

BEREISHIT

בְּרֵאשִׁית

In the story of Creation, the world begins with words – ‘Let there be...’

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

RABBI SACKS ON BEREISHIT 1:3



‘Let there be.’

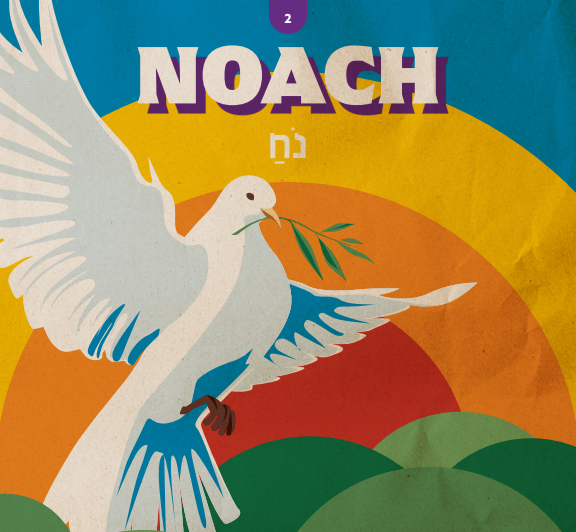
What is truly creative is not science or technology per se, but the word.

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.

NOACH

נח



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

Is Noach a bystander? Can someone be a bystander and still be called righteous?

RABBI SACKS ON BEREISHIT 7:5



We must take a stand.

We must protest.

We must register dissent even if
the probability of changing minds
is small.

That is because the moral life is a
life we share with others.

LECH LECHA

לך-לך



Avraham and Sarah begin a journey without knowing where they're going.

Would you ever do the same?

RABBI SACKS ON BEREISHIT 12:1



To be a Jew is to be willing to hear the still, small voice of eternity urging us to travel, move, go on ahead, continuing Avraham's journey toward that unknown destination at the far horizon of hope.

VAYEIRA

וַיֵּרָא



We see moments of both kindness
and cruelty across generations.

**Why is Avraham praying for
the evil people of Sodom?**

RABBI SACKS ON BEREISHIT 18:19



Teach children to love, and they will have hope.

Teach them to hate, and they will have only anger and desire for revenge.

Thinking about the past leads to war.

Thinking about the future helps us to make peace.

CHAYEI SARAH

חיי שרה



Yitzchak is alone in a field; a place between heaven and earth. He is in conversation with God, modelling prayer for us. Moments later, he meets Rivka for the first time.

Why does the Torah describe this as conversation instead of prayer?

RABBI SACKS ON BEREISHIT 24:63



Prayer is a conversation between heaven and earth.

But conversation is also prayer – for in true conversation, I open myself up to the reality of another person.

I enter his or her world.

I begin to see things from a perspective not my own.

In the touch of the two selves, both are changed.

TOLEDOT

תולדות



Yaakov seeks Esav's blessing.

Why doesn't he ask for his own? What is the importance of recognising our own path?

RABBI SACKS ON BEREISHIT 28:4



Each of us has a blessing that is our own.

That is true not just of Yitzchak but also of Yishmael, not just of Yaakov but also of Esav.

The moral could not be more powerful.

Never seek your brother's blessing.

Be content with your own.

VAYEITZEI

ויצא



When Rachel cries out to Yaakov in pain, he answers with anger instead of comfort.

Why is it sometimes hardest to really listen to the people we care about most?

RABBI SACKS ON BEREISHIT 30:2



Listen deeply to those you love
and who love you.

Listening is not easy.

I confess I find it formidably hard.

But listening alone bridges the
abyss between soul and soul, self
and other, I and the Divine.

Jewish spirituality is the art of
listening.

VAYISHLACH

וישלח

Yaakov wrestles through the night and emerges changed – with a limp and a new name. Unlike other Abrahamic religions, Judaism doesn't portray its leaders as perfect.

Does our tradition insist on showing our ancestors as flawed and human? Why?

RABBI SACKS ON BEREISHIT 32:32



The heroes of our faith do not live charmed lives. They suffer exiles, know danger, have their hopes disappointed and their expectations delayed. They fight, they struggle, but they neither give in nor give up. They are not serene.

Sometimes they laugh in disbelief; there are times when they fear, tremble, weep, and even give way to anger. For they are human beings, not angels; they are people with whom we can identify, not saints to be worshipped.

Yaakov teaches us that we cannot preempt crisis, nor should we minimise it, but we can survive it, thus becoming worthy of bearing the name of one who has struggled with God and with man and prevailed.

VAYEISHEV

וַיֵּשֶׁב



Yaakov refuses to be comforted after Yosef's disappearance. He doesn't seem optimistic – but he still holds on to hope.

If optimism means expecting things to get better, and hope means refusing to give up even when they don't, what is the difference between the two?

RABBI SACKS ON BEREISHIT 37:5



Hope is not costless in the way optimism is.

It carries with it a considerable price.

When the prophets saw evil in the world, they refused to be comforted; those who hope refuse to be comforted while the hoped-for outcome is not yet reached.

Theodicy [‘divine justice’] is a comfort bought too cheaply.

Given their history of suffering, Jews were rarely optimists.

But they never gave up hope.

MIKEITZ

מִיקֵץ



When Yosef rises to power in Egypt,
he doesn't just save his own people
– he saves an entire nation.

**Do you think he does this out of moral
responsibility, or political strategy?**

RABBI SACKS ON BEREISHIT 41:40



God wants us not to accept but to heal, to cure, to prevent.

So Jews have tended to become, out of all proportion to their numbers, lawyers fighting injustice, doctors fighting disease, teachers fighting ignorance, economists fighting poverty, and (especially in modern Israel) agricultural technologists finding new ways to grow food in environments where it has never grown before.

VAYIGASH

ויגַשׁ



Yosef finally reveals his identity to the brothers who once betrayed him.

**Have you ever been hurt in the past?
How can we honour painful memories
and still find a way to move forward?**

RABBI SACKS ON BEREISHIT 45:15



We cannot change the past.

But by changing the way we think about the past, we can change the future.

Whatever situation we are in, by reframing it we can change our entire response, giving us the strength to survive, the courage to persist, and the resilience to emerge, on the far side of darkness, into the light of a new and better day.

VAYECHI

וַיַּחֲיוּ



In the dramatic stories of Bereishit, younger siblings are chosen over older ones, rivalries reshape families, and God sometimes seems to rewrite the script.

How much power do we really have to shape our own future, and how much is already decided for us?

RABBI SACKS ON BEREISHIT 48:20



Do not believe that the future is written.

There is no fate we cannot change, no prediction we cannot defy.

We are not predestined to fail; neither are we preordained to succeed.

We do not predict the future, because we make the future: by our choices, our willpower, our persistence, and our determination to survive.

SHEMOT

שְׁמוֹת



Small acts of courage come from unexpected places – even from inside Pharaoh's own household.

What might this teach us about recognising goodness, even among those we might see as 'the enemy'?

RABBI SACKS ON SHEMOT 2:3



Moral courage can sometimes be found in the heart of darkness...

when it comes to people, we must never generalise, never stereotype...

we must recognise virtue wherever we find it, even among our enemies; and that the basic core of human values – humanity, compassion, courage – is truly universal.

VA'EIRA

וָאֵרָא
וָאֵרָא



When Moshe tells the Israelites that God will free them, they don't listen.

Is it that they won't listen – or that they can't – and what might the Torah be trying to teach us?

RABBI SACKS ON SHEMOT 6:9



Alleviating poverty, curing disease, ensuring the rule of law, and respecting human rights: these are spiritual tasks no less than prayer and Torah study.

To be sure, the latter are higher, but the former are prior.

People cannot hear God's message if their spirit is broken and their labor is harsh.

BO

בא



Pharaoh refuses again and again to let the Israelites go, as Hashem hardens his heart.

Who is/are the victim/s in this story?

RABBI SACKS ON SHEMOT 10:6



Evil has two faces.

The first – turned to the outside world – is what it does to its victim.

The second – turned within – is what it does to its perpetrator.

Evil traps the evildoer in its mesh.

Slowly but surely, he or she loses freedom and becomes not evil's master but its slave.

BESHALACH

בְּשַׁלַּח

In Parashat Beshalach, the Israelites leave Egypt – but freedom doesn't come all at once.

**Are we on a journey too?
And if we are, what does
'arriving' even look like?**

RABBI SACKS ON SHEMOT 13:21



Judaism is not described as a state of being.

It is about walking, about the way, about following the call of God.

The road is long, the work is hard, and there will be many setbacks and false turnings.

We need grit, resilience, stamina, and persistence.

In place of a column of cloud leading the way, we need the advice of mentors and the encouragement of friends.

But the journey is exhilarating, and there is no other way.

YITRO

יתרו



The Israelites are given a mission to be 'a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' Golda Meir said, 'I've never quite understood how we became the chosen people. It's been such a burden.'

What do you think it means to be the 'chosen people'?

RABBI SACKS ON SHEMOT 19:5



Indeed, with the possible exception of the United States, the Jewish people is the only nation ever to have a mission statement.

Most are defined in terms of language, geography, political structure, long association, and the like.

Jews became a nation by adopting a task, by convening with God.

Absent that, it is hard to say what it is to be a Jew.

MISHPATIM

משפטים



Why is the command not to oppress the stranger repeated more than almost any other in the Torah?

RABBI SACKS ON SHEMOT 22:20



There is only one reply strong enough to answer the question ‘Why should I not hate the stranger?’: Because the stranger is me.

TERUMAH

תרומה



The Menorah, first described in Parashat Terumah, became a lasting symbol of the Jewish people.

What do you think it represents?

RABBI SACKS ON SHEMOT 25:31



In Rome, the arch of Titus... commemorates the victorious Roman siege of Jerusalem in the year 70 CE.

It shows Roman soldiers carrying away the spoils of war, most famously the Menorah.

Rome won that military conflict. Yet its civilisation declined and fell, while Jews and Judaism survived.

We survive 'not with valor and not with strength' but by the quality of our light.

TETZAVEH

תצוה



The Torah describes beautiful garments made for the priests who serve in the Mishkan.

Is there a role for visual beauty in Judaism?

RABBI SACKS ON SHEMOT 28:3



We can define... the nature of the Jewish aesthetic in Judaism. It is art devoted to the greater glory of God. That is the implication of the fact that the word kavod, “glory,” is attributed in the Torah only to God – and to the priests officiating in the House of God.

Judaism does not believe in art for art’s sake, but in art in the service of God. Art gives back as a votive offering to God a little of the beauty He has made in this created world.

KI TISSA

כִּי תִשָּׂא



The Torah says that God rested on the seventh day and was refreshed.

**Why would an all-powerful
God need to rest?**

RABBI SACKS ON SHEMOT 31:17



All of nature is creative, but only God and humanity create consciously for a purpose.

For us, unlike the plant or animal kingdoms, creation is not a process of ceaseless activity.

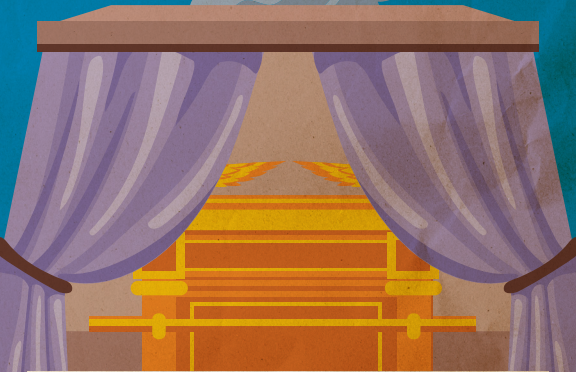
It involves moments of contemplation when we reflect on why we act.

We need time for thinking as well as for doing.

So the Sabbath is a holy time, meaning time set apart, time out from the restless pressures of activity; a day dedicated to thinking about the purpose of what we do.

VAYAKHEL

ויקהל



The Israelites are invited to build the Mishkan through their own work.

Why might God ask us to be builders, not just believers?

RABBI SACKS ON SHEMOT 36:35



God, taught R. Akiva, deliberately left the world unfinished so that it could be completed by the work of human beings. The creative God seeks creativity from mankind. Work gives human beings two things.

First it gives a person independence, one of the essentials of a free society.

The second, no less significant, however, is creativity. Work is more than mere labor.

Biblical Hebrew has two words to express the difference: melachah is work as creation; avodah is work as service or servitude. Both are central to the Tabernacle, a laboratory of love.

PEKUDEI

פקודי



The Mishkan (Tabernacle) is completed – a shared sacred space in the center of the community.

If individuals can be good on their own, why do we still need shared institutions, rituals, or communities?

RABBI SACKS ON SHEMOT 39:32

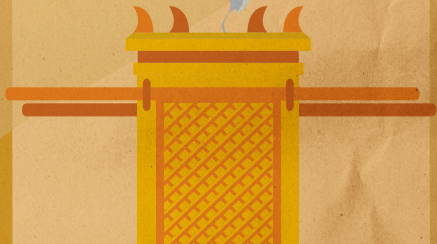


You do not need to believe in God to rescue a drowning child, give food to the hungry or shelter to the homeless... Individually, we can and should be moral, regardless of our specific religious commitments.

But man is a social animal. We form societies. And societies beat to a different pulse than do individuals... that is why societies of people not themselves wicked can perform collective acts of great evil. Without the Divine Presence symbolized at the heart of the camp, human beings will do what they have always done: oppress one another, fight with one another, and exploit one another. There can be no just society without some collective form of yirat shamayim, some 'reverence for Heaven'.

VAYIKRA

ויקרא



People are told to bring a sin offering even for things they did unintentionally.

Do you think we should be held accountable for things we didn't mean to do – or didn't realise we were part of?

RABBI SACKS ON VAYIKRA 4:2



The sin offering tells us that the wrong we do, or let happen, even if we did not intend it, still requires atonement.

Unfashionable though this is, a morality that speaks about action, not just intention – about what happens through us even if we did not mean to do it – is more compelling, more true to the human situation, than one that speaks of intention alone.

TZAV

צֵא



We learn about korbanot – offerings people gave to God to draw closer to Him. But they didn't give just anything – they gave something that mattered.

What are you willing to sacrifice – and for whom would you be willing to do so?

RABBI SACKS ON VAYIKRA 6:7



To love is to give. This is true in many aspects of life.

A happily married couple is constantly making sacrifices for one another. Parents make huge sacrifices for their children. People drawn to a calling often sacrifice remunerative careers for the sake of their ideals. In ages of patriotism, people make sacrifices for their country. In strong communities people make sacrifices for one another when someone is in distress or needs help.

Sacrifice is the superglue of relationship. It bonds us to one another. Sacrifice is the choreography of love.

SHEMINI

שְׁמִינִי



After the death of his sons, Aharon is silent – yet he continues with the work of sanctifying the Mishkan (Tabernacle). He and Moshe, who have both experienced deep tragedies, keep moving forward.

**In the face of grief, is this
resilience or avoidance?**

RABBI SACKS ON VAYIKRA 10:20



There were, and are, no words to silence the grief or end the tears [after the Holocaust].

Yet, like Moshe, the Jewish people found the strength to continue, to reaffirm hope in the face of despair.

A mere three years after coming eye to eye with the angel of death, the Jewish people, by establishing the State of Israel, made the single most powerful affirmation in two thousand years that Am Yisrael Chai, the Jewish people lives.

TAZRIA

תַּזְרִיעַ



Someone who speaks *lashon hara* – malicious or harmful speech – is marked as a *metzora* and separated from the community.

Why do you think, out of all sins, this one leads to isolation?

RABBI SACKS ON VAYIKRA 13:21



The negative force of *lashon hara*... has grown exponentially in the age of social media. It is far easier to be critical, offensive, scathing, and destructive when communicating electronically because of the so-called 'disinhibition effect' which occurs when people are not speaking face to face. Imagine a world in which those who posted negative, hurtful, or malicious remarks about others carried a visible mark of shame, and for a period were excluded from public places and the company of others – in short, suffered the fate of the *metzora*. This would be a world in which people would think twice before using speech to harm others.

METZORA

מִצְרָע



A person's hidden wrongdoing becomes visible – first on their home, then on their clothes, and on finally their skin. Imagine you've just been elected as a national leader. Your security team does a deep dive into everything you've said or done.

**What do you wish you had
done differently in life?**

RABBI SACKS ON VAYIKRA 14:34



As long as the condition of *tzaraat* existed, what had been done in private was broadcast in public, first by the walls of the offender's house, then by his clothes, and finally by his skin.

It was not just a punishment. It was a public shaming.

Never say or do in private what you would be ashamed to read about on the front page of tomorrow's newspapers.

ACHAREI MOT

אַחֲרֵי מוֹת



One of the most powerful rituals is the scapegoat – an animal symbolically sent away, carrying the people's sins.

**What does scapegoating mean today?
Why do you think people do it?**

RABBI SACKS ON VAYIKRA 16:8



‘Scapegoating,’ as we use the word today, means blaming someone else for our troubles.

Faced with problems that it cannot solve, all too often a group ensures its psychic survival by projecting its inner conflict onto an external cause, held to be responsible for the plight of the community... Hence the demonisation that has time and again led to pogroms, massacres, and genocides.

Societies find it easier to blame a scapegoat than to face their own problems honestly and openly.

KEDOSHIM

קְדוּשִׁים



The Torah says not to hate someone in your heart – even if they've hurt you.

What to do with a person who you dislike – even hate? They may have harmed, offended, or insulted you. Your hatred is not irrational. What do you do?

RABBI SACKS ON VAYIKRA 19:17-18



God does not command us to be angels, without any of the emotions natural to human beings. He does, however, forbid you to hate.

That is why, when someone does you wrong, you must confront him... The Torah sets out a realistic program.

By being honest with one another, talking things through, we may be able to achieve reconciliation – not always but often.

How much distress and bloodshed might be spared if humanity heeded this command?

EMOR

אִמּוֹר



A man publicly curses God – and it becomes one of the most serious moments in the Torah.

Why do you think using God's name disrespectfully matters so much?

RABBI SACKS ON VAYIKRA 24:14



Life itself is holy: people, not just priests; the whole of life, not just edited parts of it. So we have to be holy in the way we eat, the way we conduct our... relationships, and the way we use language. We must not curse even the deaf, let alone our parents, let alone God, because verbal abuse leads to physical abuse.

When human beings lose respect for God, they eventually lose respect for humanity.

BEHAR

בהר



The Torah says the Israelites
were freed from slavery in Egypt
so they could serve God.

**Is that true freedom?
What does freedom look like?**

RABBI SACKS ON VAYIKRA 25:55



To be free is to refuse to be defined by circumstance. It is about action that is not reaction. Our ability to see and do the unexpected is the link between human creativity and freedom.

... The fly [trapped in a bottle] keeps banging its head against the glass in a vain attempt to get out. The more it tries, the more it fails, until it dies in exhaustion. The one thing it forgets to do is to look up.

BECHUKOTAI

בְּחֻקֹּתַי



The Torah lists blessings if we follow God's path – and difficult consequences if we don't.

What is the purpose of telling us the punishments?

RABBI SACKS ON VAYIKRA 26:18



Blaming others is the suicide of liberty.

Blaming oneself, by contrast, is difficult.

It means living with constant self-criticism.

It is not a route to peace of mind.

Yet it is profoundly empowering.

It implies that, precisely because we accept responsibility for the bad things that have happened, we also have the ability to chart a different course in the future.

BAMIDBAR

בַּמִּדְבָּר

After receiving the Torah and building the Mishkan (Tabernacle), the Israelites begin their journey through the wilderness.

Why don't they go straight from Egypt into Israel? What do they need to learn in the wilderness before they're ready to enter the Land?

RABBI SACKS ON BAMIDBAR 1:1



The way to the Holy Land lies through the wilderness. The desert was the place where the people could be alone with God. There, undistracted... they could hear God's Voice directly. What they heard was a counterintuitive challenge: to take the pain of suffering in Egypt forward with them and redirect it into creating a society that would be the opposite of Egypt, not an empire built on power but a society of individuals of equal dignity under the sovereignty of God.

NASSO

נָסֹא



The tribe of Levi is chosen to look after the spiritual needs of the nation. Aharon's family is tasked with being the Kohanim. Moshe then goes into detail about the jobs of each of the other Levite families.

Why do we need to know what job each family is given?

RABBI SACKS ON BAMIDBAR 4:46



There is no way of eliminating entirely the danger of jealousy and envy, but Moshe gives us some pointers. Honor everyone equally. Pay special attention to potential disaffected groups. Make each feel valued. Give everyone a moment in the limelight. Find ways in which those with a particular passion can express it, and ensure that everyone has a chance to contribute. Though there is no fail-safe way to avoid the politics of envy, leaders can and must strive to minimise it.

BEHA'ALOTCHA

בהעלתך



Aharon is commanded to light the Menorah. This is the first act of the daily service, done before any sacrifices. Before the Star of David, the Menorah was the symbol of the Jewish people.

Why do you think that was – and what does it say about what defines us?

RABBI SACKS ON BAMIDBAR 8:2



In the hindsight of history,
military victory is often secondary
to cultural victory of handing your
values on to the next generation,
and making sure your children,
and theirs, light up the world.

SHELACH

שֶׁלַח



The spies return, afraid of what they've seen in the Land.

Are they lying? Have you ever let your own fears or self-doubt color how you see the world?

RABBI SACKS ON BAMIDBAR 13:33



[The spies] assumed that others saw them as they saw themselves, projecting their inadequacy onto the external world, with the result that they misinterpreted what they saw. Instead of ordinary people, they saw giants. Instead of towns, they saw impregnable fortresses, and they were afraid. The spies' confirmation bias meant that they paid selective attention to phenomena that gave them reason to be afraid. Their perception was not in the world but in the mind.

KORACH

קֹרַח



A rebellion breaks out – not
over facts, but over power.

**In your own life, would you rather
be right and in control, or work
toward truth and compromise?**

RABBI SACKS ON BAMIDBAR 16:15



In an argument for the sake of truth, if you win, you win, but if you lose, you also win, because being defeated by truth is the only defeat that is also a victory

In an argument for the sake of victory, if you lose, you lose, but if you win, you also lose, for by diminishing your opponents, you also diminish yourself.

Great leaders seek not power but truth, not victory but healing.

CHUKAT

חֻקַּת



Instead of speaking to a rock to miraculously bring forth water, as God had commanded, Moshe hits it.

Have you ever followed your own instincts instead of doing what you were told? What happened?

RABBI SACKS ON BAMIDBAR 20:10



One moment's anger was sufficient to deprive Moshe of the reward surely most precious to him, of seeing the culmination of his work by leading the people across the Jordan and into the Promised Land...

Each age produces its leaders, and each leader is a function of an age. At the dawn of time, said the Rabbis, God showed Adam each generation and its searchers, each generation and its leaders – meaning, no two generations are alike. The world changes and leaders need to help us to adapt to the new without breaking faith with the old.

BALAK

בַּלַּק



The prophet Bilam says the Israelites
are ‘a people that dwells alone.’

Is this a blessing or a curse?

RABBI SACKS ON BAMIDBAR 23:9



Nowhere in Tanach are we told that it will be the fate of Israel, or Jews, to be hated. To the contrary, the prophets foresaw that there would come a time when nations would turn to Israel for inspiration. Isolation may at times be the Jewish condition, but it is not the Jewish vocation. We must treat this pronouncement with caution. It is Bilam's curse, not God's blessing.

PINCHAS



The Torah introduces the regular daily offerings.

What shapes our lives: the extraordinary moments, or the everyday habits and routines?

RABBI SACKS ON BAMIDBAR 28:3



In many faiths, a sense of holiness and spirituality belongs to moments that are rare, unusual, exceptional. In Judaism what is holy is the texture of everyday life itself. It is the religious drama of daily deeds, words and relationships. God is not distant but in the here and now – if we create space in our hearts for His presence. We encounter Him, as the journey through the desert ends, not in thunder and lightning of Sinai but every morning and evening in ritual and routine.

MATOT

מטות



We learn about vows and promises – and how seriously the Torah treats them.

Rabbi Sacks says that words, when honored, create a free and moral society.

What do you think happens when people stop treating words and promises as sacred?

RABBI SACKS' INTRODUCTION TO MATOT



If you seek liberty, treat words as holy, vows and oaths as sacrosanct. When that happens, then, just as God used words to create the natural universe, so we use words to create a social universe. Words create moral obligations, and moral obligations, undertaken responsibly and honored faithfully, create the possibility of a free society.

MASEI

מַסְעֵי



Why is the Bible still the world's best-selling and most influential book? What makes it more powerful than any myth or hero story ever told?

RABBI SACKS ON BAMIDBAR 33:2



The Torah is not a myth but anti-myth. It focuses relentlessly on the drama of courage versus fear and hope versus despair. It emphasises the call, not to some larger-than-life hero but to all-of-us-together, given strength by our ties to our people's past and the bonds between us in the present. The Torah is not some fabled escape from reality but reality itself, seen as a journey we must all undertake, each with our own strengths and contributions to our people and to humanity.

DEVARIM

דְּבָרִים

Moshe begins his final speech
by reminding the people
of their past mistakes.

**Does criticism hold you
back or help you grow?**

RABBI SACKS ON DEVARIM 1:1



We are a self-critical people. The Tanach is the most self-critical of all national literatures. We know our failings, and there is something admirable about this honesty. But it must never leave us bereft of hope. Jewish leadership, as the Sages understood it, is about giving expression to love, respect, and even awe for the Jewish people, who – though it has come through an unparalleled history of suffering – still survives, still flourishes, and still bears witness to the living God. We are not short of critics, internal and external. What we need by way of balance is the voice of those who... see our faults but see our virtues also.

VA'ETCHANAN



We read the Shema: “Listen: Israel...” – the most important prayer in Judaism.

Why do you think Judaism emphasises hearing, rather than seeing? What does that mean about the very visual world we live in?

RABBI SACKS ON DEVARIM 6:4



Stop looking; listen. Stop speaking; listen. Create a silence in the soul. Still the clamor of instinct, desire, fear, anger. Strive to listen to the still, small voice beneath the noise. Then you will know that the universe is the work of the One beyond the furthest star yet closer to you than you are to yourself – and then you will love your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your might. In God's unity you will find unity, within yourself and between yourself and the world, and you will no longer fear the unknown.

EIKEV

עֵקֶב



Moshe reminds the people that they are a “Chosen People”.

Does being “chosen” imply we are “superior”?

RABBI SACKS ON DEVARIM 9:5



A chosen people is the opposite of a master race, first, because it is not a race but a covenant; second, because it exists to serve God, not to master others. A master race worships itself; a chosen people worships something beyond itself. A master race produces monumental buildings, triumphal inscriptions, and a literature of self-congratulation. Israel, to a degree unique in history, produced a literature of almost uninterrupted self-criticism.

RE'EH

ראה



The Torah commands us to care for the poor – but it never asks us to become poor ourselves.

Can we be spiritual and still enjoy material blessings?

RABBI SACKS ON DEVARIM 15:7



The whole tenor of the Torah is based on the idea that God is to be found in the physical world and its blessings. We are commanded to serve God in joy out of the abundance of good things, not through self-denial. Asceticism – always a temptation in the religious life – was never embraced by the Jewish mainstream. On the contrary, it was an implicit disavowal of this world which God created and pronounced good. Having regard for the poor did not mean in Judaism embracing poverty oneself. No poor person was ever helped by knowing that a saint had joined his ranks. He was helped by being given the chance not to be poor.

SHOFTIM

שפטים



We are taught to seek justice
and take responsibility.

**What might change – in your
relationships, your day, or life – if
you stopped waiting for someone
else to act, and stepped up yourself?**

RABBI SACKS ON DEVARIM 17:3



Just as every life has a task, so every day brings an opportunity. If we are where we are because God wanted us to be, then there must be, in every situation, something He wants us to do, some act of redemption He wants us to perform. I found the best way of knowing what it is, is to turn the situation upside down. I used to hope that people would praise my work; then I realised that what I was here to do was to praise the work of others. There were times when, in crisis, I would await the reassuring word from a friend, until I suddenly saw that I should be the one giving reassurance. [That] discovery changed my life.

KI TEITZEI

כִּי תֵצֵא



The Torah commands us to treat animals with care and compassion.

What rights should animals have? And what responsibility do we have toward them?

RABBI SACKS ON DEVARIM 22:7



Cruelty to animals is wrong. not because animals have rights but because we have duties. The duty not to be cruel is intended to promote virtue, and the primary context of virtue is the relationship between human beings. But virtues are indivisible. Those who are cruel to animals often become cruel to people. Hence we have a duty not to cause needless pain to animals because of its effect on us.

Animals may not have rights, but they have feelings, and we have duties toward them. We must respect them if we are to honour our role as God's partners in creation.

KI TAVO

כִּי־תָבוֹא



Moshe warns the Israelites not to forget God once they settle in the Land and prosper.

Why do you think comfort and success can be more dangerous than hardship and struggle?

RABBI SACKS ON DEVARIM 26:5



The sun and the wind were once arguing as to which was stronger. The sun said, 'I am stronger, because I give light and warmth to the whole world.' The wind said, 'I am stronger, because nothing can stand in my way.' Just then a farmer began plowing his field. The sun said to the wind, 'Let us settle the matter once and for all. Let us see which of us can remove the jacket from the man. That will prove which is the stronger.' The wind accepted the challenge and began to blow. But the harder it blew, the more tightly the farmer clung to his jacket, until the wind gave up, exhausted. Then the sun began to shine. As soon as the farmer felt its heat, he took his jacket off. Warmth is more powerful than wind... Throughout Jewish history, the more Jews suffered, the more they prayed, studied, and kept the commands. Paradoxically, the danger to Jewish continuity has been not slavery and suffering, but affluence and freedom.

NITZAVIM

נִצָּבִים

The Torah speaks of teshuvah
– literally ‘return’ – yet it’s
used in the context of sin.

**What does it mean to
‘return’ from sin?**

RABBI SACKS ON DEVARIM 30:2



Because a sin is an act in the wrong place, its consequence is that the one who performs it finds himself in the wrong place – in exile, meaning, not at home. Sin alienates; it distances us from God, and so from where we ought to be, where we belong. We become aliens, strangers... Hence the double meaning of teshuvah... It has both a physical and spiritual dimension, and the two are inseparable: it means both the physical return to the land and the spiritual return to God. Teshuvah is a double homecoming.

VAYEILECH

וַיֵּלֶךְ

Moshe prepares the people
for life without him.

**What keeps us connected
when the people who inspired
us are no longer there?**

RABBI SACKS ON DEVARIM 31:11



It is hard for individuals, let alone nations, to stay perennially young. We drift, lose our way, become distracted, lose our sense of purpose and with it our energy and drive. The best way to stay young is never to forget ‘the devotion of our youth,’ the defining experiences that made us who we are, the dreams we had long ago of how we might change the world to make it a better, fairer, more spiritually beautiful place.

HA'AZINU

הַאֲזִינוּ



Moshe sees the Promised Land
but knows he won't enter it.

**How do we keep going
when we know we might
never reach our goals?**

RABBI SACKS ON DEVARIM 32:51



Even the greatest human beings make mistakes, fail as often as they succeed, and have moments of black despair. What makes them great is not that they are perfect but that they keep going. They learn from every error, refuse to give up hope, and eventually acquire the great gift that only failure can grant, namely humility. They understand that life is about failing a hundred times and getting up again. It is about never losing your ideals even when you know how hard it is to change the world. It is about getting up every morning and walking one more day towards the Promised Land even though you know you may never get there, but knowing also that you helped others get there.

VEZOT HABERACHAH

וזאת הברכה



Moshe dies just before
entering the Land of Israel.

Why don't we live forever?

RABBI SACKS ON DEVARIM 34:4



If we lived forever, life itself would have no shape, no edge, no urgency, no compelling purpose. We would not act. For anything we wished to do, there would always be time in the future. If we lived forever, we would not know love, for the very power of love is tied to the knowledge that its moment is all too brief and soon it too will perish...

If we lived forever, we would not create – for the deepest source of the creative urge is the desire to make something that will live on after us, that will have the immortality we lack. Therefore we choose and plan and act. We become the creators of the most consequential work of art we will ever execute – our life itself.