



# Covenant & Conversation



Jonathan Sacks  
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

TETZAVEH · תצוה

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

COVENANT & CONVERSATION SUMMARY

## Prophet and Priest

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

The sedra of Tetzaveh has one unusual feature: it is the only sedra from the beginning of Shemot to the end of Devarim that does not contain the name of Moshe. Several explanations have been offered. Some link it to the week of Moshe's death. Others connect it to his plea, "If not, blot me out of the book You have written." Another view is that when Moshe declined God's call at the Burning Bush and angered God, he forfeited the chance to become the first High Priest. That role went instead to Aaron. Since Tetzaveh is dedicated to the priesthood, Moshe's name is absent.

All these explanations focus on absence. Perhaps, though, the simplest explanation is that Tetzaveh is dedicated to a presence: the presence of the priest.

**Judaism is unusual in recognising not one form of religious leadership but two: the Navi and the Kohen, the prophet and the priest.** The prophet has always captured the imagination. He or she speaks truth to power, challenges kings and societies, and calls people back to justice and faithfulness. No religious personality has had greater impact than the prophets of Israel, of whom the greatest was Moshe.

The priests, by contrast, were quieter figures. They served in the Mishkan rather than in the spotlight of political debate. Yet they, no less than the prophets, sustained Israel as a holy nation. Israel was called upon to become "a kingdom of priests." Moshe once said, "Would that all God's people were prophets," but this was a wish, not a reality.

**There are important differences between a prophet and a priest.** The role of priest was dynastic, passing from father to son. The role of prophet was not. Moshe's sons did not succeed him; Yehoshua, his disciple, did.

The priest's role was defined by office. It was not

personal or charismatic. The prophets, by contrast, each had their own personality and style. "No two prophets had the same style." The priests wore special garments; the prophets did not.

There were rules of honour due to a Kohen. There were no similar formal rules for honouring a prophet. A prophet is honoured by being listened to.

The priest served in the Temple and lived by strict laws of purity. The prophet was usually part of the people: a shepherd like Moshe or Amos, a farmer like Elisha. Until God's word came to him, there was nothing outwardly special about him. The priest offered sacrifices in silence. The prophet served God through the word.

**They also lived in different kinds of time.** The priest functioned in cyclical time - daily and yearly rhythms that never changed. The prophet lived in covenantal time - responding to the unique challenges of each moment in history. The priest worked to sanctify nature; the prophet responded to history. The priest represents structure and continuity. The prophet represents passion and change.

Without the prophet, Judaism would not be a religion of history and destiny. But without the priest, the children of Israel would not have become the people of eternity.

This is beautifully expressed at the start of Tetzaveh, where Aharon and his sons are commanded to keep the lamp burning continually - "a lasting ordinance for the generations to come."

Moshe the prophet dominates four of the five books that bear his name. But in Tetzaveh for once it is Aharon, the first of the priests, who holds centre-stage, undiminished by the rival presence of his brother. **For whereas Moshe lit the fire in the souls of the Jewish people, Aharon tended the flame and turned it into "an eternal light".**

### Around the Shabbat Table



1. How do the roles of Prophet and Priest complement each other in a community?
2. How do you experience keeping to routines alongside moments of significant change in your life?
3. Can you think of other pairs in Tanach where different leadership styles are highlighted? What can we learn from their dynamics?

### Takeaway Thoughts

Judaism needs both vision and stability. Prophets challenge and inspire change; priests preserve continuity and sacred rhythm. A lasting community requires those who light the fire and those who faithfully sustain it.



# Exploring the Parsha

WITH SARA LAMM

BASED ON THE TEACHINGS OF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS 7" 57



## The Parsha in a Nutshell

Tetzaveh is a unique part of the Torah. From the beginning of Shemot when Moshe is first born, until the end of the Torah, Parshat Tetzaveh is the only parsha that leaves out Moshe's name entirely. Aharon and his sons. Aharon was the first Kohen Gadol - the High Priest - and from Aharon, all future kohanim are descended.

In Tetzaveh we learn the details the Kohen Gadol's vestments (clothes), their consecration, and the perpetual lighting of the Menorah in the Mishkan. We are still delving deep into the specifics of the laws of the Mishkan at this point.

Sometimes it can all seem very technical, and many therefore find it hard to relate to the minute details of how to create and then work in a Mishkan that no longer exists. But as Rabbi Sacks teaches us, our primary task is to build a home for the Divine Presence. *"May it be God's will that His Presence rests in the work of your hands."*

God created a home for us. How important that we then created a home for Him. He also notes that *"the whole time that Bnai Yisrael were building the holy Mishkan, there was peace among them, for "we are made by what we make."*



## Parsha Activity

### Rhythm and Energy

Divide into two groups: The Priests keep a steady drum beat (clapping, tapping table, stomp-clap pattern). The Prophets chant or speak song lyrics/zemirot dramatically. The catch? The Prophets must match the rhythm perfectly. If they rush or drag, the Priests stop. If the Priests lose tempo, the Prophets pause. Switch roles after each round. The Priests create structure (steady rhythm). The Prophets bring energy and passion. Without words, the rhythm can feel empty of meaning. Without rhythm, the words can collide and collapse.



## The Light of Humanity

In 1938, Nicholas Winton, a young British stockbroker, cancelled a skiing holiday to help Jewish refugees in Prague. It was the year before the devastating war broke out across Europe, but it was already becoming quite clear to Jews just how much danger they were in. Nicholas couldn't bear it. He said, "I have seen this, and cannot see it." He felt compelled to help where he could.

While others focused on the grand political drama of Europe, Winton quietly set to work on the details. For nine months, he spent his evenings after work organising visas, finding foster homes, and raising funds to bring children to safety by the trainload. He didn't seek any credit for this work; he simply tended

the "flame" of human life through meticulous, repetitive administrative work. In utmost secrecy, he saved 669 children, for his silence helped him to keep them safe. So he told no-one, not even his wife, for fifty years.

Then in 1988, when his wife Grete found a scrapbook in their attic, his story came to light: The meticulous work, the careful attention to detail, and the lives that were saved because of his quiet care.

The 669 children who were saved grew up and went on to have their own Jewish families. Over 6,000 people are alive today due to the actions of Sir Nicholas Winton. His life proves that while prophetic moments of inspiration are vital, it is the quiet, consistent "priestly"



dedication to the details of goodness that truly sustains the world and keeps the light of humanity burning.

In 2015, he passed away, aged 106. Rabbi Sacks wrote that "he was the British Schindler, all the more impressive for thinking that there was nothing special about what he did, seeking neither honour nor recognition. Our Sages said that saving a life is like saving a universe. Sir Nicholas saved hundreds of universes. He was a giant of moral courage and determination, and he will be mourned by Jewish people around the world."



# Cards & Conversation

**“Make sacred vestments for your brother Aharon, for glory and for splendour.” - Shemot 28:3**

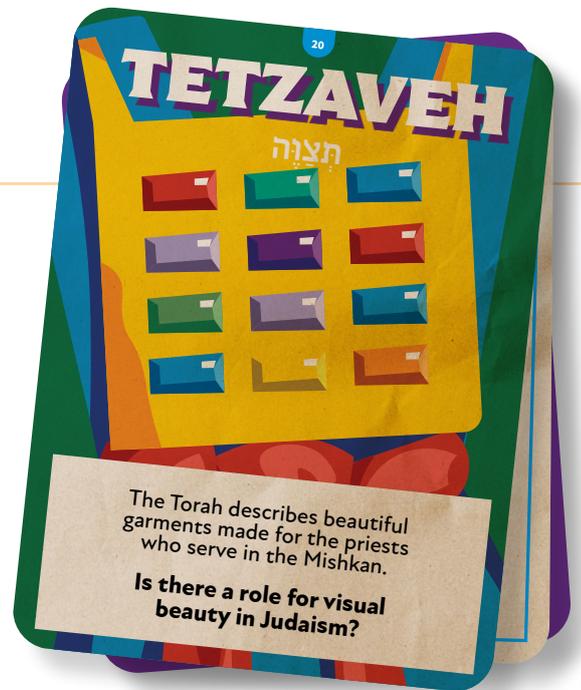
The Torah describes beautiful garments made for the kohanim who served in the Mishkan.

**QUESTION:** Is there a role for visual beauty in Judaism?

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

**“The nature of the Jewish aesthetic in Judaism... is art devoted to the greater glory of God. That is the implication of the fact that the word *kavod* - ‘glory’ - is attributed in the Torah only to God and to the priests officiating in the House of God. Judaism does not believe in art for art’s sake, but in art in the service of God. Art gives back as a votive offering to God a little of the beauty He has made in this created world.”**

**Cards & Conversation: Chumash Edition** 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 to discover an idea from Rabbi Sacks that shines a new light on the parsha. We offer a weekly sample of these cards here, and you can also download the full set, order a physical pack, and find out more by visiting [rabbisacks.org/cards-and-conversation](http://rabbisacks.org/cards-and-conversation)



## Parsha in Practice

### Mitzva of the Week

**Tending the Ner Tamid**  
(Shemot 27:20-21)

Aharon and his sons are told to keep the Menorah lamps burning continuously. This mitzva symbolises the enduring nature of our spiritual connection and traditions, teaching us the profound value of continuity and care. Just as the kohanim maintained the physical light, we are responsible for tending the spiritual flame of our heritage. This means actively engaging with our traditions and values, ensuring Judaism’s light shines brightly on.

*Much of Judaism is timeless - our beliefs, our values, our way of life. One of our most potent symbols is the ner tamid, the everlasting light that ‘burns and is not consumed’. That has been an essential part of our story and self-understanding as an eternal*

*people bound in an unbreakable relationship to the eternal God. The days, the years, the centuries pass, but Judaism and the Jewish people remain. - Rabbi Sacks*

### Practically Speaking

What does this mean today?

Go to almost any shul in the world today, and you will find the eternal flame - the *ner tamid* - hanging directly above the Aron. Although we no longer have a Mishkan or a Temple, we set up electric lights that flicker eternally, to remember this element of the Beit HaMikdash. Making space for God means identifying the ‘flames’ in our lives - our relationships, values, learning, or community involvement, and committing to their regular upkeep. It’s about showing up, putting in the effort, and being consistent.



## 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.

### 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 Beautiful Ephod

#### LAYER 1: LOOK AT THE TORAH TEXT: SHEMOT 28:6

"... וַעֲשׂוּ, אֶת-הָאֶפֶד: זָהָב תְּכַלֵּת וְאַרְגָּמָן תּוֹלַעַת שָׁנִי, וְשֵׁשׁ מְטָזָר."

#### LAYER 2: READ RABBI SACKS' TRANSLATION

"... make the Ephod of finely spun linen embroidered with gold, and sky-blue, purple, and scarlet wool."

#### LAYER 3: THINK ABOUT WHAT IT MEANS

Worshipping the invisible God, Judaism tends to devalue the visual in favour of the oral and aural: words heard, rather than appearances seen. Yet the service of the Mishkan and Beit HaMikdash are different. Here appearances – dignity, beauty – make a difference. They are actually encouraged. Why?

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

Rambam suggests that to those who really understand the religious life, appearances should not matter, but most people are not like that. They are impressed by spectacle, the glitter of gold, the jewels of the breast piece, and the pristine purity of white linen robes. Taking Rambam one step further, recent science has taught us that in order to be moved to action, we need emotion. And art speaks to emotion. It moves us in ways that go deeper than words.

The detailed descriptions of these beautiful objects confirm that there is a place for the aesthetic in *avoda*, Divine service. In the words of the Song of the Sea: *Zeh Keli ve'anvehu*, "This is my God, I will glorify Him" (Shemot 15:3). For beauty inspires love, and from love flows the service of the heart.

#### LAYER 5: REFLECT AND RESPOND

As we see in the Cards and Conversation this week, beauty does have a place in Judaism, as it can be used to serve God. Here we take that a step further. Sometimes we actually need the beauty, the sparkle, and the spectacle. It helps us to connect. First we see the physical, then we feel the emotions. And from there, inspiration comes.

1. Do you agree that beauty can move you to feel inspired?
2. Which mitzvot can you think of where we are encouraged to seek out beauty? (Hint: think of Succot)
3. How could you use art, or effort, or other creative endeavours, to elevate something in your spiritual life?

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

*Jonathan Sacks*  
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

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