



Covenant & Conversation

FAMILY
EDITION

Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

NOACH · נח

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

True Morality

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

Is there such a thing as an objective basis of morality? For some time, many secular thinkers said no. Morality, they argued, is what we choose it to be, as long as we don't harm others. There was no way from facts to universal values. This became the accepted wisdom in philosophy for a century. Nietzsche even argued for abandoning morality altogether. He saw it as a product of Judaism, and not an objective truth.

More recently, however, morality has found a scientific basis, from two surprising directions: neo-Darwinism and the branch of mathematics known as Games Theory. As we will see, this discovery is closely related to the story of Noah and the covenant made between God and humanity after the Flood.

John von Neumann looked at how people make choices. His Games Theory shared the thought experiment of the Prisoner's Dilemma. Imagine two people arrested for a crime. The police separate them and offer each a deal: if one testifies against the other, he will go free while the other serves ten years in prison. If both testify, each serves five years. If both stay silent, they each serve only one year.

Rationally, each will betray the other for a shorter sentence, but if they do, this leads to a worse outcome for both (five years each) than if they had trusted one another (one year each). The dilemma shows that individual self-interest can harm everyone. Later experiments showed that if the same prisoners faced this choice repeatedly, then over time they would learn to trust rather than betray each other.

While Games Theory was developing, biologists were puzzling over Darwin's theory of "survival of the fittest". Why do almost all societies admire altruism – people who sacrifice their advantage to help others – in our biological world of natural selection? The Prisoner's Dilemma suggested an answer: groups that learn to cooperate will be stronger than groups of selfish individuals. In the 1970s, scientists tested this by running computer programs for the "Iterated

Prisoner's Dilemma." The winning program, called *Tit-for-Tat*, was simple: start by cooperating, then do what your opponent did last time. It proved that the principle of "measure for measure" – treating others as they treat you – is not only moral, it is also effective. This mirrors the covenant with Noah: "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made man."

This is justice as reciprocity: as you do, so shall you be done to. The Torah even sets out the words in mirror-image form. **The first moral principle of the Torah is also the first to be scientifically demonstrated.** In 1989, mathematician Martin Nowak devised a program that improved on *Tit-for-Tat*. Called *Generous*, it occasionally "forgot" an opponent's betrayal, allowing the cycle of retaliation to stop. What Nowak had simulated was forgiveness. Here again, the Torah anticipated the principle. After the Flood, God vowed never again to destroy the earth, despite man's continuing evil. Divine forgiveness became part of the covenant.

Thus, the two great principles of the Noachide covenant – justice and forgiveness – are also the two principles now shown to be essential for human survival. **Without them, no group can survive in the long-run.**

Centuries ago, Rav Saadia Gaon taught that the truths of Torah can be established by reason, but revelation was necessary because humanity takes time to reach truth and often stumbles on the way. It took more than a thousand years after Rav Saadia Gaon for humanity to demonstrate scientifically the moral truths at the heart of God's covenant: that cooperation is as necessary as competition, that cooperation depends on trust, that trust requires justice, and that justice is incomplete without forgiveness.

Morality is not simply what we choose it to be. It is part of the basic fabric of the universe, revealed to us by the universe's Creator, long ago.

Around the Shabbat Table



1. Do you think people are naturally selfish or naturally cooperative? Why?
2. In the Prisoner's Dilemma, would you stay silent or tell on your partner? What would influence your choice?
3. How does the story of Noah show both justice and forgiveness?

A Takeaway Thought

Justice and forgiveness, ideals at the heart of Noah's story, are part of how the world itself works. Without them, no group can survive. What science has only recently discovered, the Torah taught long ago: trust and forgiveness, are the foundations of life.



Exploring the Parsha

WITH SARA LAMM

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



The Parsha in a Nutshell

In a world steeped in violence and corruption, one man finds favour with Hashem. Noah is commanded to build a great *teivah*, a massive ark, to protect his family from a world-ending *mabul* (flood). Noah, his family, and pairs of every animal will take refuge in the *teivah* for the duration of the *mabul*.

Then the Flood begins. It rains for 40 days, and waters rage for 150 more. At last the *teivah* rests upon Har Ararat. Noah sends out a raven, whose swift return tells him it is not yet safe to leave. Later, he sends out a dove, and learns that the land has dried. Exactly one year after the flood began, Hashem tells Noah to leave

the *teivah* and begin his new life. Noah offers sacrifices, and Hashem establishes a *brit* never again to destroy humanity, with the rainbow as its sign. Hashem also commands respect for life, and 7 Noachide laws.

Soon Noah plants a vineyard and becomes drunk; Shem and Yafet act with honour, while Cham behaves shamefully and is cursed. Generations pass, and the people grow restless, building the Tower of Babel. Hashem creates confusion, dispersing them throughout the land with many different languages. The parsha concludes with the introduction of Avram, journeying toward the land of Canaan.



Parsha Activity

Face to Face

Two players sit face-to-face and look into each other's eyes. The first to blink, laugh, or look away "loses." The longer you hold steady, the more you "win." Feel free to change the rules! Try smiling without laughing, or doing the entire game with one eye closed. Perhaps one player can make silly faces while the other cannot. Add more players in a circle to make your unflinching society just a bit more complicated! As you add and enforce rules, how does it feel to become lawmakers and judges?



The Friends' Dilemma

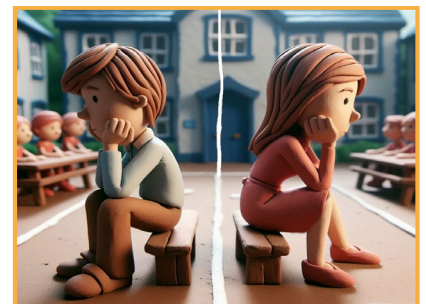
In a nearby school, Eli and Shelley are two best friends who share a very important secret. But now they face a dilemma. Their teacher tells them, "If you both keep the secret safe, you'll each get a B grade. If one of you tells me the secret while the other stays quiet, the one who told will get an A+ and the quiet one will get a D. If you both tell, you'll each get a C. But here's the tricky part - you can't discuss your decision with each other. You must decide what to do from opposite sides of the playground."

Eli sat alone, wondering what to do: "I'm sure I can trust Shelley to keep the secret. At least, I'm *almost* sure... maybe 99% sure? So if we both stay quiet, we'll pass, and no-one fails.

That's the best option for both of us... But what if she spills the secret? Should I tell too, just in case. That way, I definitely won't lose out?"

Shelley was also considering the problem. If they both chose to tell, they would hurt each other, but at least no-one would get a failing grade. And if they both trusted each other and stayed quiet, they would both win higher grades... but there was also the possibility that someone would reach for that A+...

From opposite ends of the school playground, the two best friends each reached the same decision. They decided that no matter the prize, they couldn't bear the idea of betraying the other. Shelley and Eli each chose



to stay silent. They each received a B grade, but also the feeling that their friendship was stronger than ever. And that, said Shelley, was "priceless".

The lesson is simple. Trust and cooperation often bring better results than selfishness. Just as Noah's story teaches us about justice and forgiveness, this story shows that life works best when we choose to work together, not against each other.



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.

"Noach was a righteous man, a person of integrity in his generation..." (Bereishit 6:9)

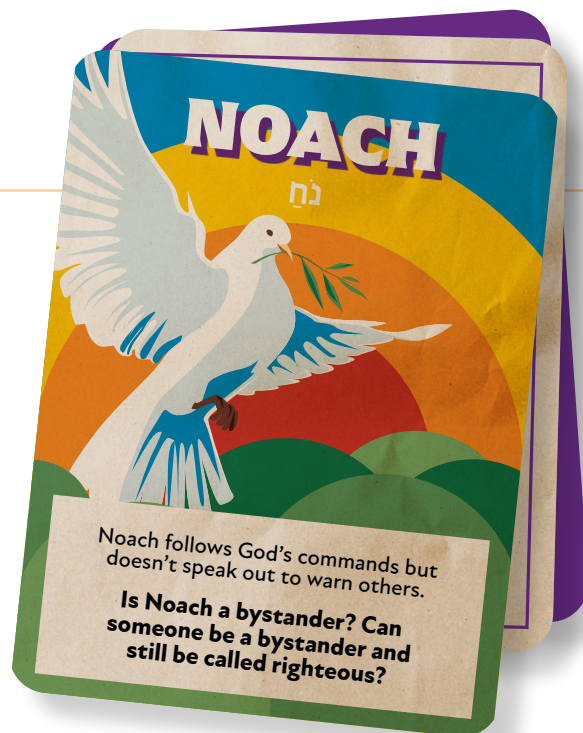
Noach follows God's commands but doesn't speak out to warn or protect others.

1. Does that make him a bystander?
2. Can someone be a bystander and still be called righteous?

Rabbi Sacks on Bereishit 7:5 (in the Koren Sacks Humash) offers an answer:

"We must take a stand. We must protest. We must register dissent even if the probability of changing minds is small... because the moral life is a life we share with others."

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



Parsha in Practice

Mitzva of the Week

"Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for in the image of God He made man" (Gen. 9:6).

This mitzva reminds us of the sacredness of life. Rabbi Sacks says it challenges us to see that all people are made in God's image, and this shift is what makes society possible. After the Flood, Hashem gave humanity a new moral foundation: violence against another person is a violation not just of them, but of God Himself. "After the Flood, He taught Noach (and through him all humanity), that we should think, not of ourselves but of the human other as in the image of God. That is the only way to save ourselves from violence and self-destruction."

Practically Speaking What will you build?

Human life is precious, and it is forbidden to kill one another. But this mitzva reaches beyond the act of murder. It means we must be careful not to diminish life in other ways: with cruelty, with hurtful speech, or with indifference to another's suffering. Instead, we are called upon to find meaning in our own life, and to build relationships of trust and respect with others. Remember that every encounter with another human being is also an encounter with the image of God.

"I believe the Jewish vision is the noblest, most profound, most subtle attempt ever to give human life the dignity of a purpose." – Rabbi Sacks



Try it out

YOUNG STUDENTS:

Try using kind words, even when you're upset. If you hurt someone's feelings, say "I'm sorry," or "how can I help you feel better?" When you see other people as precious to God, you'll learn to treat others with care, and you'll make the world a kinder place.

ADVANCING STUDENTS:

This notion challenges us to respect life in every form. It means learning to control anger and thinking before speaking or posting online. Ask yourself: "Am I lifting this person up or tearing them down?" Practise standing up for someone. Notice the good in people who are different from you. By choosing respect, you honour the image of God in them.



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.



"Let us make bricks..." (Bereishit 11:3)

LAYER 1: LOOK AT THE TORAH TEXT

"וַיֹּאמְרוּ אִישׁ אֶל-רֵעֵהוּ, הֲבֵה נִלְבְּנָה לִבְנִים, וְנִשְׂרָפָה, לְשִׂרְפָּה..."

LAYER 2: READ RABBI SACKS' TRANSLATION

"They [the people of Bavel] said to each other, 'Come, let us make bricks, and let us bake them thoroughly.' They used bricks for stone and tar for mortar."

LAYER 3: THINK ABOUT WHAT IT MEANS

The Torah tells us the people of Bavel made bricks instead of using stone. Why focus on the material? Perhaps it shows their pride in a new invention. Perhaps it suggests that people can shape the world around them. Or maybe it suggests something about uniformity. The question remains: what do you think this choice really teaches us?

LAYER 4: LEARN FROM RABBI SACKS' COMMENTARY

"Bricks are man-made, identical, and replaceable. Unlike natural stone, they symbolise uniformity and human control. The danger was not the tower itself but the mindset: people reducing themselves to interchangeable parts in a totalising society."

Rabbi Sacks examines the symbol of the brick, and why the Torah chooses to specify the building materials. He then explains that the Torah is not just giving us a recipe for a new construction material. Rather, we are seeing first-hand the foundation that an unstable society was built on.

LAYER 5: REFLECT AND RESPOND

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

1. Why might a society prefer everyone to be the same, like identical bricks, rather than unique like stones?
2. In what ways do we see the "brick mindset" in our world today, and what might it look like to choose "stones" instead?
3. Every detail in the Torah is important, and no word is wasted. What does this idea mean to you?

• 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.

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