



# Covenant & Conversation



Jonathan Sacks  
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

VAYIKRA · ויקרא

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

COVENANT & CONVERSATION SUMMARY

## Between Destiny and Chance

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

In English, the book of Vayikra is known as Leviticus. This means “to do with the Levites” reflecting the fact that the *Leviim* in Judaism served as guardians of the sacred. The ancient rabbinic name was *Torat Kohanim*, “the law of the priests.” This is also an appropriate title, since much of the book deals with sacrifices and rituals associated with the Mishkan and later the Beit HaMikdash in Jerusalem.

By contrast, the name Vayikra, “And He called,” seems to be used simply because it is the first word of the book. **Yet in fact there is a deep connection between this word and the message of the book as a whole.** To understand this, we must notice something unusual about how the word appears in a Sefer Torah. Its last letter, an *aleph*, is written small – almost as if it barely existed. Without that letter, the word becomes *vayikar*, meaning “he encountered” or “it happened by chance.” Unlike *vayikra*, which means a call or summons, *vayikar* suggests something accidental.

Vayikar is used when God appeared to the pagan prophet Bilaam, whereas here *vayikra* is used when God calls to Moshe. A Midrash explains that God speaks to the prophets of Israel with a full, loving call - *vayikra*. But with Bilaam, the Torah uses language that suggests a casual encounter - *vayikar*.

Rashi adds that the word *vayikra* expresses affection, like the way angels call to one another. The Baal HaTurim goes further. He explains that Moshe, because of his humility, wanted to write *vayikar*, as if God’s appearance to him was only by chance, like a dream. God insisted on the word *vayikra*, but Moshe still wrote the *aleph* small, due to his humility.

Something very important is hinted at here. To understand it fully, we must look at the end of the book. In the section known as the *tochachah* (the rebuke), the Torah describes the terrible fate that will befall Israel if it abandons the *brit* with God. The passage describes fear, defeat, and exile. Yet it ends with God’s promise that He will always

remember His people, and never break His promise with them or reject them.

A key word appears several times in this passage: *keri*. It is often translated as “contrary,” but Rambam instead connects it to the word *mikreh*, meaning “chance” from the same root as *vayikar*. Rambam says that when trouble strikes a community, they are commanded to cry out in prayer and examine their actions. This is a path to *teshuvah*. But if people say that their suffering is simply the way of the world, a matter of chance, they choose a dangerous path. By seeing events as random, they fail to learn from them, and the troubles continue.

According to Rambam, the Torah is teaching a profound idea. **If people believe that history is guided by God, they will experience Divine Providence. But if they see history as random chance, they will be left to chance.**

We can now understand the link between the beginning and the end of Vayikra. The difference between *mikra* (a call) and *mikreh* (chance) is almost invisible. The only difference is the small *aleph*. The Torah is hinting that God’s presence in history will not always be obvious. Sometimes it is like the small *aleph* - almost silent, almost hidden. Those who look carefully will see it. Those who listen carefully will hear it. But if we refuse to see or hear, the call will disappear and history will seem like mere coincidence. Indeed, says God in the *tochachah*: if you believe that history is chance, then it will become so. But in truth it is not so. The very history of the Jewish people testifies to the presence of God in their midst. Only thus could such a small, vulnerable, relatively powerless people survive, and still say today - even after the *Shoah* - *Am Yisrael Chai*, the Jewish people lives. And just as Jewish history is not mere chance, so it is no mere coincidence that the first word of the central book of the Torah is Vayikra, “And He called.” **To be a Jew is to believe that what happens to us as a people is God’s call to us - to become “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”**

### Around the Shabbat Table



1. Why is humility essential for hearing God's call?
2. Think of an event in your own life. Can you see it as both a random event and as a Divine call? What changes when you look at it from each perspective?
3. Rambam suggests that if we believe our lives are governed by chance, God will leave us to chance. Do you think our beliefs shape our reality in this way?

### A Takeaway Thought

History can feel like random events, but Judaism teaches that it may be God’s call to us. The challenge is to listen carefully, finding meaning and taking responsibility rather than seeing life as random.



# 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

The book of Vayikra is also known as Torat Kohanim, meaning the law of the Priests.

Our parsha, and our book, opens with God calling to Moshe. The parsha then details the five different types of *korbanot* - sacrifices - that were to be brought to the Mishkan: the burnt offering, *olah*; the meal offering, *mincha*; the peace offering, *shelamim*; the sin offering, *chatat*; and the guilt offering, *asham*. Each offering has its own specific rules and rituals,

forming the heart of the service in the Sanctuary.

Sefer Vayikra is markedly different from the other books. It contains no journey and is set entirely at Sinai. It occupies only a brief section of time: a single month. There is almost no narrative. Yet, set at the centre of the Mosaic books, it is the key to understanding Israel's vocation as "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation," the first collective mission statement in history.



## Parsha Activity

### Whispers and Claps

Nominate one player to be the Listener. As they sit with their eyes closed, other players sit in a circle around them. One at a time, each player makes a very soft sound: a quiet clap, a click, a whisper. The caller must try to identify who made the sound and from which direction. If they call out the correct name and point in the correct direction, they have answered the call and get another turn. If not, a new player gets to be the Listener!

A STORY FOR THE AGES



## The Art of Seeing

In a bustling city lived two artists. The first, Leo, painted whatever he thought he could sell for a high price, with very little care for his work. He sold many canvases, and was known for his beautiful but disconnected works.

The second artist, Eliana, felt a quiet sense of purpose guiding her art. She spent years studying light, colour, and the stories of the people within the ordinary streets. Her work carried meaning, and helped others see the suffering and hidden stories of the city.

When a great fire swept through the city, both studios burned to the ground. Leo stared at the ashes and felt that all his work had been for nothing. Bad luck had simply taken it away. Eliana lost everything too, yet she walked through the blackened streets and felt something different. The empty walls seemed to call to her, for she knew that everything happens for a reason, and perhaps she was needed now more than ever.

Within days she began painting murals across the burned bricks, colours rising from soot like dawn after night. People gathered to watch, and hope quietly returned to the streets.

Leo wandered the city with no studio and no plan. One evening he stopped before one of Eliana's murals. It showed the fire, but within the flames small figures were planting trees, rebuilding homes, picking up the pieces of their shattered city. For the first time Leo wondered if the world was not random at all. Perhaps there was a great work of art being painted by an invisible hand, and perhaps it was even something a person could glimpse too, if they stepped back and looked at the bigger picture.

The next morning Leo collected burned pieces of wood, seeing them now as charcoal, the tool of an artist. He started to sketch. And slowly, new ideas began to flow. He met Eliana at

her half-finished mural and showed her the sketches. She smiled, seeing that they now had a shared purpose. The two artists picked up their brushes, and began to paint. Others joined them at the wall, and the project expanded. Children watched and joined in, adding plants and flowers to the lower edges of the mural. As the city became a gallery of stories, journalists came to report on the fire, and as the world learned of the destruction in the city, others answered the call to help rebuild. Leo worked with more enthusiasm than he'd ever known, realising now that chance had not led him there; listening had. And the more he listened, the clearer the call. Even the ashes had a purpose now.





# Cards & Conversation

**“If an individual among the people sins unintentionally... bring a goat as an offering to atone for the sin that they committed.”**

- Vayikra 4:27-28

The people are told to bring a sin offering even for things they did unintentionally.

**QUESTION:** Do you think we should be held responsible for things we didn't mean to do – or didn't realise we were part of?

*Rabbi Sacks offers an answer in his commentary to Vayikra 4:2*

“We cannot just walk away as if the act had nothing to do with us... The sin offering tells us that the wrong we do, or let happen, even if we did not intend it, still requires atonement. Unfashionable though this is, a morality that speaks about action, not just intention – about what happens through us even if we did not mean to do it – is more compelling, more true to the human situation, than one that speaks of intention alone.”

*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)



People are told to bring a sin offering even for things they did unintentionally.

**Do you think we should be held accountable for things we didn't mean to do – or didn't realise we were part of?**



## Parsha in Practice

### Mitzva of the Week

#### Bringing an Offering

(Vayikra 1:2)

The central mitzva of the parsha is the *korbanot*, the offerings. The root meaning is 'to draw near'. An offering was not just a ritual act; it was a response to God's call. It was a way for a person to actively draw closer to God, to acknowledge His presence and reject the idea that the world is empty, governed by mere chance. By bringing a part of their life, whether an animal or grain, a person was making a statement: I hear You, and I am answer.

### Practically Speaking

#### How will you draw near?

Today, without a Temple, we cannot bring physical offerings. However, the idea of the *korban*

remains. We can draw near to God through *tefillah*, Torah study, and acts of kindness. Each time we choose to do good, we are bringing an offering. It's about seeing our daily actions not as random events, but as opportunities to answer God's call. Instead of just happening to help someone, we can choose to see it as a response to a call for compassion. This transforms everyday life into a sacred service.

*The key element is not so much giving something up (the usual meaning of sacrifice), but rather bringing something close to God. Lehakriv is to bring the animal element within us to be transformed through the Divine fire that once burned on the altar, and still burns at the heart of prayer if we truly seek closeness to God.*

- Rabbi Sacks



## Try it out

### YOUNG STUDENTS:

This week, practise listening for the call. When you are playing with your friends or family, listen carefully to what they are saying. Try to hear not just their words, but what they really mean or feel.

### ADVANCING STUDENTS:

Identify one area of your life that feels random or meaningless. This week, make a conscious effort to see it as a call. If your schoolwork feels like a chore, try to see it as a call to learn and grow. If a relationship is difficult, see it as a call for patience and understanding. Reflect on how this change in perspective alters your experience.



## 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.

### Guilt, and the sin offering

#### LAYER 1: LOOK AT THE TORAH TEXT: VAYIKRA 5:5

"וְהָיָה כִּי-יֵאָשֵׁם, לְאַחַת מֵאֵלֶּה: וְהִתְוַדָּה אֲשֶׁר חָטָא עָלָיו."

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

"...when he realises the guilt he has incurred in any of these ways, he shall confess the sin he has committed..."

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

Even accidental sins require us to do teshuvah. How do we go about this in today's world, when sin offerings cannot be brought to God for forgiveness.

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

"In our daily and annual prayers for forgiveness, God asks us: What have you done with your life thus far? Have you thought about others or only about yourself? Have you brought healing to a place of human pain or hope where you found despair? You may have avoided malicious actions, but have you sinned by inattention? You may have been a success, but have you also been a blessing?

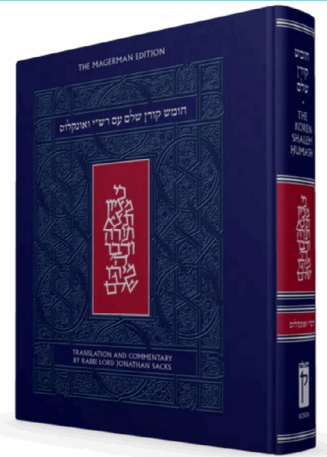
"To ask these questions in the company of others publicly, willing to confess their faults, knowing that God forgives every failure we acknowledge as a failure, and that He has faith in us even when we lose faith in ourselves, can be a lifechanging experience. That is when we discover that, even in a secular age, God is still there, open to us whenever we are willing to open ourselves to Him."

#### LAYER 5: REFLECT AND RESPOND

Vayikra establishes Judaism's culture of repentance through confession. God asks us searching questions: What have you done with your life? Have you thought about others or only yourself? Have you been a success, but not a blessing? To ask these questions publicly, in the company of others willing to confess their faults, knowing that God forgives every failure we acknowledge, can be life-changing. It is when we discover that God is still there, open to us whenever we are willing to open ourselves to Him.

1. What is the difference between success and being a blessing? Can you think of an example from your own life?
2. The passage suggests that confessing our faults in the company of others can be life-changing. Why do you think public acknowledgement of failure is more powerful than private reflection?
3. Rabbi Sacks teaches that God has faith in us even when we lose faith in ourselves. How does this idea change the way you think about repentance and forgiveness?

- 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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