



Covenant & Conversation

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



Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

Freedom's Defence

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

"And you shall explain to your child on that day, 'It is because of what the Lord did for me when I went free from Egypt'."

After more than two hundred years of slavery, the Israelites were about to go free. Ten plagues had struck Egypt. The people were the first to understand; Pharaoh was the last. God was on the side of freedom and human dignity. You cannot build a nation, however strong your police and army, by enslaving some for the benefit of others. History eventually turns against every tyranny.

The moment arrived. The Israelites stood on the brink of liberation. Moshe gathered them together to speak at what was the birth of a people. He could have spoken about freedom itself, the breaking of chains and the end of slavery. He could have spoken about the destination ahead, the land flowing with milk and honey. He might have spoken about the dangers of the long journey that still lay ahead.

Moshe did none of these things. Instead, he spoke about children, the distant future, and the duty to pass on memory to generations yet unborn. **Three times in this week's sedra he reminds them that this is a story that they will teach their children.** At the very moment they were about to gain their freedom, the Israelites were told that they must become a nation of educators. That is what made Moshe not only a great leader, but a unique one. The Torah is teaching that freedom is not won on the battlefield, nor in politics or courts of law. It is won in the human imagination and will. **To defend a country you need an army. But to defend a free society you need schools, families, and an educational system in which ideals are passed from one generation to the next and never forgotten.**

This is why Jews became a people whose passion was education, whose citadels were schools, and whose heroes were teachers. By the time of the Second Temple, Jews had created the world's first system of universal compulsory education. The Sages insisted that if a city made no provision for the education of its children, it had no right to call itself secure. They taught that the true defenders of a city were not soldiers, but teachers.

No other faith has attached a higher value to study. From the very outset, Israel knew that freedom cannot be created by laws alone, nor sustained by political structures.

The Sages expressed this truth in a striking way. When they describe the two Tablets of Stone that Moshe received at Sinai, the Torah says that the writing was "*charut* - engraved" on the stone. The Sages read this as "*cheirut* - freedom," teaching that when the Torah is engraved on the hearts of the people, they are truly free.

Moshe taught Bnai Yisrael that freedom is more than a moment of political victory. It is a constant effort, across generations, to remember suffering so as never to cause it. That is why we eat matzah and maror on Pesach: to remember our past affliction, and thus to never become a people who afflict others.

Freedom is not about individuals doing whatever they wish. **Freedom is a never-ending effort of education in which parents, teachers, homes, and schools are all partners in the dialogue between the generations.** Learning - *Talmud Torah* - is the very foundation of Judaism, the guardian of our heritage and hope. That is why we give Moshe the greatest honour by calling him *Moshe Rabbeinu*, our teacher. For it is in the arena of education that the battle for the good society is lost or won.

Around the Shabbat Table



1. What do we mean when we say that freedom must be taught, not just achieved?
2. How can forgetting the past lead to a loss of freedom?
3. What is the difference between freedom and "doing whatever you want"?

Takeaway Thoughts

Without education and moral guidance, freedom fades into chaos or tyranny. True liberty is learned, practiced, and protected over time, and educating the next generation is key.



Exploring the Parsha

WITH SARA LAMM

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



The Parsha in a Nutshell

The final three plagues strike Egypt one after another. **Locusts** destroy the remaining crops, a heavy **darkness** covers the land, and at midnight on the fifteenth of Nissan every **Egyptian firstborn** dies.

God gives the Israelites instructions including their first mitzvah; to establish a calendar based on the new moon. They are commanded to bring a *Pesach Korban* (Passover offering), to mark their doorposts with sheep's blood so their homes will be spared when the Egyptian homes are struck

with the final plague, and they are also commanded to eat the Paschal lamb sacrifice together with matzah and bitter herbs.

After the tenth terrible plague, Pharaoh finally gives in to Moshe's demands for his people's freedom, and the Egyptians drive the Israelites out. They leave in haste, before their dough can rise, but with great wealth. They are told to consecrate their firstborns, to observe Pesach each year, and to teach the story of the Exodus to their children.



Parsha Activity

Rosh Chodesh minute

Set a one-minute timer and go around the table. Each person shares three things before the timer ends: one thing they learned this past month, one thing they would do differently, and one thing they want more time for next month. When the timer stops, the turn ends and play moves on. It is quick, familiar, low pressure, and always finishes on time.



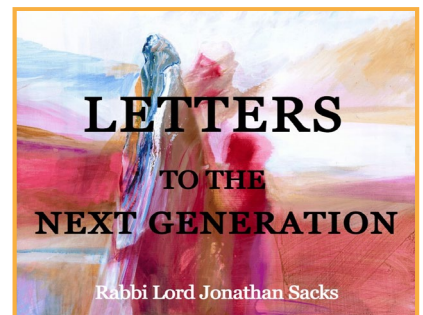
His Letters, My Story

Growing up in the Former Soviet Union, I didn't have much knowledge about my Jewish identity and traditions. When my husband and I first discussed how to raise our children, it was clear that we wanted to build a home with Jewish values and traditions. But my Soviet childhood made it challenging to navigate and feel competent in the world of observant Jews. After all, I still remember the day my best friend called me "a dirty Jew". Such words cut deep...

One day I came across the essay, "Letters to the Next Generation", written by Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks. I held my breath as the words spoke directly to me: "The truth is that virtually every Jew alive today has a history more remarkable than the

greatest novel or family saga. It tells of how they were expelled from one country after another, how they lost everything and had to begin again..." I couldn't believe how relevant this statement was to me. This was exactly my story. I was astonished that somewhere in the world lived a rabbi who understood my personal ordeal and the depth of my struggles.

My family rebuilt, creating a new life in the United States. We hoped that our Jewish identity would no longer be our biggest obstacle but rather a sign of pride and integrity. It was intimidating for a Soviet-bred young mother to walk into a yeshiva school for the first time. At that time, Rabbi Sacks' words inspired me again, speaking directly to me: "For Jews, education is not just what we know. It's



who we are.... the first duty of a Jewish parent is to ensure that their children have a Jewish education." These profound words encouraged me to make the ultimate leap of faith and allow my children to enter the world of ancient Hebrew texts and Torah wisdom. The most powerful answer to our captors was not to wallow in self-pity but to expose our own child to the insight of Jewish ideas and values.

This story is shared here: rabbisacks.org/life-of-rabbi-jonathan-sacks/reflections/



Cards & Conversation

But the Lord strengthened Pharaoh's heart, and he would not agree to send the people forth.

- Shemot 10:27

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

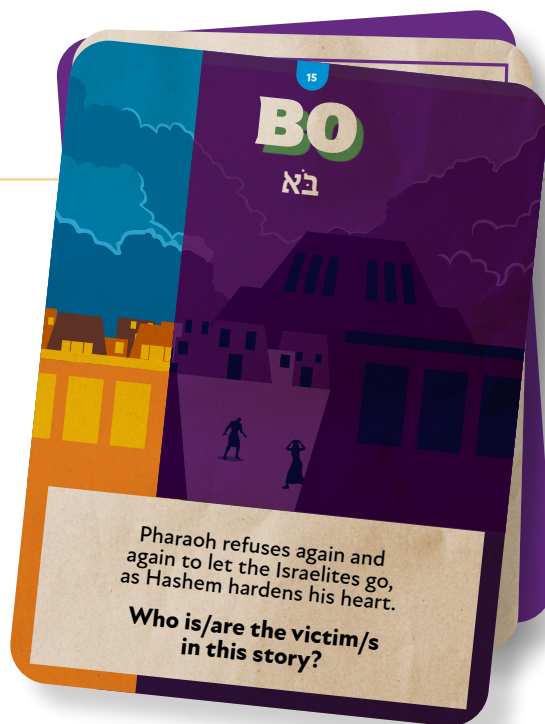
QUESTION: Who is/are the victims/s in this story?

Rabbi Sacks on Shemot 10:6 (in the Koren Sacks Humash) offers an answer:

"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."

Cards & Conversation: Chumash Edition is a new resource. On one side of every parsha card, you'll find an interesting question to think about and discuss, based on the Torah portion. Flip it over, and you'll discover an idea from Rabbi Sacks that shines a new light on the parsha.

We are pleased to offer a weekly sample of these cards here, and you can also download the full set, request a pack of your own, and find out more by visiting rabbisacks.org/cards-and-conversation ☞



Parsha in Practice

Mitzva of the Week

Rosh Chodesh

(Shemot 12:2)

Before Bnai Yisrael leave Egypt, God gives them their very first mitzva as a people: to sanctify the new moon and establish a calendar. This is not a lesson in astronomy. It's about ownership of time. Slaves live according to schedules imposed on them by others. Free people decide what matters, when it begins, and how it is marked. By making Rosh Chodesh the first commandment, God teaches that freedom begins when we learn to shape our time with purpose and meaning, and sanctifying the new moon reminds us that renewal is built into the rhythm of life. Even after darkness, a new beginning is always possible. The moon may wane, but it will always return.

Practically Speaking

How will you mark the new month?

We often feel as if time controls us. School schedules, work deadlines, messages, and obligations pull us along, leaving little room to pause or reflect. Rosh Chodesh pushes back against that feeling. It reminds us that time is not just something that happens to us. It is something we can elevate.

Sanctifying time means choosing moments to stop, notice, and reset. It means marking beginnings instead of rushing past them. When we treat time as holy, even small moments can become meaningful, and life feels less like survival and a bit more intentional.



Try it out

YOUNG STUDENTS:

When Rosh Chodesh arrives, pause and name one thing you hope to begin or improve this month. It can be small, just a step in a new direction, for even a small beginning counts.

ADVANCING STUDENTS:

Take a few minutes this week to reflect on how you use your time. Choose one habit or moment you want to be more intentional about this month, and consciously mark it as a fresh start.

Decide how you can give yourself the best chance to implement this change, and set off on your new path knowing it can be done!



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.



When the people left Egypt, were they a unified group?

LAYER 1: LOOK AT THE TORAH TEXT: SHEMOT 12:38

"וְגַם-עָרֵב רַב, עָלָה אִתָּם, וְצֹאן וּבְקָר, מִקְנֵה כְּבֹד מֵאֵד."

LAYER 2: READ RABBI SACKS' TRANSLATION

"And a great variety of other people went up with them, as well as large droves of livestock, flocks and cattle."

LAYER 3: THINK ABOUT WHAT IT MEANS

Who are the other people who left Egypt, the ones who are not the children of Israel, from the twelve tribes? This is the first time, but by no means the last, that we read of the **erev rav**, an unidentified "variety of others" or "mixed multitude" who leave Egypt as part of Israel. Mention of them at this point could be literal, relevant, or even a metaphor for the nation on the day of Yetziat Mitzrayim.

LAYER 4: LEARN FROM RABBI SACKS' COMMENTARY

There are two ways of reading the story of the Exodus. One is as a tale of Divine Intervention in history; this is how we have read the text so far. The other is about how Moshe turned a ragtag crowd of escaping slaves, fractious, fearful, and disputatious, into a cohesive nation with an identity so strong that it was able to survive devastating defeats, as well as a two-thousand-year exile. That nation continued to see itself as a nation even when scattered and dispersed across the world.

How do you create that kind of identity out of diversity? How do you build this sort of unity and sovereignty of God, commitment to the commandments, and – as in these two passages – the engagement of God in history and the deliverance of His people from slavery.

The texts contained in the tefillin embody what could have been abstract ideas. It is the genius of Judaism to turn such ideas into concrete actions and physical symbols. Tefillin, in particular, represent a daily engagement with the fundamentals of faith, worn as gestures of love and dedication.

LAYER 5: REFLECT AND RESPOND

The story of Yetziyat Mitzrayim is more than a tale of miracles. It's a narrative that shows how a diverse and unlikely group of people learned to see themselves as one whole nation. Bnai Yisrael begins as a mixed crowd, showing that unity grows from shared values and responsibility rather than ancestry. The rest of the Torah then unfolds just how a free society can build identity and loyalty without force, through teaching, law, and a common purpose.

Reading all this, how do you view the story of Yetziat Mitzrayim. Is it a grand finale, the end of a story about national slavery and liberation, or perhaps the beginning of a new one about the journey toward freedom?

- 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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