



Covenant & Conversation



Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

שמיני · SHEMINI

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

COVENANT & CONVERSATION SUMMARY

Fire: Holy and Unholy

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

The shock is immense. For several weeks and the longest prelude in the Torah, we have read of the preparations for the moment when God’s Presence will fill the Mishkan. Seven *parshiyot* describe the instructions for the *korbanot*, and for building the Mishkan. For seven days the kohanim have been consecrated. Now comes the eighth day when the service of the Mishkan will begin. The entire people have played their part in constructing what will become the visible home of the Divine Presence on Earth. With a simple, moving verse the drama reaches its climax: *“Moshe and Aharon went into the Tent of Meeting and when they came out, they blessed the people. God’s glory was then revealed to all the people.”*

Just as we think the narrative has reached closure, a terrifying scene takes place. *Aharon’s sons, Nadav and Avihu, took their censers, put fire into them and added incense; and they offered unauthorised fire before God, which He had not instructed them to offer. Fire came forth from before God, and it consumed them so that they died before God. Celebration turned to tragedy with the death of Aharon’s eldest two sons.*

The Sages offer many explanations, but the simplest is the one explicit in the Torah itself: they offered “unauthorised fire,” meaning, that which was **not** commanded. To understand this, we must remind ourselves of the meaning of *kadosh*, “holy”. The holy is that segment of time and space God has reserved for His Presence.

Creation itself involves concealment. For human beings to have freedom, God must make space for them by an act of self-limitation. God is like a parent who lets go so that a child can grow. But there is a limit. If God withdrew completely, the world would lose its connection to the Divine.

How then does God leave a trace of His Presence? The Torah’s answer is this: **There are holy times, holy people, and holy places. The Mishkan was one such place: a point at which the Divine Presence becomes real.**

The holy is where God is experienced as absolute Presence. Therefore it requires self-renunciation on the part

of humankind. Just as God makes space for humanity, so humanity must make space for God. In everyday life, we are encouraged to use our initiative, creativity, and freedom. But in the arena of the holy, there is a different rule: obedience. “As God commanded” is essential.

This was the mistake of Nadav and Avihu. They were not evil but perhaps they were over-enthusiastic. They used their own initiative in a place that demanded humility and obedience. Had they used their passion to fight injustice, they would have been heroes. But in the holy space, they asserted their own presence in the Presence of God. That is a contradiction. That is why they died.

We should not think of God as harsh or angry. The Torah speaks in human language so we can understand. In truth, Tanach is a love story – the love of the Creator for His creations. God does not need us, but we need Him. If civilisation is to be guided by love, justice, and respect, there must be moments when we step back from ourselves and encounter something greater.

That is the function of the holy – the point at which “I am” is silent in the overwhelming presence of “There is”. That is what Nadav and Avihu forgot. Like fire, and nuclear fission, worship generates power, which can be benign but can also be profoundly dangerous.

The significance of this cannot be over-estimated. When we confuse God’s will with our will, we turn the holy – the source of life – into something unholy and a source of death. History has shown how dangerous this can be.

This episode is written in three kinds of fire: the fire from Heaven that signalled Divine favour; the “unauthorised fire” brought by Nadav and Avihu; and the fire that consumed them. The message is simple and intensely serious: **Religion is not mute, marginal, and mild. It is fire – and like fire, it warms but it also burns. And we are the guardians of the flame.**

Around the Shabbat Table



1. Where is the spiritual line between religious enthusiasm and overstepping?
2. God limits Himself to make space for us. How do we limit ourselves to make space for God?
3. If religion is like fire, what does it mean to be a responsible guardian of that flame?

A Takeaway Thought

Holiness requires humility: using our own initiative in the wrong place can be dangerous. True faith means making space for God, recognising that powerful spiritual energy can create life or, if misused, destroy it.



Exploring the Parsha

WITH SARA LAMM

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

THIS WEEK'S TORAH PORTION



The Parsha in a Nutshell

Parshat Shemini begins on the eighth day of the inauguration of the Mishkan, the Sanctuary.

Aharon and his sons begin their service as kohanim, priests. It is a remarkable day, and we have been building up to it for seven *parshiyot*. A fire comes down from heaven to consume the offerings, showing God's acceptance. It is a wondrous moemnt.

Then, in a shocking turn, Aharon's two eldest sons, Nadav and Avihu, make a bold move. They attempt to offer an 'unauthorised fire' and in a

flash, they are consumed by a fire from God. Aharon's sons, the eldest of the second generation of kohanim, die. Aharon does his best to carry on, although we see signs of his deep grief.

In the wake of the tragedy, the Torah details the laws of kashrut, the Jewish dietary laws, specifying which animals, birds, and fish we are permitted to eat, and which are forbidden.

What is the link between the story of Aharon's sons and the laws of kashrut?



Parsha Activity

The Conductor

Choose one person to be the conductor. The rest of the group is the orchestra. The conductor uses hand signals to lead the orchestra in making sounds, like humming, clapping, or tapping. The orchestra must follow the conductor's precise directions for volume and rhythm. After a minute of perfect harmony, the conductor gives a signal for one person to add their own 'unauthorised' sound. The game shows how a single act of personal initiative, even a well-intentioned one, can disrupt the harmony of a sacred, ordered space.

A STORY FOR THE AGES



The Man who Split the Atom

Ernest Rutherford is often called the 'father of nuclear physics'. In 1932, scientists working in his laboratory achieved something everyone thought impossible: they split the atom.

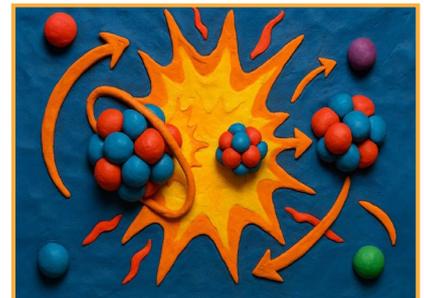
Everything in the universe is made of atoms, and although they are tiny units of matter, they store enormous amounts of energy within their centre, their nuclei. Each atom is held together by one of the most powerful forces in nature, the strong nuclear force.

Breaking an atom is not like smashing an object with a hammer. Instead, scientists use extremely fast, high-energy particles to strike the nucleus. But this is incredibly difficult, because the nucleus is unimaginably small, even compared to the tiny atoms themselves. If a nucleus were the size of a strawberry,

the entire atom would be the size of a football stadium. So Rutherford's team built a machine that could accelerate tiny particles called protons to incredibly high speeds, then directing them at a lithium atom. When the protons struck the nucleus, it overcame the forces holding the nucleus together, breaking the atom into smaller pieces, and unlocking vast amounts of energy.

This breakthrough led to amazing advances, from nuclear power that can supply energy to entire cities, to medical isotopes used to diagnose and treat disease. Yet it also led to the development of nuclear weapons, capable of immense destruction.

Rutherford's story reminds us that knowledge is powerful. When people discover something new, they gain



the ability to change the world in big ways. That power can be used to help others, solve problems, and improve lives - but it can also cause harm if it is used carelessly. This in fact applies to all types of power. We can learn from this story, and remember to wield our power within careful limits, finding the routes that are kind, wise, and responsible.



Cards & Conversation

“Aharon is in a state of grief. But, Moshe implies, he is not simply a private person. He is the High Priest.”

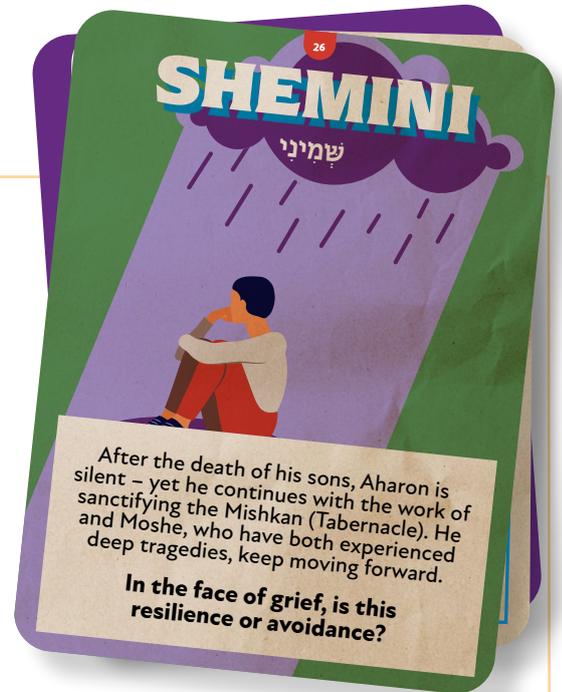
- Rabbi Sacks on Vayikra 10:20

After the death of his sons, Aharon is silent – yet he continues with the work of sanctifying the Mishkan. He and Moshe, two leaders who have both experienced deep tragedies, keep moving forward.

QUESTION: In the face of grief, is this resilience or avoidance?

Rabbi Sacks continues his commentary as follows: “There were, and are, no words to silence the grief or end the tears [after the Holocaust]. Yet, like Moshe, the Jewish people found the strength to continue, to reaffirm hope in the face of despair. A mere three years after coming eye to eye with the angel of death, the Jewish people, by establishing the State of Israel, made the single most powerful affirmation in two thousand years that *am Yisrael chai*, the Jewish people lives.

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



After the death of his sons, Aharon is silent – yet he continues with the work of sanctifying the Mishkan (Tabernacle). He and Moshe, who have both experienced deep tragedies, keep moving forward.

In the face of grief, is this resilience or avoidance?



Parsha in Practice

Mitzva of the Week

The Laws of Kashrut
(Vayikra 11)

It's no accident that immediately after the chaotic fire of Nadav and Avihu, the Torah introduces the laws of keeping kosher. Kashrut is a system of making distinctions: between the permitted and the forbidden, the pure and the impure, the land and the sea. It is an act of bringing order and discipline to one of our most basic, animal-like activities: eating.

Keeping kosher teaches that holiness is not about grand, fiery gestures. It is about creating order in the small, everyday details of life. It is a daily practice of self-limitation, a way of saying, 'I will not act on every impulse; I will follow a Divine command.'

“Judaism invites us to sanctify food by the laws of kashrut...” - Rabbi Sacks

Practically Speaking

How will you create order?

Kashrut teaches us that holiness is built through small acts of distinction and self-control.

This week, think about one area of your life that feels chaotic or impulsive. It could be your use of social media, your spending habits, or even the way you speak to others. The challenge is not to stop entirely, but to bring one small, clear rule into that chaos. For example, no phone during mealtimes, or a twenty-four-hour pause before any online purchase.

By creating a boundary, you are practising the core lesson of kashrut: that making distinctions is how we build a space for holiness in our lives.



Try it out

YOUNG STUDENTS:

Play a sorting game. Take a mixed pile of anything, from toys to different types of pasta. Your job is to sort them into different groups based on rules you create: by colour, by size, by shape. The laws of kashrut are like a big sorting game Hashem gave us for the world. Talk about why it feels good to have things in their proper place and how rules can help create order out of a mess.

ADVANCING STUDENTS:

The laws of kashrut teach us to control our impulses. This week, identify an impulse you can work on, e.g., interrupting others, checking your phone too often, or eating snacks than you need. Now make a conscious plan to pause and think before you act. Reflect on what it feels like to be in control of your impulse, rather than letting your impulse be in control of you.



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 Stork

LAYER 1: LOOK AT THE TORAH TEXT: VAYIKRA 11:19

“וְאֵת, הַחֲסִידָה, הָאֲנָפָה, לְמִינָהּ; וְאֵת-הַדּוֹכִיפֹת, וְאֵת-הָעֶטְלֹף.”

LAYER 2: READ RABBI SACKS' TRANSLATION

“...the **stork**, any kind of heron, the hoopoe, and the bat.”

LAYER 3: THINK ABOUT WHAT IT MEANS

The stork, the chassida, is among the list of creatures who are specifically named as treif, unkosher. For what reason could this be? Storks are herbivore birds, like the chicken, duck, and turkey, all of which are kosher.

There is a hint to the deeper reason, and it is found in the shoresh (root letters) or the word chassida. Can you guess what it is?

LAYER 4: LEARN FROM RABBI SACKS' COMMENTARY

“Ramban links the laws of kashrut to the characteristics of different groups of animals. We eat tame herbivores but not predators, because we are affected by what we eat.

The Jewish mystics once asked: Why, then, is the chassida, the stork, an unclean animal? Its name in Hebrew literally means “the compassionate one.” How can a bird called “compassion” possibly be unclean?

They answered: The chassida has compassion only for its own kind. Compassion only for your own is not compassion.”

LAYER 5: REFLECT AND RESPOND

Rabbi Sacks teaches that the stork is unclean because it has limited compassion, caring only for its own kind. This teaches a profound lesson about the nature of true compassion. A love that is directed only at your own family, your own community, or your own people is not true compassion. It is a form of extended self-love. True compassion, the kind the Torah values, means feeling for the stranger, the other, the one who is not like you.

1. Can you think of a time when you found it easy to have compassion for someone in your own group, but harder to feel it for an outsider?
2. Why do you think the Torah deems the stork unkosher? What is the issue with this kind of compassion?
3. What practical step could you take this week to extend your compassion beyond your immediate circle?

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



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The Rabbi Sacks Legacy perpetuates the timeless and universal wisdom of Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks as a teacher of Torah, a leader of leaders, and a moral voice.

Explore the digital archive, containing much of Rabbi Sacks' writings, broadcasts, and speeches, or support the Legacy's work, at www.RabbiSacks.org, and follow The Rabbi Sacks Legacy on social media @RabbiSacks.

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