



# Covenant & Conversation

TERUMAH • הַתְּרוּמָה

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

FAMILY  
EDITION

Jonathan Sacks  
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

## Two Narratives of Creation

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

There are two key acts of creation described in the Torah: God's creation of the universe, and the Israelites' creation of the Mishkan that travelled with them in the desert. The connection between them is not incidental, for the Torah uses a series of striking verbal parallels between the two narratives. The message is unmistakable. **The making of the Mishkan mirrors the making of the universe. Just as God made the world, so He instructed the Israelites to make a dwelling place for Him.** It is their first great constructive and collaborative act after leaving Egypt. Just as the universe began with an act of creation, so Jewish history begins with an act of creation.

The key words are the same in both accounts: *make, see, complete, bless, sanctify, work, behold*. For instance, after he created the world, “*God saw all that He had made, and behold it was very good.*” After the Mishkan was built, “*Moshe saw all the skilled work and behold they had done it; as God commanded it, they had done it.*” So the creation of the Mishkan was what creating the universe was for God.

Yet there is a striking difference. The creation of the universe is told in only 34 verses. The making of the Mishkan takes many chapters. Why devote so much space to a small, portable Sanctuary of poles and drapes? The answer is profound. **The Torah is not man's book of God. It is God's book of humankind.** It is not difficult for an infinite Creator to make a home for humanity. What is difficult is for human beings to make a home for God. Yet that is the purpose of the Mishkan, and of the Torah.

A Midrash explains this powerfully. When God created the universe, He desired a dwelling place in the lower world. But after Adam sinned, and through later human failings, the Divine Presence withdrew. Generation after generation, God's Presence moved further away. Then

came Avraham and his descendants, each bringing it closer again. Finally came Moshe, and when the Mishkan was erected, God's Presence returned. God said, “I have come into My garden.” **The Mishkan restored something that had existed at the beginning but had been lost.**

How are we to understand this idea? The answer lies in the word *kadosh*, holy.

Creation itself involves *tzimtzum*, Divine self-limitation. For human beings to have freewill and moral responsibility, God cannot be overwhelmingly present everywhere. When the Israelites heard God's voice at Sinai, they said to Moshe, “Speak to us yourself... but do not have God speak to us or we will die.” The infinite crowds out the finite. Like a parent who lets go so a child can learn to walk, God withdraws to create space for humanity. Creation is an act of Divine self-limitation.

But this causes a paradox. If God is everywhere, there is no room for humankind, but if He hides from us, how can we know Him? The Torah's answer is that God sets aside certain domains as uniquely His: in time (Shabbat), among a people (Israel), and in space (the Mishkan). These are holy moments and holy places where heaven and earth meet.

In holy spaces, though, we must tread carefully. There is no room for human initiative. Everything must be “as God commanded.” Just as God limits Himself to make space for us, so we limit ourselves to make space for Him.

That is why the making of the Mishkan parallels the creation of the universe. Both are acts of self-renunciation whereby one makes space for the other. When it comes to the holy, “as God commanded it” is the human equivalent of the Divine “it was very good”. **Chol is the space God makes for man. Kodesh is the space we make for God.**

## Around the Shabbat Table



- Why do you think the Torah spends more time on the creation of the Mishkan than it does on the creation of the entire universe?
- What does it mean to make space for God in our busy daily lives?
- Bnai Yisrael received instructions from God on exactly how to build the Mishkan. Why couldn't they just use their own creative initiatives?

## Takeaway Thoughts

Faith lives not only in ideas, but in disciplined action. Holiness comes from making space for God. Just as God limited Himself to create a world for us, we must limit ourselves to create space for Him.



# Exploring the Parsha

WITH SARA LAMM

BASED ON THE TEACHINGS OF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS 77



## The Parsha in a Nutshell

Parshat Terumah is the first parsha to lay out the detailed instructions for building the Mishkan, the portable Sanctuary that will accompany Bnai Yisrael in the desert.

God asks the people to bring a contribution of gold, silver, copper, and precious materials, but only from those whose hearts move them to contribute to the cause. This was to be the first great collaborative project of the redeemed people, a physical space where the Divine Presence could dwell among them. The parsha describes the exact dimensions and

materials for the Aron (the Ark), the Shulchan (the Altar), the Menorah (the candelabra), and the structure of the Mishkan itself.

These details continue to be further explained in the next few parshiyot, and as Rabbi Sacks explains, we started the Torah by learning how God created the world and gave it as a home for the people. Then he created a nation. Now it is time to learn how that new nation created a home for God.



## Parsha Activity

### The Build-off

For this game you will need Lego bricks, building blocks, or other materials that can be used on Shabbat. Divide into teams, and one judge. The judge must give each team a set of the materials, and a very specific set of instructions (e.g., build a tower exactly 40 inches high with exactly 3 windows). The catch is that the teams cannot add any creative extras. The judge judges. Then reflect together. Do the creations match the constructions? What felt easier/harder, and why?

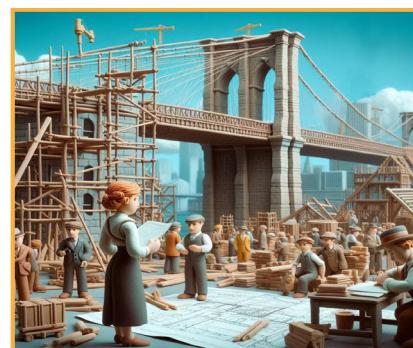


## Building the Bridge

In the 1870s, a new construction plan was enacted in New York: The Brooklyn Bridge. It was the greatest engineering project of its time. But after leading the effort to put out a fire, the chief engineer, Washington Roebling, became bedridden with decompression sickness. From then on, he could no longer visit the site. He was determined to continue to oversee the work, to make sure every stage was completed correctly, but how to do that when he couldn't move around the construction site? How could he conduct the largest and most difficult engineering project of the day when he was stuck in bed?

For over a decade, Washington

watched the construction take place using a telescope from his bedroom window. To ensure the bridge was built exactly to his complex blueprints, his wife, Emily, who had taught herself bridge construction, visited the site in his place, and carried out all the work he had planned. But his symptoms worsened. Soon he was partially paralysed, unable to speak or even move his hands properly. So he developed a system with Emily. He would tap out complex messages with his one functional finger onto her arm. She understood them all. Emily then shared the precise details, measurements for the steel cables, the tension of the



wires, and the placement of the stones, to the workers. Even though Washington couldn't be there, his presence was felt in every bolt and wire, because Emily ensured his commands were followed to the letter. Today the Brooklyn Bridge is marked with a plaque dedicated to the memory of Emily Warren Roebling, and her husband Washington Roebling.



# Cards & Conversation

**“Make a candelabrum of pure gold.”**

- Shemot 25:31

**QUESTION:** The Menorah, first described in Parashat Terumah, became a lasting symbol of the Jewish people. What do you think it represents?

*Rabbi Sacks offers an answer (in the Koren Sacks Humash):*

**“In Rome, the arch of Titus... commemorates the victorious Roman siege of Jerusalem in the year 70. It shows Roman soldiers carrying away the spoils of war, most famously the Menorah. Rome won that military conflict. Yet its civilisation declined and fell, while Jews and Judaism survived. We survive ‘not with valour and not with strength’ but by the quality of our light.”**

**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](http://rabbisacks.org/cards-and-conversation)



The Menorah, first described in Parashat Terumah, became a lasting symbol of the Jewish people.  
What do you think it represents?



## Parsha in Practice

### Mitzva of the Week

**Building the Mishkan**  
(Shemot 25:8)

This notion teaches us that holiness is not something that happens by accident; it requires intentional effort. The word for Mishkan comes from the same root as Shechinah, God's Presence. By building a physical space dedicated to God, we are practising the art of stepping back from our own wills to make room for something greater. This idea reminds us that God doesn't just want to be in the heavens; He desires a dwelling-place in the lower worlds, within the heart of every person and the structure of every community.

*“The highest achievement is not self-expression but self-limitation: making space for something other and different from us.” - Rabbi Sacks*

### Practically Speaking

**How will you make space?**

Making space for God means knowing when to set aside our own autonomous will to follow a higher calling. In our modern world, we are often encouraged to be entirely self-made and to follow our own private initiatives. However, the Mishkan teaches us that true holiness comes from discipline and following a shared framework. Practically, this looks like keeping the details of a mitzva even when we don't fully understand them, or choosing to listen to others' needs before our own desires. When we limit our egos, we create space for community and spirituality to flourish.



## Try it out

### YOUNG STUDENTS:

This week, choose one area (e.g., a shelf or box) to take care of in an extra special way. How is this related to the Mishkan, you ask? Every time you look at it, remember that just as you made a special space, we can make space in our hearts for God by taking care, and being kind.

### ADVANCING STUDENTS:

Identify one habit or activity that usually takes up all your focus and crowds out other things, e.g., screen time. Try to step back from it for a set amount of time this week to create space for something that feels meaningful in a different way, like learning a new Torah thought or helping someone in need. Reflect on how limiting yourself actually creates room for something else.



# 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 Dwelling-Place of God

### LAYER 1: LOOK AT THE TORAH TEXT: SHEMOT 28:8

"וְעַשְׂתָּו לְיִםְמִקְדָּשׁ וְיִשְׁכְּנָתִי בְּתוֹכָם".

### LAYER 2: READ RABBI SACKS' TRANSLATION

"They shall make Me a Sanctuary and I will dwell in their midst."

### LAYER 3: THINK ABOUT WHAT IT MEANS

Long ago, the Jewish mystics pointed out the linguistic strangeness of this verse. It should have said, "They shall make Me a Sanctuary and I will dwell in it," meaning, I will dwell in the Sanctuary, not "I will dwell in their midst." So, why would we build a home for God that He will not dwell in? And what does 'dwelling in our midst' mean?

### LAYER 4: LEARN FROM RABBI SACKS' COMMENTARY

The reason for this wording is that the Divine Presence lives not in a building, but in its builders, not in a physical place but in the human heart. The Sanctuary was not a place in which the objective existence of God was somehow more concentrated than elsewhere. Rather, it was a place whose holiness had the effect of opening hearts to the One worshipped there. God exists everywhere, but not everywhere do we feel the presence of God in the same way. The essence of "the holy" is that it is a place where we set aside all human devices and desires and enter a domain wholly set aside for God.

If the concept of the Mishkan, the Tabernacle, is that God lives in the human heart whenever it opens itself unreservedly to Heaven, then the way is open to the synagogue: the supreme statement of the idea that if God is everywhere, He can be reached anywhere.

### LAYER 5: REFLECT AND RESPOND

The Mishkan, and later the synagogue, is not a place where God is more concentrated, but a place whose holiness has the effect of opening our hearts to Him. It is a domain where we consciously set aside our own desires and enter a space wholly set apart for God. Furthermore, God wants us to know that there is a piece of Godliness within each of us. We can create space for God within ourselves, even when the walls of the Mishkan, Beit Hamikdash, or Synagogue are ready and present.

1. How can we open our hearts to feel God's presence in a place that isn't traditionally religious?
2. If God is everywhere, why do we still feel the need to build physical places like synagogues or sanctuaries?
3. What is one way that you feel the Godliness inside of you?

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

*Jonathan Sacks*  
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

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