



# Covenant & Conversation



Jonathan Sacks  
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

KI TISSA · כִּי תִשָּׂא

BASED ON THE TEACHINGS OF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS 7"52

COVENANT & CONVERSATION SUMMARY

## Two Types of Religious Encounter

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

Framing the events of this week’s sedra are two sets of Tablets, the first given before, the second after, the sin of the Golden Calf. Of the first, we read: *“The Tablets were the work of God, and the writing was God’s writing, engraved on the Tablets.”*

These were perhaps the holiest objects in history: entirely the work of God. Yet within hours they lay shattered, broken by Moshe when he saw the Calf and the people dancing. The second Tablets, brought down by Moshe on the tenth of Tishrei - the day that became Yom Kippur - were different. God said: *“Carve two Tablets of stone like the first, and I will inscribe on them the Words that were on the first Tablets that you broke.”*

These Tablets were the joint work of God and Moshe. Here is the paradox: the first Tablets, made entirely by God, were broken. The second, the result of Divine-human collaboration, endured. **Why did the less holy survive, while the more holy did not?** This reflects a fundamental principle in Jewish spirituality. The mystics spoke of two types of Divine-human encounter: *itaruta de-l’eylah*, “an awakening from above,” and *itaruta deletata*, “an awakening from below.” The first is initiated by God. It is dramatic and overwhelming. The second is initiated by human beings. It may seem less spectacular, but it leaves a deeper mark.

An awakening from above may change nature, but it does not necessarily change human nature. Those who experience it are passive. While it lasts, it is powerful; afterward, life returns to normal. An awakening from below, however, transforms us permanently. Because we took the initiative, something within us changes. The first changes the universe; the second changes us.

Two examples show this clearly. When they reached the Red Sea, the Israelites were told to do nothing: “The Lord will fight for you... stay silent.” Then miraculously, the sea split in two. That was an awakening from above. Soon

after, they were complaining again.

When they faced the Amalekites, however, Moshe told Yehoshua, “Choose men for us, and go out and do battle.” This was an awakening from below. From then on, they did not complain when faced with battle. The battles fought for us do not change us; *the battles we fight, do.*

The second example is Har Sinai and the Mishkan. At Sinai, God’s glory descended in overwhelming revelation. Yet 40 days later, they made a Golden Calf.

The Mishkan was different. The Israelites built it themselves. They created the space that God’s Presence would fill. After constructing the Mishkan, they did not fall into idolatry again in the desert. **The difference is clear: the things done for us change us for a moment; the things we help create change us for a lifetime.**

There is another difference between the first and second Tablets. With the first, Moshe received the Written Torah. With the second, he also received the Oral Torah - a partnership between God’s word and human interpretation. The Written Torah was given once. The Oral Torah continues through study and debate. Revelation meets interpretation.

This explains why only after the second Tablets did Moshe’s face shine with light. Receiving the first, he was passive. For the second, he carved the stone himself. He had a share in the making. That is why he became a different person. In Judaism, the natural is greater than the supernatural in the sense that an “awakening from below” is more powerful in transforming us, and longer lasting in its effects, than is an “awakening from above.” That was why the second Tablets survived intact while the first did not. **Divine intervention changes nature, but it is human initiative - our approach to God - that changes us.**

### Around the Shabbat Table



1. Why are the things we participate in creating often more enduring than those we simply receive?
2. Which has a stronger impact on you: sudden inspiration, or a change you work hard to achieve?
3. The Oral Torah is an example of partnership with God. How does interpreting and debating God’s law change our relationship with Him?

### Takeaway Thoughts

The things we help create, the battles we fight, the institutions we build are the things that last. And that is how true spiritual growth takes place.



# Exploring the Parsha

WITH SARA LAMM

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

THIS WEEK'S TORAH PORTION



## The Parsha in a Nutshell

Parshat Ki Tissa covers the census of the Israelites, as Bnei Yisrael are counted through the giving of a half-shekel each.

In addition, one man - Betzalel - is appointed to over the building of the Mishkan, the Tabernacle, and the people receive instructions for the anointing oil and incense to be used.

Ki Tissa then recounts the tragic sin of the Golden Calf, followed by Moshe's dramatic act of breaking the first two Tablets, and his powerful plea for God to forgive the nation.

The parsha concludes with God's forgiveness and the giving of the second set of Tablets. After Moshe spends 40 days and 40 nights receiving them and writing them with God, he returns to Bnei Yisrael, and they see that Moshe's face now radiates with a Divine light.



## Parsha Activity Half-Shekel Challenge

Give each participant a small item: a coin (if it's not Shabbat), a stone, or a block. The objects can be creative and unique in size, shape, etc. Create a central collection point. Each person must walk across the room and balance their item carefully to build a collective structure. The catch: set a difficulty, like hopping while crossing the room, or closing one eye. If anyone drops their item or the structure collapses, the whole group starts over.

A STORY FOR THE AGES



## TWO Gardens

In a small town lived two neighbours, Ella and Ben. Both loved flowers, and so they had each moved to a house with a large patch of earth attached, hoping to one day own a beautiful garden.

One night, Ella prayed for her garden to be transformed. Lightning struck at midnight, and a mysterious storm raged until daybreak. When Ella awoke, she found her back yard miraculously filled with the most stunning, exotic blossoms she had ever seen. The whole town was in awe.

Ben, who lived next-door, admired Ella's new blooming garden greatly. The land on his side of the fence had not changed. However, he continued the work he had begun in the spring. He spent his time tilling the soil, planting seeds, and watering them

daily. His garden grew slowly, through his constant effort and care. Little by little, the buds grew through the freshly planted grass, and flowers bloomed.

Ella's miracle garden was magnificent, and a thing of beauty for all to see. But Ella did not know how to care for the strange flowers, and within a few weeks, they had withered and died. The miracle was a fleeting memory.

Meanwhile, Ben's garden continued to flourish. By now he knew every plant. He knew exactly where the sunlight fell each day, and where the shady areas were. As winter approached, a frost threatened the sapling trees and all that grew near. Calmly, Ben made adjustments. He knew how to protect his seedlings.

His garden, born of his own labour, became a lasting source of beauty for the whole village. Ben's face shone with a quiet pride, not because of a miracle he had received, but because of the beauty he had helped create, and that he continued to tend, day by day.





# Cards & Conversation

**"...in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day He ceased, and was revived."**

- Shemot 31:17

The Torah says that God rested on the seventh day and was refreshed.

**QUESTION:** Why would an all-powerful God need to rest?

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

"All of nature is creative, but only God and humanity create consciously for a purpose. For us, unlike the plant or animal kingdoms, creation is not a process of ceaseless activity. It involves moments of contemplation when we reflect on why we act. We need time for thinking as well as for doing. So the Sabbath is a holy time, meaning time set apart, time out from the restless pressures of activity; a day dedicated to thinking about the purpose of what we do."

*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

#### The Half-Shekel

(Shemot 30:11-16)

This week's portion commands every adult male to contribute a half-shekel to the Mishkan. This was not a one-time donation; it was a recurring act of participation. Significantly, the Torah specifies that "the rich shall not give more, and the poor shall not give less." This mitzva teaches that when it comes to building a sacred community, everyone has an equal and necessary share. Our Sanctuary is not a gift from a few wealthy patrons; it is built and sustained by the collective effort of the entire nation.

*"To win the Jewish battle... the victory of heart, mind and soul, you do not need numbers. You need a people who are instinctively inclined to give, to contribute. Give, then count the contributions: the finest way ever devised to measure the strength of a people." - Rabbi Sacks*

### Practically speaking

What does this mean today?

Practically, this mitzva reminds us that our spiritual lives require our active investment. We cannot be passive participants. Whether it is through giving tzedaka, volunteering time, or participating in community life, our contribution matters. It is the small, consistent actions of many that build something holy and lasting. Our relationship with God is a partnership, and He invites us to be active builders in His world.



## Try it out

### YOUNG STUDENTS:

This week, find a project at home or in your classroom that everyone can contribute to, like a garden, a tzedaka box, or a group art project. Make sure everyone has a specific job. Talk about how it feels to build something together, and how each small part makes the whole thing possible.

### ADVANCING STUDENTS:

Identify a community need or project you care about. Instead of just donating money, find a way to contribute your time and effort this week. Reflect on the difference between being a passive supporter and an active participant. How does your involvement change your connection to the cause?



## 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.



### When We Stand Against A Crowd...

#### LAYER 1: LOOK AT THE TORAH TEXT: SHEMOT 32:24

"... וַיִּתְּנוּ-לִי; וְאַשְׁלַכְהוּ בְּאֵשׁ, וַיֵּצֵא הָעֵגֶל הַזֶּה."

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

"...they gave it to me, I threw it into the fire – and out came this Calf."

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

Pay close attention to Aharon's language here as he recounts the incident to Moshe. What do his words imply?

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

Aharon denies responsibility for making the Calf. "I threw it into the fire, and out came this Calf!" This is the same kind of denial of responsibility we recall from the story of Adam and Chava (Bereishit 3). The man says, "It was the woman." The woman says, "It was the serpent"... In anyone, such evasion is a moral failure; in a leader, all the more so.

Tradition dealt kindly with Aaron. He is portrayed as a man of peace. It is easy to be critical of people who fail the leadership test when it involves defying the crowd, but it is hard to oppose a mob. They can ignore you, remove you, even assassinate you... The fact that Aharon was not a leader [like] Moshe does not mean that he was a failure as a leader. It means that he was made for a different kind of role. There are times when you need someone with the courage to stand against the crowd, others when you need a peacemaker.

#### LAYER 5: REFLECT AND RESPOND

Aharon faced an impossible choice: defy the mob and risk violence, or give in and betray his mission. He chose the path of least resistance, but compounded his failure by denying responsibility. Leadership is not just about having a vision or a title. It is about taking responsibility, especially when things go wrong. When leaders evade accountability, they lose their moral authority. But ultimately, we see that Aharon did his best at a very tricky time.

1. Why is denying responsibility, as Aharon did, considered a greater moral failure for a leader than for an ordinary person?
2. Can you think of a time when you faced pressure from a group to do something you knew was wrong? What made it difficult to resist, and what would have helped you stand firm?
3. Moshe had to take dramatic action to restore order. He smashed the Tablets, and ground up the Calf. When is it necessary to take extreme measures to correct a wrong? How do we know when we have crossed the line?

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

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