



# Covenant & Conversation



Jonathan Sacks  
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

ויקהל-פקודי · VAYAKHEL-PEKUDEI

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

COVENANT & CONVERSATION SUMMARY

## Three Types of Community

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

It was a drama that unfolded over time. Moshe led the people from slavery to the beginning of the road to freedom. The people themselves had witnessed God at Mount Sinai, the only time in history when an entire people became the recipients of revelation. Then came Moshe's long absence on the mountain, which led to the Israelites' greatest collective sin, the making of the Golden Calf. Moshe returned to plead for forgiveness, and forgiveness was granted.

Its symbol was the second set of Tablets. Now life had to begin again. A shattered people had to be rebuilt. How did Moshe proceed? The verse that begins the sedra gives us the clue:

*“Moshe assembled the whole Israelite community and said to them: ‘These are the things God has commanded you to do.’”* The key word is *vayakhel* – “he assembled.” It reminds us of an earlier verse:

*“When the people saw that Moshe was so long in coming down from the mountain, they assembled around Aharon and said, ‘Come, make us gods who will go before us.’”*

Moshe's act is what the kabbalists called a *tikkun* – a restoration, a repairing of what had gone wrong. The sin happened when the people assembled as a crowd to make the Calf. Atonement came when they assembled again, this time to build a home for the Divine Presence. **Moshe gathered the people for good, where before they had gathered for bad.**

At a deeper level, the opening verse teaches us about the nature of community in Judaism. In classical Hebrew there are three words for community: *edah*, *tzibbur*, and *kehillah*. Each represents a different type of group.

*Edah* comes from the word *ed*, meaning “witness.”

People who form an *edah* share a strong collective identity.

They have experienced the same events and feel bound by the same purpose. The Israelites became an *edah* when they shared the experience of redemption and faith.

However, an *edah* can gather for bad as well as good. When the spies brought back their negative report about the land, the people lost courage and wanted to return to Egypt. They were still called an *edah* – but now it was a community united by fear rather than faith.

The second word is *tzibbur*. This word comes from a root meaning “to heap” or “pile up.” A *tzibbur* is simply a group of people gathered together. For example, ten people praying together form a minyan even if they do not know each other. They may have nothing in common except that they happen to be together at that moment. A *tzibbur* is a community in the most minimal sense.

The third word is *kehillah*. A *kehillah* is different. Its members may be very different from one another, but they are brought together for a shared task. Each person contributes something unique. The danger is that such a gathering can become a chaotic crowd, like the people dancing around the Golden Calf.

But a *kehillah* can also be something beautiful. **When guided toward a constructive purpose, it gathers together the different gifts of many individuals so that each person can say, “I helped to make this.”**

That is what happened when the Israelites built the Mishkan. Each person brought something different – gold, silver, yarn, jewellery, skill, or craftsmanship. Because every contribution mattered, every person felt valued.

**To preserve the diversity of a *tzibbur* with the unity of purpose of an *edah* – that is the challenge of *kehillah*-formation, community-building, itself the greatest task of a great leader.**

## Around the Shabbat Table



1. Think about the groups you belong to. Which feel like an *edah*, which are a *tzibbur*, and which are a *kehillah*?
2. Why is it sometimes harder to be part of a *kehillah* than an *edah*?
3. Moshe's task was to lead people with different temperaments. What is the key to making a diverse group work well together?

## Takeaway Thought

True community forms when people unite around a shared purpose, using their different talents to build something meaningful together, turning a crowd into a community where every individual contribution truly matters.



# Exploring the Parsha

WITH SARA LAMM

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

THIS WEEK'S TORAH PORTION



## The Parsha in a Nutshell

Parshat Vayakhel begins with Moshe gathering Bnai Yisrael together, reiterating the laws of Shabbat, and then calling for contributions to build the Tabernacle. The people respond with overwhelming generosity, bringing gold, silver, yarn, and their unique skills. The parsha details the work of the skilled artisans, led by Betzalel and Oholiav, as they construct the various components of the Sanctuary.

Parshat Pekudei follows with a detailed accounting of all the materials used and describes the final assembly of the Tabernacle, the creation of the priestly garments, and the moment God's glory fills the completed structure.



## Parsha Activity

### The Skill Circle

Sit in a circle. One person starts by sharing one skill or quality they have (e.g., "I'm good at making people laugh"). The next person repeats the first person's skill ("Sara is good at making people laugh"), then adds their own talent or skill. Continue around the circle, with each person repeating all previous names and skills before adding theirs.

A STORY FOR THE AGES



## Branching Out

In a hill-ringed kingdom, a wise king ruled. One autumn, his daughter asked him, "Which tree is the most noble in all the kingdom?" He did not answer. Instead, he suggested she go on a quest to discover the answer for herself.

One hundred knights volunteered to escort the princess around the kingdom, and one by one, they led her to the trees they believed were the most worthy. Through valleys and over mountains they travelled.

After one week, the princess declared, "The oak tree is unparalleled, standing firm even through storms." After two more weeks, she reconsidered, for she had met a carpenter who showed her some highly polished wood. "The maple is surely the most worthy. Its wood gives beauty and warmth." Then as it grew colder, she noticed the fragrant needles on the pine trees. "The pine tree is finest. It stays green when winter takes all colour." But as spring began to creep

in, the blossoms on an almond tree caused her to think again. Then the fruit trees became her favoured choice. A full year passed, and the princess returned to the palace with her final decision.

"There is no one tree that is noble over all the others!" she announced. The great hall filled with argument. What about the strongest tree, or the most enduring, or the most useful? The king listened until dusk brushed the windows gold. Then he sent out his messengers, and woodsmen, carpenters, and musicians appeared at his royal command. The people were puzzled, but the princess understood. She asked the people to return the following evening.

When the court gathered in the palace garden. The visitors showed them how the oak branch had become a drumstick, the maple wood had been shaped into a violin's frame. Pine needles rustled like soft rain

when shaken in woven baskets. Apple branches were whittled into fine pipes. Then the musicians played and everyone heard the deep oak beat, the warm maple tone, the whispering pine, the clear whistles. As they wove their sounds together, the people felt it in their chests - strength, sweetness, patience, joy - each voice unique, in harmony.

When the last note faded, the king smiled. "There is no noblest tree," he pronounced, and looked to his daughter. The princess nodded once, and added, "But together, they can make a forest, and even a symphony."





# Cards & Conversation

**“He has filled them with the skill to do all kinds of work, as engravers, designers, embroiderers... and as weavers.”**

- Shemot 35:35

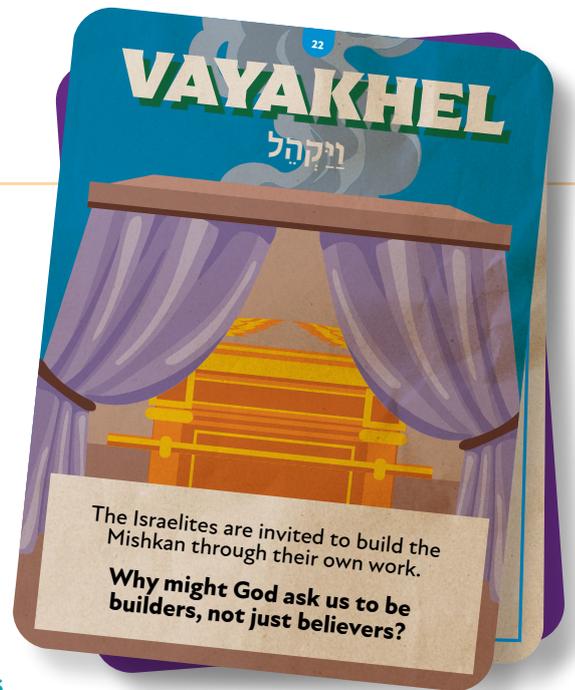
The Israelites are invited to build the Mishkan through their own work.

**QUESTION:** Why might God ask us to be builders, not just believers?

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

“God deliberately left the world unfinished so that it could be completed by the work of human beings. The creative God seeks creativity from humankind. Work gives human beings two things. First it gives a person independence, one of the essentials of a free society. The second, just as significant, is creativity. Work is more than mere labour. Biblical Hebrew has two words to express the difference: *melachah* is work as creation; *avodah* is work as service or servitude. Both are central to the Tabernacle, a laboratory of love.”

*Cards & Conversation: Chumash Edition* Each card holds 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. Find out more by visiting [rabbisacks.org/cards-and-conversation](http://rabbisacks.org/cards-and-conversation)



## Parsha in Practice

### Mitzva of the Week

#### Shabbat

(Shemot 35:1-3)

Before Moshe instructs the people about building the Mishkan, he first commands them about Shabbat. The placement is deliberate. Even the holiest work, building God's dwelling place, must stop for Shabbat. This teaches that Shabbat is not merely the absence of work; it is the presence of holiness. It is a day when we step back from creating and building to recognise that we are not the ultimate creators. Shabbat reminds us that our worth is not measured by our productivity. It is a weekly reset, a communal pause that binds us together in rest and reflection.

*“Shabbat is Judaism’s stillness at the heart of the turning world.” - Rabbi Sacks*

### Practically Speaking

#### How do you step back?

Shabbat asks us to stop striving and simply be. In our families and communities, it means creating sacred time where we are fully present with one another, not distracted by tasks or devices. It is a day to celebrate what we have built during the week, not by doing more, but by resting in it. For a healthy community knows when to work and when to stop, when to build and when to simply enjoy being together.



## Try it out

### YOUNG STUDENTS:

This Shabbat, take a moment to think about what makes Shabbat feel different from other days of the week. Notice how it feels to simply rest and be present. Talk with your family about what changes when you stop striving and just enjoy being together.

### ADVANCING STUDENTS:

This Shabbat, resist the urge to “be productive.” Instead, spend time in conversation, reflection, or simply resting.

Recite the Shema, the Amidah, Birkat Hamazon or another *tefilla* at a slower, more thoughtful pace. Reflect afterwards on what you learned about yourself when your worth was not measured by what you accomplished.



## 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 Fragrant Incense

#### LAYER 1: LOOK AT THE TORAH TEXT: SHEMOT 37:29

"וַיַּעַשׂ אֶת-שֶׁמֶן הַמִּשְׁחָה, קֹדֵשׁ, וְאֶת-קִטְרֹת הַסַּמִּים, טְהוֹר-מַעֲשֵׂה, רִקְהָ.".

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

"...with the skill of a perfumer, he prepared the sacred anointing oil and the fragrant incense."

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

Perek 37 details the work that Betzalel did on the Aron HaKodesh. This is the final passuk (sentence) in the chapter. What is the deeper meaning of this final task of the perek?

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

"...the Mishna tells us that the scent of the incense spread out so far from Jerusalem that 'goats on Mount Mikhvar [beyond the River Jordan] would sneeze'... There are things that are limited and measurable, and things, equally real, that cannot be pinned down and yet colour everything else. What we call "faith" falls in the latter category. Does faith make a difference? And is it possible to have faith, even in the 21st century, after all we have learned from science? The answer to both questions is yes. Jewish faith isn't irrational or naive or prescientific. Faith is what I call a framing belief. Compare trust. Is it right or wrong to go through life trusting people? ...which is the rational option: trust or suspicion? There is no rational option.

Faith and faithlessness are framing beliefs. But which we choose makes all the difference. You can live without optimism and trust, just as you can live without music, a sense of smell, or a sense of humour. But it is a more limited life. And in the same way, you can live without faith. But you will miss out on all that comes from the belief that life has a meaning, that God created the universe in love and forgiveness and asks us to love and forgive others. Like the smell of the incense enveloping Jerusalem, the mystery that is faith can pervade our lives and fill them, unmistakably, with a scent of holiness.

#### LAYER 5: REFLECT AND RESPOND

The incense's fragrance could not be measured, yet it coloured everything. Faith works the same way, a lens through which we see the world. Faith is a choice you make about how to frame your life. It can infuse all you do.

1. What are some framing beliefs that shape how you see the world, even without scientific proof to them?
2. Rabbi Sacks compares faith to trust. Can you think of a time when choosing to trust someone, despite the risk, opened up possibilities that cynicism would have closed off?
3. The Mishkan's incense spread everywhere. In what ways can your faith colour everything else in your 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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