



Covenant & Conversation

בשלהך · BESHALLACH

BASED ON THE TEACHINGS OF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ז"כ

FAMILY
EDITION

Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

To be a Leader of the Jewish People

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

“That day, God saved the Israelites. The people were in awe, they believed in God, and in His servant Moshe. Moshe and the Israelites then sang this song...”

The Song at the Sea was one of the great epiphanies of history. For the first time, the people broke into collective song – a song we still recite every day.

The Sages asked a fascinating question: how exactly did the Israelites sing? They offered several views. According to Rabbi Akiva, Moshe sang each line and the people responded with the refrain, “I will sing to the Lord,” like saying Amen in response. According to Rabbi Eliezer, son of Rabbi Jose, Moshe recited each line and the people repeated it after him, word for word. Rabbi Nehemiah held that Moshe and the people sang together in unison, all inspired at the same time. A fourth view, from the Mechilta, suggests that Moshe began each verse, the people repeated his opening words, and then completed the verse themselves.

At first glance, this seems like a technical debate about how the song was sung. But beneath the surface lies a much deeper question: what kind of leader was Moshe?

To understand this, we can look at another discussion, between the sages. This time they debate honour, and whether different leaders can renounce the honour given to them: a parent, a teacher, the *nasi*, and a king. A parent may do so. Some say a teacher may do so. A *nasi* may, but only in limited situations. But a king may not ever. The reason is that each role sits at a different point on the scale between personal and official authority. At one end we have parenthood, which is intensely personal; kingship, at the other end of the spectrum, is entirely official.

Rabbi Sacks suggests the debate about the Song at the Sea is really about leadership styles. For R. Akiva, Moshe

was like a king. He spoke, and the people responded a type of ‘Amen.’ For R. Nehemiah, Moshe was like a *nasi*, singing together with his colleagues. For R. Eliezer, he was like a teacher, with the people repeating after him. For R. Eliezer, Moshe was like a parent: he began, but allowed the people to complete the journey themselves.

This last model is especially powerful. The Torah’s first image of parenthood already points in this direction. Terach began the journey toward Canaan, but it was Abraham who completed it. **To be a parent is to want one’s children to go further than you did.**

That, according to this view, was Moshe’s deepest relationship with Bnai Yisrael. The Torah says that at the sea they believed “in God, and in His servant Moshe” – the first time they fully trusted his leadership. But Moshe did not want followers who depended on him forever. At times he asserted authority, as during the rebellion of Korach. At other moments he expressed the wish that “all God’s people were prophets.” Judaism recognises that leadership has many forms, depending on time and situation.

In Judaism, there is more than one style of leadership. We are all called upon to lead in different ways: as parents, teachers, friends, team members and team leaders.

It is however clear that Judaism favours the role of parent. This is the highest ideal. The parental style means encouraging those we lead to continue the journey we have begun, and go further than we did.

A good leader creates followers. A great leader creates leaders. That was Moshe’s greatest achievement – that he left behind him a people willing, in each generation, to accept responsibility for taking further the great task he had begun.

Around the Shabbat Table



- Which kind of leader do you think Moshe was in the Song at the Sea, and why?
- How can giving someone responsibility help them grow?
- How does Moshe’s leadership in the Song at the Sea compare with leaders like Avraham, Yosef, or Yehoshua?

Takeaway Thoughts

True leadership is measured less by authority and more by the ability to nurture responsibility, invite participation, and enable others to carry the song forward on their own.



Exploring the Parsha

WITH SARA LAMM

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



The Parsha in a Nutshell

Beshallach begins with a battle, ends with a battle, and in the middle is a great miracle, the splitting of the Reed Sea.

After allowing Bnei Yisrael to leave Egypt, Pharaoh's heart is hardened once again and he thinks they are lost and trapped in the desert. With his men and his 600 powerful chariots, Pharaoh pursues his former slaves, trapping the people between his army and the sea.

The people are armed, but seeing the Egyptians thundering towards them, they fear for their lives. Moshe tells them to stand firm and witness God's miracles. Moshe lifts his staff and all night long the sea splits into two, creating a path for Bnai Yisrael to

walk through safely. Then the waters return, overwhelming the Egyptians. The powerful chariots are useless against the waves. Having seen this wondrous power, Moshe and Bnei Yisrael respond with *Az Yashir*, a song of praise to God.

In the desert, the people struggle with thirst and hunger, and complain to Moshe and Aharon. So bitter waters are sweetened, water flows from a rock, manna falls each morning, and quail appear at night. A double portion of manna is gathered before Shabbat each week.

Then at Rephidim, Amalek attacks, but the people fight back for the first time, led by Moshe and Joshua, and they defeat their enemies.



Parsha Activity

Mission Control

Choose one person as Mission Controller, and one player as Leader. The Controller privately gives the Leader a leadership style (bossy, silent, consensus-seeking, hands-off, optimistic, chaotic, etc.) and then the Leader must set the team a simple mission (e.g. move an object across the room without talking/touching). The team has 60 seconds to complete the mission, led by their Leader. After the attempt, guess/reveal the style. Rotate Leaders and styles. At the end, ask: Which styles felt good? Which were frustrating? Which would you want - or not want - in real life?



The Rebbe's Leaders

When Rabbi Sacks used to tell the story of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, he described him as one of the most far-reaching leaders in Jewish history. While many great figures shaped ideas, texts, or *kehilot*, the Rebbe transformed Jewish life across the entire world, building communities where none had existed and inspiring leadership on an unprecedented scale.

Rabbi Sacks describes how, as a young philosophy student in Cambridge, he repeatedly heard the Rebbe's name spoken with awe by Jews of every background. Rabbi Sacks had a lot of questions for this great man. But when they eventually met, the Rebbe instead

asked him some questions of his own. He enquired about Jewish life in Cambridge, and challenged a young Jonathan Sacks to take responsibility for strengthening it. Rabbi Sacks said that what struck him most was how the Rebbe treated a young student as someone capable of leadership.

Again and again, Rabbi Sacks encountered similar stories. The Rebbe encouraged young people to take on serious responsibility, sent scholars into the wider world rather than keeping them close, and believed deeply in the potential of every Jew. He supported figures as different as Chabad emissaries, academics, and even Viktor Frankl, urging them to



persevere in work that would ultimately change lives.

Rabbi Sacks explained that the Rebbe's greatness lay in his belief that leadership is not about creating followers, but about creating leaders. By trusting people and believing in their ability to grow, the Rebbe helped them believe in themselves. His legacy lives on through the countless individuals he inspired to take responsibility and bring meaning, faith, and hope into the world.



Cards & Conversation

He led them on a roundabout course...

- Shemot 13:17

QUESTIONS: 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 (in the Koren Sacks Humash) offers an answer:

"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."

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Parsha in Practice

Mitzva of the Week

Shabbat

(Shemot 16:22)

God commands Bnei Yisrael to gather as much manna each day as they need to eat that day. On Fridays, they can scoop up a double portion, because no manna will fall on Shabbat. This mitzva is not only about food. It is about trust. For the first time, a people newly freed from slavery are asked to stop working without fear. In Egypt, survival depended on constant labour. In the wilderness, God teaches that sustenance does not come only from effort, but from faith. Gathering a double portion before Shabbat, and collecting nothing for one day a week, teaches that rest is not a risk. It is an act of belief that what we have is enough.

Practically Speaking

How will you pause?

Many of us feel pressure to keep going, even when we are exhausted. We worry that if we stop, we will fall behind or lose something important. The double portion of manna challenges that mindset. It reminds us that rest is not laziness, and pausing is not failure. Shabbat teaches that the world can continue even when we step back. Learning to stop, to trust that we will have enough, creates space for gratitude, presence, and perspective. When we practise healthy limits, we discover that rest can strengthen us rather than weaken us, and that trust allows us to live with greater calm and confidence.



Try it out

YOUNG STUDENTS:

Before Shabbat, think about something you usually rush through. Choose one moment to slow down and enjoy over Shabbat without worrying about what comes next.

And after the challah is passed around on Shabbat, offer to teach your family why we have two loaves on Shabbat – a double portion!

ADVANCING STUDENTS:

This week, notice when you feel pressure to keep going instead of resting. Ask yourself what you are afraid might happen if you stop. Try setting aside one protected moment, on Shabbat or over your week, where you practise trusting that what you have is enough.



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.



God vs. the Egyptian army

LAYER 1: LOOK AT THE TORAH TEXT: SHEMOT 14:24-25

...וַיַּשְׁקֹף הָאֱלֹהִים מַחְנֶה מִצְרָיִם, בְּעִמּוֹד אֹשֶׁר עָצָן; וַיַּהְיֶה, אֶת מַחְנֶה מִצְרָיִם. וַיַּסֶּר, אֶת אֹפֶן מַרְכֶּבֶתִי, וַיַּבְנֶה נֶהָרָה, בְּכֶבֶד; וַיֹּאמֶר מִצְרָיִם, אָנוֹתָה מִפְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל - כִּי הִנֵּה, נֶלֶחֶם לָהֶם בְּמִצְרָיִם.

LAYER 2: READ RABBI SACKS' TRANSLATION

“...the Lord looked down at the Egyptian army from a column of fire and cloud and threw them into a panic, clogging their chariot wheels so that it was hard for them to move. The Egyptians said, 'Let us flee from the Israelites. The Lord is fighting for them against Egypt.' ”

LAYER 3: THINK ABOUT WHAT IT MEANS

This was an open miracle for anyone paying attention to the moment. What do you think Bnei Yisrael were thinking in this moment? What was Pharaoh thinking? How do the Egyptians react? How will other nations respond when this story gets spread to all the neighbouring peoples?

LAYER 4: LEARN FROM RABBI SACKS' COMMENTARY

While the Israelites watch, the chariots become bogged down in the mud. By the time the Egyptians realize what is happening, they are trapped. The mightiest army of the ancient world is defeated, and its warriors drowned, not by a superior army, not by human opposition at all, but by their own folly in being so focused on capturing the Israelites that they ignored the fact that they were driving into mud where their chariots could not go. Strength has turned to weakness, and what gave the Egyptian army its speed now mires them in immobility.

LAYER 5: REFLECT AND RESPOND

Egypt's power was real. Their horses and chariots were unmatched, the height of military technology in the ancient world. They had speed, strength, and confidence. But those very advantages blinded them. So focused on control and capture, they drove straight into terrain where their power could not function. What made them dominant became what trapped them. At the same time, Bnei Yisrael are told to do almost nothing. Moshe's instruction was simply trust and restraint. The Egyptians lost the battle, not because Israel was stronger, but because Egypt misunderstood what real strength is.

1. What can happen when people rely too much on power, speed, or control?
2. Moshe tells the people to stay silent and trust. When is it hardest to do that?
3. Why do you think the Egyptians' greatest strength became their downfall?

- 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.

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