



Covenant & Conversation



Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

יִתְרוֹ · יִתְרוֹ

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

COVENANT & CONVERSATION SUMMARY

The Politics of Revelation

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

Every member of Bnei Yisrael stood there at Har Sinai. They heard the voice of God, and received the Torah. This is the revelation at Har Sinai: the key moment of the Torah. It was unique in the religious history of humankind. Other faiths speak of revelation to individuals, but only in Judaism did God go beyond speaking to one person or a small group. He spoke to the entire nation: men, women and children, the righteous and not yet righteous alike.

From the very outset, the Bnai Yisrael knew something unprecedented had happened at Sinai. As Moshe said forty years later, nothing like it had ever occurred before: no people had ever heard the voice of God speaking out of fire and lived. For medieval Jewish thinkers, this mattered because it created certainty. A revelation to one person could be doubted. A revelation witnessed by an entire people could not.

History shows that this moment held religious significance not only for religious knowledge, but also for politics. At Sinai, a new kind of nation was formed and a new kind of society – the opposite of Egypt, where the few had power and the many were enslaved. The Israelites became, for the first time, a people bound by a shared *brit* - a covenant: a nation of citizens under the sovereignty of God, with the Torah as their constitution and a mission to become “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”

The word democracy is Greek in origin. But long before this word was coined, and in a manner far more profound - at Sinai - the idea of a free society was born.

Three features of that moment were crucial. First, the *brit* at Sinai placed moral limits on power. Long before Israel had kings, they had Torah. This meant that no ruler was above the law. Power was subject to justice. Any leader - even a king - acting against Torah could be challenged.

This established, for the first time, the primacy of **right over might**. This is one of the most important ideas in biblical politics.

Second, the *brit* required consent. God told Moshe to speak to the people, and only after they replied, “We will do everything the Lord has said,” did the revelation proceed. This means there is no legitimate authority without the consent of the governed – even when the ruler is God. That is a radical idea: **the free God desires the free worship of free human beings**. God, said the Sages, does not act tyrannically with His creatures.

Third, this *brit* included everyone. God’s partners were “all the people” – men, women and children. Later, the Torah commands the mitzva of Hakhel, gathering the entire nation together for covenant renewal. In ancient democracies like Athens, only a small group had political rights. Women, children, slaves, and foreigners were excluded. At Sinai, citizenship was universal. Everyone belonged.

Together, these ideas created a vision of society unlike anything the ancient world had known: power limited by morality, authority based on consent, and dignity shared by all.

There is much more that could be said about the political theory of the Torah, but one truth stands out clearly. With the revelation at Sinai something unprecedented entered the human horizon. It would take centuries, even millennia, for its full meaning to be understood. Abraham Lincoln said it best when he spoke of “a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.” **At Sinai, the politics of freedom was born.**

Around the Shabbat Table



1. What part of the Sinai story feels most meaningful to you, and why?
2. Why do you think God chose to reveal the Torah to an entire people rather than to one key leader?
3. How do you define democracy from the Torah perspective?

Takeaway Thoughts

At Har Sinai, faith became shared and public. The Torah teaches us that freedom is not licence or power, but the willingness of a nation to accept responsibility together.



Exploring the Parsha

WITH SARA LAMM

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

THIS WEEK'S TORAH PORTION



The Parsha in a Nutshell

This week's parsha opens with Yitro, Moshe's father-in-law, hearing of the miracles God performed for Bnai Yisrael. He travels from Midian, where he is a respected leader in his own right, and arrives at the Israelite camp, bringing Moshe's wife and sons with him. Yitro is quick to see that Moshe is being overworked by his own leadership style, and he advises Moshe to delegate and share his leadership by appointing judges to help govern the people.

Bnai Yisrael then camp at Har Sinai, where God declares them a 'kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' The people willingly accept this calling.

Seven weeks after leaving Egypt,

the entire nation gathers at the mountain. They are warned not to climb the mountain themselves, not even the priests, and they heed the warning. God reveals Himself with fire, thunder, lightning and powerful sound as He proclaims the Ten Commandments.

It is an overwhelmingly powerful experience, and it proves too much for the people to handle directly. They tremble with fear. So Bnei Yisrael ask Moshe to receive God's Word on their behalf from now on and Moshe agrees. Every single member of the Bnei Yisrael, without exception, bears witness to this great moment at Har Sinai.



Parsha Activity

The Shared Problem

Describe a slightly absurd challenge that you might wish to avoid (examples: the lights have gone out just as guests arrive, or the road is blocked by a flock of very stubborn goats).

Ask the group to suggest solutions one at a time, without interrupting. Each new idea must build on the previous one, even if it sounds ridiculous at first. The goal is to see how cooperation works when no one is fully in control.

A STORY FOR THE AGES



Survival and Destiny

Ervin Birnbaum was born in 1929 in Košice, Czechoslovakia, the youngest of three boys. During the Holocaust, he survived by hiding, fleeing with false papers, and joining the underground in Budapest. Most of his family did not survive, but when Soviet forces arrived in May 1945, Ervin was saved.

At just nineteen, Ervin was already looking forward. In 1947, he served as a group leader on the Exodus, the ship carrying Holocaust survivors to the Land of Israel before it was a State, back when it was still British Mandate Palestine. But the British naval force intercepted the ship and forced its passengers back to Europe. Ervin did

not give up. He moved to the United States, became a rabbi, earned a Ph.D. from Columbia University, and built a life with his wife, Hadassa.

In 1970, Ervin finally fulfilled his dream and moved to Israel with their three sons. They settled in Sde Boker in the Negev, where he founded a high school for English-speaking youth at Ben Gurion's request. Later, in Netanya, he continued a lifetime of education, leadership, and service.

Today, at 93, Ervin is the proud grandfather of ten. His grandchildren, including twin granddaughters Gal and Shai, serve in the IDF. His message to them remains simple and powerful: be proud of your uniform.



In many ways, Ervin's life reflects the lesson of Sinai itself. Survival was not enough. Like the generation that stood at the mountain, he chose responsibility, education, and commitment to a shared future, turning personal history into a covenant with the next generation.



Cards & Conversation

“You will be My treasure among all the peoples.”

- Shemot 19:5

The Israelites stand at Har Sinai and are given a mission to be ‘a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’ Golda Meir is often quoted as saying, ‘I’ve never quite understood how we became the chosen people. It’s been such a burden.’

QUESTION: What does it mean to be ‘the chosen people’?

Rabbi Sacks on Shemot 19:5 (in the Koren Sacks Humash offers an answer: “It does not mean that we are better than anyone else...God wants us to be the people who are true to our faith, while being a blessing to others regardless of their faith. Jews are the voice of hope in the conversation of humankind. That is what we were chosen for, and I can think of no higher vocation.”

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, order a pack and find out more by visiting rabbisacks.org/cards-and-conversation



Parsha in Practice

Mitzva of the Week

Shared Responsibility

(Shemot 19:8)

Before the Torah is given, God asks the people if they are willing to enter the covenant. Only after they answer together, “All that God has spoken, we shall do,” does the revelation continue. Sinai teaches that faith is not imposed from above but accepted from within. Responsibility is something we carry together, not something handed to us by force. Rabbi Sacks highlights how radical this moment is. Even God seeks consent. A free society begins when people choose obligation, not when they are compelled into it. The Torah is not a private gift but a shared commitment that binds a people into a moral community.

Practically Speaking

How will you stand up?

How does shared responsibility work? It is easy to think that responsibility belongs only to leaders, parents, or those in charge. Parshat Yitro reminds us that lasting communities are built when everyone feels they have a part to play.

Freedom is not about standing alone, but about showing up for one another. Shared responsibility asks us to listen, to contribute, and to accept limits. It means asking not only “What do I want?” but “What do we need?”

When people feel included in decision-making, they are more invested in the outcome. That is as true at home and school as it is for a nation standing at Sinai.



Try it out

YOUNG STUDENTS:

This week, notice one small way you can help your family or class without being asked. It could be during a family meal or at school. It could be organising things, helping a sibling, or listening carefully. Afterwards, notice how it feels to be part of the team.

ADVANCING STUDENTS:

Pay attention this week to a situation where responsibility could easily be passed to someone else. Choose one moment to step in instead of sitting back waiting for others to act. Reflect on how shared responsibility changes the atmosphere and affects your sense of belonging.



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.



Reflecting on the holiness of Shabbat

LAYER 1: LOOK AT THE TORAH TEXT: SHEMOT 20:11

”על-כן, בָּרַךְ יְהוָה אֶת-יוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת - וַיְקַדְּשֶׁהוּ.”

LAYER 2: READ RABBI SACKS' TRANSLATION

“And so the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.”

LAYER 3: THINK ABOUT WHAT IT MEANS

This seemingly simple phrase can throw up a lot of questions. We say these words every Shabbat as part of Kiddush. What do they mean? Did you know they came from parshat Yitro? Are they similar to the words in passuk 8? What is the difference here? Furthermore, how can you make something holy? Is it the same as blessing it?

LAYER 4: LEARN FROM RABBI SACKS' COMMENTARY

The Universe was created in six days yet creation itself involved seven days. The seventh day is declared by God Himself to be holy. The holy is where human beings renounce their independence and self-sufficiency, the very things that are the mark of their humanity, and for a moment acknowledge their utter dependence on He who spoke and brought the universe into being.

The essence of the Sabbath is that it is a day of not doing, a cessation, a stopping point, a pause, an absence of activity. The Sabbath is the time when humans cease, for a day, to be creators and become conscious of themselves as creations. Just as God had to make space for the finite, so human beings have to make space for the infinite. One way to understand the holy, then, is that it is a time or space that in itself testifies to the existence of something beyond itself. The Sabbath points to a time beyond time: to creation.

LAYER 5: REFLECT AND RESPOND

The idea of holiness is not found in constant action or achievement, but in knowing when to stop. Shabbat is holy because it reminds us that we are not self-made or self-sufficient. By ceasing to create and control, we remember that the world existed before us and does not belong to us alone. Shabbat creates space for humility, equality, and responsibility. It levels social differences, reconnects us to family and community, and teaches us to value being over doing. In a world driven by power and productivity, Shabbat protects human dignity and reminds us how to live, not just how to succeed.

1. Why do you think holiness is connected to stopping rather than doing?
2. In what ways might taking a weekly pause protect human dignity today?
3. How does Shabbat change the way people relate to power, money, and equality?

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

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