



# Covenant & Conversation

Jonathan Sacks  
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

TERUMAH • תרומה

FROM THE TEACHINGS AND WRITINGS OF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ז"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 ז"ל in 5773 (2012–2013). These timeless messages are accompanied by a new [Family Edition](#) created to inspire intergenerational learning on the Parsha.

## Tabernacle and Temple

This week's sedra and those that follow it to the end of the book of Exodus, describe the great collective project of the Israelites in the desert: building a *mikdash*, a portable Sanctuary, that would serve as the visible home of the Divine Presence. It was the first collective house of worship in the history of Israel.

The opening command, however, emphasises an unusual dimension of the project:

God spoke to Moses saying: "Speak to the Israelites and have them bring Me an offering. Take My offering *from everyone whose heart impels him to give* . . . They shall make me a Sanctuary, and I will dwell among them."

Ex. 25:1-2, 8

The emphasis is on the voluntary nature of the gifts. Why so? The Sanctuary and its service were overwhelmingly compulsory, not voluntary. The regular offerings were minutely prescribed. So too were the contributions. Everyone had to give a half-shekel for the silver sockets needed for the building, and another half-shekel annually for the sacrifices. The Sanctuary itself was the pre-eminent domain of the holy, and the holy is where God's will rules, not ours. Why then was the Sanctuary

specifically to be built through voluntary donations?

There are some biblical passages whose meaning becomes clear only in hindsight, and this is one. To understand this week's sedra we have to move forward almost five hundred years, to the time when King Solomon built the Temple. The story is one of the most ironic in Tanach.

Our initial impression of Solomon is that he was a supremely wise king. He had asked God for wisdom, and was granted it in abundance:

God gave Solomon wisdom and very great insight, and the breadth of his understanding was measureless as is the sand on the sea shore.

I Kings 4:29

During Solomon's reign, Israel reached its greatest heights, economic and politically. The building of the Temple was itself seen by the Bible as the completion of the Exodus from Egypt. Unusually the text tells us the date of the project, not only in terms of years of the king's reign, but also in terms of the Exodus:

*In the 480th year after the Israelites had come out of Egypt, in the fourth year of*

Solomon's reign . . . he began to build the Temple of the Lord.

I Kings 6:1

The reference to the Exodus is striking and deliberate. It reminds us of the phrase Moses used to the Israelites as they were about to enter the land:

Now you have not yet come *to the resting place and the inheritance* that the Lord your God is giving you.

Deuteronomy 12:9

The classic commentators take this to be a reference to Jerusalem and the Temple. Thus Solomon's project brought the narrative of the Exodus to closure. It was the last chapter in a long story.

Yet ultimately, and significantly, Solomon failed as a king. After his death the kingdom divided. The ten northern tribes seceded from Solomon's son Rehoboam, and formed their own kingdom under the rebel Jeroboam. This was the critical turning-point in biblical history. Weakened by division, it could only be a matter of time before both kingdoms eventually fell to neighbouring empires, and so it happened.

The real question is not, why did Jeroboam rebel? Politics is full of such events. It is: how was he able to do so and succeed? *Coups d'état* do not happen when a nation is flourishing, successful and at peace. Israel was all these things in Solomon's reign. How then was Jeroboam able to mount a coup, with real expectation of success?

The answer lies in the impact the building of the Temple had on the people. We are told:

King Solomon conscripted labourers from all Israel – thirty thousand men. He sent them off to Lebanon in shifts of ten thousand a month, so that they spent one month in Lebanon and two months at home. Adoniram was in charge of the forced labour. Solomon had seventy thousand carriers and eighty thousand stonecutters in the hills, as well as thirty-three hundred

foremen who supervised the project and directed the workmen.

I Kings 5:27-30

The Tanach tells us that it was this burden that made the people restive after Solomon's death:

So they (the people) sent for Jeroboam, and he and the whole assembly of Israel went to Rehoboam and said to him: "Your father put a heavy yoke on us, but now lighten the *harsh labour* and the heavy *yoke* he put on us, and we will serve you."

I Kings 12:3-4

The elders who had been Solomon's advisors told Rehoboam to accede to the people's request: "If today you will be a servant to this people and serve them and give them a favourable answer, they will always be your servants" (I Kings 12:7). Rehoboam, influenced by his own young, impetuous advisors, ignored their advice. He told the people he would increase, not reduce, the burden. From then on his fate was sealed.

Something strange is happening in this narrative. On several occasions we hear words that appear in the Mosaic books either in the context of Egyptian slavery or in laws forbidding the Israelites to act harshly towards slaves. The phrase "harsh labour", spoken by the people to Rehoboam, is used at the beginning of Exodus to describe the enslavement of the Israelites (Exodus 1:14). The description of Solomon's "carriers", *nosei saval*, reminds us of the sentence, "Moses grew up, and went out to his brothers and saw *their burdens*" (*sivlotam*, Ex. 2:11). After Solomon's death, the people use the word yoke: "Your father put a heavy yoke on us" (I Kings 12:4) – yet another term that recalls slavery in Egypt: "Therefore, say to the Israelites: I am the Lord, and I will bring you out from under the *yoke* of the Egyptians. (Ex. 6:6).

Solomon's supervisors are described as *ha-rodim ba-am*, the verb used in Leviticus 25 to describe how a master should not treat a slave: "Do not rule over (*tirdeh*) them ruthlessly" (Lev. 25:43, 25:46, 25:53). Solomon built "store cities", *miskenot*, the same word used to describe the cities built by the

Israelite slaves for Pharaoh (I Kings 9:19; Ex. 1:11). Like Pharaoh, Solomon had and chariots and riders (*rechev* and *parashim*, I Kings 9:19; Ex. 14-15).

Without saying so explicitly (indeed, at one point denying it: “But Solomon did not make slaves of any of the Israelites”, I Kings 9:22), the Tanach is hinting that the building of the Temple turned Israel into a second Egypt. Solomon was altogether too close to being an Israelite Pharaoh.

The irony is overwhelming. Solomon was Israel’s wisest king. The nation stood at the apex of its power and prosperity. Momentarily, it was at peace. The king was engaged in the holiest of tasks, the one that brought the Exodus narrative to completion. Yet at that precise moment, the faultline developed that was eventually to bring centuries of tragedy. Why? Because Solomon in effect turned the Israelites into a conscripted labour force: the very thing they had left Egypt to avoid. On the surface, the text tells another story. Solomon fell from grace because his foreign wives led him astray into idolatry (I Kings 11:4). Yet it was not this that led to the rebellion of the people.

No sooner do we understand this than we appreciate the significance of another text. When David first conceived the plan of building the Temple, God sent word through the prophet Nathan:

“I have not dwelt in a house from the day I brought the Israelites up out of Egypt to this day. I have been moving from place to place with the tent as My dwelling. Wherever I have moved with all the Israelites, did I ever say to any of their rulers, whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel: Why have you not built Me a house of cedar?”

II Samuel 7:6-7

There is a hint here that God disclosed to David the danger involved in the project. Only later did it become clear. Even then, Solomon’s son could have salvaged the situation, had he listened to the advice the elders gave him.

There is a profound theological statement here. *The free God desires the free worship of free human beings*. As the Sages used to say: “The Holy One blessed be He does not behave tyrannically to his creatures” (Avodah Zarah 3a). It was not accidental but of the essence that the first house of God – small, fragile, portable, the opposite of the grandeur of the Temple – was built by free, uncoerced, voluntary contributions. For God lives not in houses of wood and stone, but in minds and souls of free human beings. He is to be found not in monumental architecture, but in the willing heart.