



# Covenant & Conversation

Jonathan Sacks  
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

BESHALLACH • בשלח

FROM THE TEACHINGS AND WRITINGS OF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS זצ"ל

With thanks to the Schimmel Family for their generous sponsorship of Covenant & Conversation, dedicated in loving memory of Harry (Chaim) Schimmel.

"I have loved the Torah of R' Chaim Schimmel ever since I first encountered it. It strives to be not just about truth on the surface but also its connection to a deeper truth beneath. Together with Anna, his remarkable wife of 60 years, they built a life dedicated to love of family, community, and Torah.

An extraordinary couple who have moved me beyond measure by the example of their lives." — Rabbi Sacks

This year's series of essays were originally written and recorded by Rabbi Sacks זצ"ל in 5773 (2012–2013). These timeless messages are accompanied by a new [Family Edition](#) created to inspire intergenerational learning on the Parsha.

## To be a Leader of the Jewish People

*That day, the Lord saved the Israelites from the Egyptians. And when the Israelites ... witnessed the wondrous power the Lord had unleashed against the Egyptians, the people were in awe of the Lord, and they believed in Him and in Moshe, His servant.*

*And then Moshe and the Israelites sang this song to the Lord...*

Exodus 14:30–15:1

The Song at the Sea was one of the great epiphanies of history. The Sages said that even the humblest of Jews saw at that moment what even the greatest of prophets was not privileged to see. For the first time they broke into collective song – *Az Yashir* – a song we recite every day. There is a fascinating discussion among the Sages as to how exactly they sang. On this, there were four opinions. Three appear in the tractate of Sotah:

Rabbi Akiva expounded: When the Israelites came up from the Red Sea, they wanted to sing a song. How did they sing it? Like an adult who reads the Hallel and they respond after him with the leading word. Moses said, "I will sing to the Lord," and they responded, "I will sing to the Lord." Moses said, "For He has triumphed gloriously," and they responded, "I will sing to the Lord."

Rabbi Eliezer, son of Rabbi Jose the Galilean, said: It was like a child who reads the Hallel and they repeat after him all that he says. Moses said, "I will sing to the Lord," and they responded, "I will sing to the Lord." Moses said, "For He has triumphed gloriously," and they responded, "For He has triumphed gloriously."

Rabbi Nehemiah said: It was like a schoolteacher who recites the Shema in

the synagogue. He begins first and they follow along with him.

Sotah 30b

According to Rabbi Akiva, Moses sang the song phrase by phrase, and after each phrase the people responded, I will sing to the Lord – their way, as it were, of saying Amen to each line. According to R. Eliezer son of R. Jose the Galilean, Moses recited the song phrase by phrase, and they repeated each phrase after he had said it. According to Rabbi Nehemiah, Moses and the people sang the whole song together. Rashi explains that all the people were seized by Divine inspiration and miraculously, the same words came into their minds at the same time.

There is a fourth view, found in the Mechilta:

Eliezer ben Taddai said, Moses began and the Israelites repeated what he had said and then completed the verse.

Moses began by saying, “I will sing to the Lord, for He has triumphed gloriously,” and the Israelites repeated what he had said, and then completed the verse with him, saying, “I will sing to the Lord, for He has triumphed gloriously, the horse and its rider He hurled into the sea.” Moses began saying, “The Lord is my strength and my song,” and the Israelites repeated and then completed the verse with him, saying, “The Lord is my strength and my song; He has become my salvation.”

Moses began saying, “The Lord is a warrior,” and the Israelites repeated

and then completed the verse with him, saying, “The Lord is a warrior, Lord is His name.”

Mechilta Beshallach Parsha 1

Technically, as the Talmud explains, the Sages are debating the implication of the (apparently) superfluous words *vayomru lemor*, “they said, saying”, which they understood to mean “repeating”. What did the Israelites repeat? For Rabbi Akiva it was the first words of the song only, which they repeated as a litany. For Rabbi Eliezer, son of Rabbi Jose the Galilean, they repeated the whole song, phrase by phrase. For R. Nehemiah they recited the entire song in unison. For Rabbi Eliezer ben Taddai they repeated the opening phrase of each line, but then completed the whole verse without Moses having to teach it to them. Read thus, we have before us a localised debate on the meaning of a biblical verse.

There is, however, a deeper issue at stake. To understand this, we must look at another Talmudic passage, on the face of it unrelated to the passage in Sotah. It appears in the tractate of Kiddushin, and poses a fascinating question. There are various people we are commanded to honour: a parent, a teacher (i.e. a rabbi), the *nasi*, (religious head of the Jewish community), and a king. May any of these four types renounce the honour that is their due?

Rabbi Isaac ben Shila said in the name of Rabbi Mattena, in the name of Rabbi

Hisda: If a father renounces the honour due to him, it is renounced, but if a rabbi renounces the honour due to him it is not renounced. Rabbi Joseph ruled: Even if a rabbi renounces his honour, it is renounced. . . Rabbi Ashi said: Even on the view that a rabbi may renounce his honour, if a *nasi* renounces his honour, the renunciation is invalid. . . Rather, it was stated thus: Even on the view that a *nasi* may renounce his honour, yet a king may not renounce his honour, as it is said, “You shall surely set a king over you,” meaning, his authority should be over you.

Kiddushin 32a-b

Each of these people exercises a leadership role: father to son, teacher to disciple, *nasi* to the community and king to the nation. Analysed in depth, the passages make it clear that these four roles occupy different places on the spectrum between authority predicated on the person and authority vested in the holder of an office. The more the relationship is personal, the more easily honour can be renounced. At one extreme is the role of a parent (intensely personal), at the other that of a king (wholly official).

I suggest that this was the issue at stake in the argument over how Moses and the Israelites sang the Song at the Sea. For Rabbi Akiva, Moses was like a king. He spoke, and the people merely answered “Amen” (in this case, the words “I will

sing to the Lord”). For Rabbi Eliezer, son of Rabbi Jose the Galilean, he was like a teacher. Moses spoke, and the Israelites repeated, phrase by phrase, what he had said. For Rabbi Nehemiah, he was like a *nasi* among his rabbinical colleagues (the passage in Kiddushin, which holds that a *nasi* may renounce his honour, makes it clear that this is only among his fellow rabbis). The relationship was collegial: Moses began, but thereafter, they sang in unison. For Rabbi Eliezer ben Taddai, Moses was like a father. He began, but allowed the Israelites to complete each verse.

This is the great truth about parenthood, made clear in the first glimpse we have of Abraham:

*Terah took his son Abram, his grandson Lot son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, the wife of Abram, and together they set out from Ur of the Chaldeans to go to Canaan. But when they came to Haran, they settled there.*

Bereishit 31:11

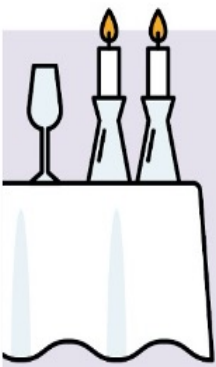
Abraham completed the journey his father began. To be a parent is to want one's children to go further than you did. That too, for Rabbi Eliezer ben Taddai, was Moses' relationship to the Israelites.

The prelude to the Song at the Sea states that the people “believed in God, and in His servant Moses” – the first time they are described as believing in Moses'

leadership. On this, the Sages asked: What is it to be a leader of the Jewish people? Is it to hold official authority, of which the supreme example is a king (“The rabbis are called kings”)? Is it to have the kind of personal relationship with one’s followers that rests not on honour and deference but on encouraging people to grow, accept responsibility and continue the journey you have begun? Or is it something in between? There is no single answer.

At times, Moses asserted his authority (during the Korach rebellion). At others, he expressed the wish that “all God’s people were prophets”. Judaism is a complex faith. There is no one Torah model of leadership. We are each called on to fulfil a number of leadership roles: as parents, teachers, friends, team-members, and team-leaders.

There is no doubt, however, that Judaism favours as an ideal the role of parent, 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 Moses’ 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

1. Which kind of leader is Moshe depicted as in the Song at the Sea? Explain.
2. How does bestowing responsibility onto others allow them to grow?
3. How does Moshe’s leadership in the Song at the Sea compare with leaders like Abraham, Joseph, or Joshua?

● These questions come from this week’s **Family Edition** to Rabbi Sacks’ Covenant & Conversation. For an interactive, multi-generational study, check out the full edition at <https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation-family-edition/beshallah/to-be-a-leader-of-the-jewish-people/>