



Covenant & Conversation



Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

SHEMOT · שמות

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

Leadership and the People

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

Parshat Shemot paints a portrait of Moshe's early life, which culminates in the moment when God appears to him in the bush that burns without being consumed. It is a key text of the Torah's view of leadership. One passage in the long dialogue between God and Moshe is especially striking. God summons him to lead Bnei Yisrael to freedom, and Moshe refuses four times. "I am unworthy," he says. "I am not a man of words." "Send someone else." But it is his second refusal that attracted special attention from the Sages:

"But they will not believe me. They will not listen to me. They will say, 'God did not appear to you.'"

The Sages noticed three unusual features of this response. First, God had already said, *"They will listen to you"*. Yet Moshe still doubted their faith in him. Commentators suggested that he feared the people as a whole, or that their belief would evaporate as soon as Pharaoh refused. Moshe had already seen how quickly his people challenged him. His doubts were not unreasonable.

Second, they noticed the strange sign God then gave Moshe: his hand turning *"leprous as snow"*. Unlike the staff-snake transformation or the Nile-water-turning-into-blood, this sign never appears again. The Sages linked it to Miriam later being punished with leprosy for Lashon Hara. **Perhaps Moshe too had spoken negatively - not about an individual, but about an entire people.**

The third detail is that this refusal is the only one where Moshe speaks not of his own inadequacy, but of the people's. Putting these points together, the Sages taught:

"He who entertains a suspicion against the innocent will be bodily afflicted... They are believers, the children of believers... but you will ultimately disbelieve."

This is an extraordinary idea. Moshe was permitted to doubt himself. What he was not permitted to do was doubt the people. In truth he was not wrong about their character. They were often "stiff-necked," frequently complaining and wanting to return to Egypt. Yet God still reprimanded him. **Leadership, the Sages imply, demands faith in the people you are to lead.**

This insight helps explain a larger truth about prophetic leadership. A critic or leader can speak from the "outside," detached and superior. But the prophets of Israel were different. They spoke from within, rooted "among their own people," sharing their fate and covenant. They were the voice of God to the people, and the voice of the people to God. To lead this way requires identification, solidarity, and faith.

Rambam expressed this with particular force in his *Epistle on Martyrdom*. After forced converts to Islam asked whether their hidden Jewish observance still had value, a rabbi harshly dismissed them. Rambam responded with a defence of love and solidarity, quoting rabbinic passages in which God rebukes prophets for speaking negatively of Israel. Those who keep Judaism in secret, he wrote, are to be praised, not condemned. Leadership must raise people through encouragement, not crush them with criticism.

So who is a leader in the Jewish sense? One who identifies with his or her people, mindful of their faults but convinced of their potential greatness and their preciousness in the sight of God. "Those people of whom you have doubts," God is, in essence, saying to Moshe, "are believers, the children of believers. They are My people, and they are your people. Just as you believe in Me, so you must believe in them."

Around the Shabbat Table



1. Why might believing in people be harder than believing in an idea or a mission?
2. How should a leader balance believing in their people with understanding their flaws?
3. How does having faith in others change the way we speak about them?

Takeaway Thoughts

Leadership begins with believing in people, even when they falter. A truly good leader isn't one who believes they are exceptional, but one who has faith in those they lead.



Exploring the Parsha

WITH SARA LAMM

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



The Parsha in a Nutshell

The Israelites settle in Egypt and grow into a large and thriving people. Alarmed by their numbers, Pharaoh enslaves them and subjects them to harsh labour. When this fails to slow their growth, he orders the Hebrew midwives, Shifra and Puah, to kill all the baby boys at birth. The midwives refuse, so he then commands that all Hebrew infants be thrown into the Nile.

During this time of great danger, a son is born to Yocheved and Amram. They hide him for as long as they can, but they fear if he is discovered he too will be killed. Carefully they place the baby in a basket and send him down the River Nile. Miriam, his older

sister, watches over him as Pharaoh's daughter discovers the child, raises him as her own, and names him Moshe.

Years later, Moshe witnesses the suffering of his people. Seeing an Egyptian slave master beating a Hebrew slave, he kills the slave master. Then he flees to Midian, becomes a shepherd, and marries Tziporah, daughter of Yitro the Midianite priest. God appears to him in a Burning Bush and sends him to confront Pharaoh. Pharaoh refuses to release the people, and their suffering intensifies, but God assures Moshe that redemption is near.



Parsha Activity

Join My Movement

One person starts a movement and then stops halfway, for example, raising an arm or beginning a spin. The next person continues the movement in their own way. Keep passing it along, trusting that each person will carry your gestures forward.

The round ends when you've gone through every player and back to the original person who 'started the movement'.



Seeing Potential

Even when Helen Keller was a young child, she could neither see nor hear. She would later describe the overriding feeling as being "at sea in a dense fog." The world around her felt chaotic and unreachable, and her frustration often erupted into outbursts. Her family loved her deeply but struggled to help her learn or communicate. So Helen struggled on, unable to speak or understand others.

Everything changed in 1887, when Annie Sullivan arrived at the house as seven-year-old Helen's new governess. Annie was young, partially blind herself, and carried her own experiences of loss and hardship. From the start, she treated Helen not as unreachable, but as someone capable of understanding. She set firm boundaries, and stayed when progress was slow and resistance was strong.

One day, Annie brought Helen to a water pump. As cool water poured over Helen's hands, Annie traced letters into her palm, repeating the same motion again and again. 'Water'. Helen suddenly realised that the movements stood for something real. They were names. They were words. As she later wrote, *"I stood still, my whole attention fixed upon the motions of her fingers. Suddenly I felt ...a thrill of returning thought; and somehow the mystery of language was revealed to me. I knew then that w-a-t-e-r meant the wonderful cool something that was flowing over my hand. The living word awakened my soul, gave it light, hope, set it free!"*

From that moment, her learning accelerated at lightning speed. Helen demanded to be taught the names of all the objects in her world. She then



absorbed language with intensity and purpose. Over time, she studied, learned to write and speak, wrote, and became a powerful advocate for education and human dignity.

In later years, Helen Keller wrote that Annie Sullivan did far more than teach her language. She credited her with awakening her mind. Annie had believed in Helen's abilities long before Helen knew it herself, and that belief had changed everything.



Cards & Conversation

"Pharaoh's daughter came down to bathe in the Nile... She saw the basket among the reeds... the boy was crying, and she was moved to pity for him: 'This must be one of the Hebrew boys!'"

- Shemot 2:5-6

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

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

Rabbi Sacks on Shemot 2:5 (in the Koren Sacks Humash) offers an answer:

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."

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Parsha in Practice

Value of the Week

Civil Disobedience
(Shemot 1:17 and 2:12)

Shemot introduces us to people who practice civil disobedience. Shifra and Puah refuse Pharaoh's command because they recognise the humanity of the vulnerable, and the immorality of the law. Moshe seeing injustice done to a Hebrew slave, also intervenes. These actions come from attention, certainty or status. Noticing suffering, they choose not to look away.

Rabbi Sacks often emphasised that morality in Judaism begins with responsibility. We do not wait to be instructed before acting with compassion. Sometimes we must follow our own moral compass.

Practically Speaking

How can we know when to follow and when to act out?

The Torah is teaching us that leadership and justice begin with small, courageous decisions, made when no one is watching and outcomes are unclear.

We like to think that all laws are fair, and made for the benefit of others. And often this is true. But sometimes they come into conflict with our morality. In *Halachah* - Jewish Law - for instance, we must obey our parents. But if they command us to break Shabbat, or act against another mitzva, we make an exception and refuse their request. Sometimes we must make our own moral choices, over authority.



Try it out

YOUNG STUDENTS:

Think about a time you saw someone being left out or treated unfairly. What small thing could you do to help, even if you are unsure how it will turn out?

ADVANCING STUDENTS:

Notice moments this week when it would be easier to stay silent. Choose one situation where you speak or act kindly on behalf of someone else, not because you are certain, but because it is the right thing to do.



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.



The women who defied a cruel order from Pharaoh

LAYER 1: LOOK AT THE TORAH TEXT: SHEMOT 1:17

וַתִּירָאן הַמִּילֵדוֹת, אֶת-הָאֱלֹקִים, וְלֹא עָשׂוּ, כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר אֲלֵיהֶן מֶלֶךְ מִצְרַיִם; וַתַּחְיֶינָן, אֶת-הַיִּלָּדִים.

LAYER 2: READ RABBI SACKS' TRANSLATION

But the midwives feared God, and did not do as the king of Egypt ordered them. They let the babies live.

LAYER 3: THINK ABOUT WHAT IT MEANS

Pharaoh has given Shifra and Puah, midwives to the Jewish women in Egypt, a direct order to kill every male Hebrew baby as soon as he is born. And now we read that they follow God over their king, and disobey the order. Does this seem surprising to you? Do you think it was unusual behaviour for the time?

It should be noted that when we read, "The midwives feared God", that in this context this usually means, they believed in God and followed a strict moral code, like Avraham did, and not that they feared God as we might fear a wild animal or a cruel king of Egypt. These women, it seems, did not fear Pharaoh.

LAYER 4: LEARN FROM RABBI SACKS' COMMENTARY

Though Shifra and Puah are seemingly minor figures in the narrative, they are giants in the story of humanity. All we know about them is that they "feared God and did not do as the king of Egypt ordered them". In those words, a precedent is set that will eventually become the basis of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Shifra and Puah, by refusing to obey an immoral order, redefine the moral imagination of the world.

Shifra and Puah are the first of six courageous women who will play a vital part in the story of Israel's redemption in this parsha. The others are Yocheved and Miriam, Pharaoh's daughter, and Moshe's wife Tziporah. Moshe may be the central character in the unfolding drama of Israel's redemption, but without these women, there would be no Moshe. Their moral courage is a vital element in the story.

LAYER 5: REFLECT AND RESPOND

It is striking that many of the moral heroes at the start of Shemot are women, and several are not Israelites at all. Pharaoh's daughter rescues a Hebrew child, and Tziporah later saves Moshe's life. Shifra and Puah, whoever they were, defy royal power to protect the vulnerable. As Rabbi Sacks notes, the Torah balances Israel's unique calling with a universal moral law that binds all humanity, Jews and non-Jews alike.

1. What does it mean for morality to be universal, even when identity is particular?
2. Why might the Torah choose women as the first moral actors in the Exodus story?
3. What other characters throughout Tanach play a similar role in partnership with the Jewish people - while they themselves are not Jewish?

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



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.

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