge the players.



Yael's Choice

It was Friday afternoon. Abba was vacuuming upstairs, and Imma had just set a fresh batch of her famous mini chocolate chip cookies onto the cooling trays. Shabbat was approaching, and the whole house smelled like melted chocolate and warm goodness. Yael stood on her tiptoes and peeked at the tray. "Imma," she said, "Can I have a cookie?"

"Not yet, sweetie," said Imma. "They're for Shabbat. After we make Kiddush, we can each have two." Yael nodded. But oh, it was so hard to wait when the cookies looked so delicious. Yael's tummy gurgled. She tiptoed back into the kitchen. Her hand reached out, closer, closer... Then she stopped. It felt like her mind was arguing with itself, two voices that both sounded like Yael. One was

saying, "I know it's not the right time." Another voice argued back, "But I want it now!" She stood frozen, hand in mid-air, inches from the cookies. She felt like she was being pulled in two directions! Just then, Abba walked in. "What's up, Yael?" "I really want a cookie," she said, blushing. "But I know I'm supposed to wait."

Abba smiled. "Your superpower is showing."

Yael blinked. "Huh?"

"Freewill," he said. "The power to choose what kind of person you want to be. It's like a muscle in your heart. Every time you make a good choice, especially a hard one, it gets stronger."

Yael looked at the cookies. She looked at Abba. She took a deep breath and stepped back. "Okay. I'm going to wait."



Abba high-fived her. "That's my girl."

Later on, when the candles flickered and the family sat around the table, Imma passed Yael two small, perfect cookies.

"You waited," Imma said. "I'm proud of you."

"Thank you, Imma. They look like your best batch yet!" Yael took a bite. It tasted mostly of chocolate, and just a little bit like victory.



Cards & Conversation

Our **Cards & Conversation** packs include one card for every parsha. On one side, you'll find an interesting question from the Torah to think about and discuss. Flip it over, and you'll discover an idea from Rabbi Sacks that shines a new light on the parsha.

"Let there be..." (Bereishit 1:3)

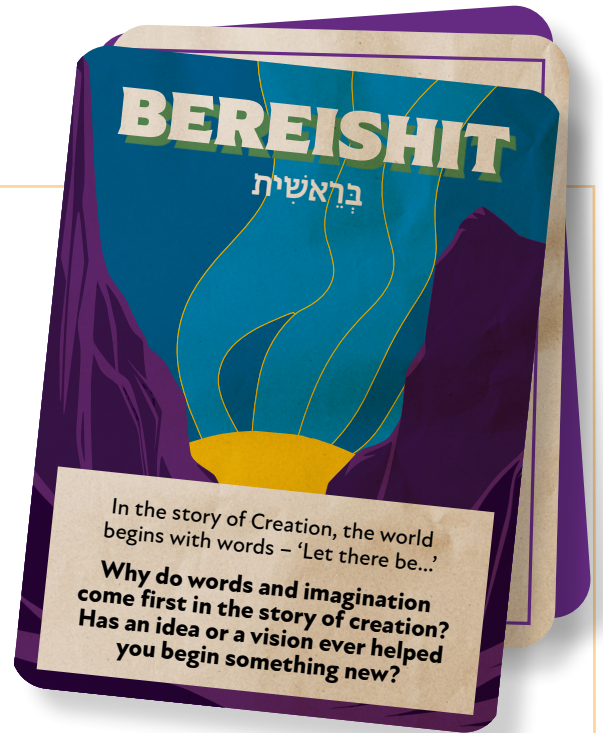
In the story of Creation, the world is created with words: "Let there be..."

1. Why do you think words and imagination come first in the story of Creation?
2. Has an idea or a vision ever helped you begin something new?

Rabbi Sacks on Bereishit 1:3 (in the Koren Sacks Humash) offers an answer:

"What is truly creative is not science or technology per se, but the word. Because we can speak, we can think and therefore imagine a world different from the one that currently exists. Creation begins with the creative word, the idea, the vision, the dream. The first stage in creation is imagination."

- Find out more about **Cards & Conversation** at rabbisacks.org/cards-and-conversation



Parsha in Practice

Mitzva of the Week Building the Future

The very first mitzva in the Torah is *pru u'rvu* - "be fruitful and multiply" (Bereishit 1:28). Rabbi Sacks reminds us that parenthood is one of the most sacred responsibilities we can take on. "To be a Jewish parent is to make space for your child, as God makes space for us, His children."

This mitzva shows the importance of family. It's about bringing children into the world. It's also about shaping a future, creating space for others, and passing on love, faith, and Torah values, the way God does for us.

Practically Speaking What will you create?

The Torah opens with the story of Creation, and then calls on us to continue this process. Every new life, and every act of making space for others, is part of fulfilling that very first mitzva. So ask yourself: Each time you make a choice, what to say, how to respond, how to spend your time, pause and ask: Am I acting like someone made in God's image? Am I shaping the kind of life I want to live?

"Creation of things is relatively easy, creation of relationships is hard."
– Rabbi Sacks



Try it out

YOUNG STUDENTS:

Practice the spirit of this mitzva by helping a sibling, sharing with a friend, or letting someone else take a turn first. Each time you make space for another person, you are continuing creation.

ADVANCING STUDENTS:

Think about the "worlds" you are already building, friendships, projects, teams, or ideas you care about. Ask yourself: Am I creating something that will make life better for others?



Learning in Layers

Guiding you through Torah step by step, with insights from the [Koren Sacks Humash with translation and commentary by Rabbi Sacks](#). Each step takes us a little deeper and invites 'Torah as Conversation,' just as Rabbi Sacks taught.



"But you must rule over it..." (Bereishit 4:7)

LAYER 1: LOOK AT THE TORAH TEXT

"אם תיטיב שאת ואם לא תיטיב לפתח חטאת רבץ ואליך תשוקתו ואתה תמָשֶׁל בו."

LAYER 2: READ RABBI SACKS' TRANSLATION

"If you act well, will you not be uplifted? But if you do not act well, sin is crouching at the door. It desires you, but you can rule over it."

LAYER 3: THINK ABOUT WHAT IT MEANS

God tells Kayin that even when strong feelings like anger are present, we have the ability to resist. We can let those feelings rule us - or we can master them. Emotions are not wrong in themselves; they are part of being human. The challenge is deciding which impulses to act on and which to resist, knowing that every choice shapes the kind of person we become. This verse is God's response to Kayin, whose offering was not accepted and who is now burning with anger. But God does not punish or shame Kayin. He offers him a choice.

LAYER 4: LEARN FROM RABBI SACKS' COMMENTARY

"Sin is crouching at the door... but you can rule over it." This is moral responsibility at its most personal level. Modern neuroscience might call it a battle between the amygdala and the prefrontal cortex, but Rabbi Sacks reminds us: it's not just biology. It's choice. It's values. It's who we decide to become.

The amygdala is the brain's alarm system for emotions like fear and anger, while the prefrontal cortex is the control centre for our whole bodies. It helps us think, plan, and make wise choices.

According to Rabbi Sacks, this moment with Kayin reveals the essence of what it means to be human:

- We are not helpless.
- Our emotions are powerful but they do not control us.
- We can master our instincts, not by ignoring them, but by choosing what to do with them.

LAYER 5: REFLECT AND RESPOND

Add your own questions too! Apply what you've learned to other examples in the Torah, and in your own life...

Why do you think God doesn't comfort Kayin, but instead gives him a challenge?

1. Can you think of a time when you were angry, but made the right choice anyway? What helped you do that?
2. What's the connection between "being made in God's image" (Bereishit 1:27) and "you can rule over it" (Bereishit 4:7)?
3. How would society change if more people believed their choices really mattered?

- Find out more about the [Koren Sacks Humash](#) at rabbisacks.org/books/the-koren-sacks-humash

Jonathan Sacks
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**