



# Covenant & Conversation



Jonathan Sacks  
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

TAZRIA-METZORA · תזריע-מצורע

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

COVENANT & CONVERSATION SUMMARY

## Holiness and

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

The sidrot of Tazria and Metzora contain laws that are among the most difficult to understand. They are about conditions of “impurity” arising from the fact that we are physical beings, embodied souls, exposed to “the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to.” Though we have immortal longings, mortality is the condition of human existence.

Throughout history there have been two opposing ways of relating to this: *hedonism* (living for physical pleasure) and *asceticism* (rejecting it). The Jewish way is distinct from both of these, for in Judaism we aim to sanctify physical acts such as eating, drinking, relationships and rest - making the life of the body a vehicle for Hashem. We believe that the God of redemption is also the God of creation, and the world He made is “very good.” **To be a Jew is to celebrate both creation and Creator.**

This helps explain the laws with which the parsha begins. After childbirth, a woman enters a state of *tumah* - not “impurity” in a negative sense, but a condition that temporarily limits direct encounter with holiness. *Tumah* does not mean something negativ, tainted, or sinful. It is a temporary state that creates distance from direct encounter with holiness, and it is often linked to moments of transition in life. After a specified period of time, the woman brings offerings and returns to full ritual life. Why should childbirth, one of the most life-filled moments, lead to this state?

The first principle is that God is life. Judaism is a protest against cultures that glorify death. The paradigm case of *tumah* is contact with a corpse. Other cases involve things that remind us of mortality. God’s domain is life, and holiness is the point at which we become intensely aware of it. Anything that signals loss or separation from life creates distance from that direct encounter.

This is how thinkers like Judah Halevi explain these laws: a dead body represents the highest loss of life, and even lesser forms of loss create a contrast with the living and breathing.

Judaism, as a religion of life, is deeply sensitive to these boundaries.

A second principle is Judaism’s sensitivity to the birth of a child. Nothing is more natural than having children, yet the Torah often describes births as miraculous. Many biblical figures had children only after long struggle. The message is clear: survival is not just biology. Every child is a gift of God. No faith has taken children more seriously or devoted more effort to the next generation.

Childbirth is wondrous. To be a parent is the closest any of us come to God himself. That is why it carries such spiritual weight.

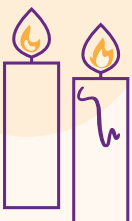
We can now understand the laws more deeply. Childbirth has always involved risk, to both mother and baby. It is also a moment of separation: what was once part of the mother becomes an independent life. In the case of a girl, who may one day bring new life herself, this sense of life emerging from life is even more powerful. The laws reflect this profound transition.

There is also a halachic principle: **“One who is engaged in a mitzva is exempt from other mitzvot.”** It is as if God were saying to the mother: you are temporarily exempt from entering the Sanctuary because you are engaged in one of the holiest acts of all – caring for new life. Others must go to the Temple to encounter holiness. You are experiencing it directly.

In time, she returns to give thanks. But for now, her focus is elsewhere. She has been given a rare and intimate encounter with creation itself.

**Childbirth exempts the new mother from attendance at the Temple because her bedside replicates the experience of the Temple. She now knows what it is for love to beget life, and, in the midst of mortality, to be touched by an intimation of immortality.**

### Around the Shabbat Table



1. Where else in your life can you elevate an everyday act into something holy?
2. How might seeing every childbirth as a miracle change the way we think about families and parenting?
3. A new mother is exempt from the Temple because she is already experiencing holiness. What does this teach us about where to find God?

### A Takeaway Thought

Judaism sanctifies life. Even physical experiences like childbirth become encounters with holiness. In caring for new life, we come closer to God, touching the mystery of creation and the gift of life itself.



# Exploring the Parsha

WITH SARA LAMM

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



## The Parsha in a Nutshell

Parshat Tazria deals with the laws of purity and impurity. It begins with the status of a woman after childbirth.

The parsha then describes the spiritual condition known as *tzara'at*, often translated as leprosy, which could affect the skin conditions of people, discolouration in clothing, and even the walls of houses. A person afflicted with *tzara'at*, is known as a *metzora*, would be temporarily sent outside the camp. The parsha also details the complex process of diagnosis by the Kohen - the priest.

This week we have a double-parsha reading. In Parshat Metzora, we continue along the same theme, moving onto the process of purification for this phenomenon of *tzara'at*.

After a *metzora* goes through the correct purification rituals, the Kohen can check them and declare when they are 'pure' again.

*Why would a person's home and clothes be affected, by tzara'at does this help explain anything about the condition?*



## Parsha Activity

### The Sacred Space

Each person finds a small, simple, ordinary object in the room, for example, a cup, a book, a cushion. For one minute, they must hold the object and think of all the ways it is a 'miracle'. Who made it? What materials from the earth were used? How does it help you live? See if you can find the holiness hidden in everyday items.



## Rapunzel's Mother

Once upon a time, there lived a woman who wished for a baby more than anything in the world.

Finally, she and her husband found that a baby was on the way. Oh how they rejoiced! Hoping to find the best green vegetables for his wife, the husband then made a terrible mistake. He plucked the greens from the garden of mysterious witch, who punished him by insisting that in payment for the vegetables, he now owed her his firstborn child.

And so, when the baby girl was born, she was taken away by the witch to a tall tower, hidden deep within the forest.

The new mother was heartbroken. Every day, she would walk to the edge of the forest and sing, "My child, wherever you are, you are loved by me, now and forever."

Years passed. The girl, now named

Rapunzel, grew up trapped in the tower, and her hair grew too. As she sat by the only window, braiding her long golden tresses, her hair hung down over the window-sill and almost reached the grass outside!

Rapunzel was told by the witch to call her 'mother', but she never felt any love from her. And yet, Rapunzel's true mother had so much love for her, it held a power of its own.

Sometimes, as she sat by the window something, Rapunzel heard a voice in the distance, and felt a pull, a warmth. Almost as if someone, somewhere, was thinking of her, calling to her.

After many twists and turns (and yes, a prince, because every fairy story has one), Rapunzel finally found her way out into the world by sliding down her own hair. She and the prince wandered



out into the forest, uncertain where to go. Until Rapunzel heard a voice. Soft. Familiar. Singing her song.

In a flash, Rapunzel and her mother ran to each other. Somehow they knew each other, for they felt the love that had always kept them connected like a golden braid.

The mother laughed and cried all at once. "My daughter, I never stopped hoping to find you," she said. Rapunzel smiled through her tears. "I always felt you were out there, somewhere."

Her mother's love had guided her on the path to home. And from that day on, they were never parted again.



# Cards & Conversation

“... then the priest shall quarantine the patient for seven days.” - Vayikra 13:21

Someone who speaks lashon hara is marked as a metzora and separated from the community.

**QUESTION:** Why do you lashon hara, out of all sins, leads to the punishment of isolation?

*Rabbi Sacks' commentary explains:* “The negative force of lashon hara... has grown in the age of social media. It is far easier to be critical, offensive, scathing, and destructive when communicating electronically because of the so-called ‘disinhibition effect’ which occurs when people are not speaking face to face. Imagine a world in which those who posted negative, hurtful, or malicious remarks about others carried a visible mark of shame, and for a period were excluded from public places and the company of others – in short, suffered the fate of the metzora. This would be a world in which people would think twice before using speech to harm others.”

*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

Purification after Childbirth  
(Vayikra 12:2-4)

When a woman who gives birth enters a state of tumah, often translated as ritual impurity, for a set period. This is not a sin or a flaw. It is a recognition of having touched the raw, awesome power of life and death. Childbirth is a moment when a person is closest to the Divine act of creation. The period of separation is a sacred pause, a time to recover and bond with the new life, exempt from the demands of the Mishkan because she has just participated in a holiness of her own. The offering she brings afterwards is not for a sin, but to mark her re-entry into the community after a life-altering experience.

### Practically Speaking

How to recover

This mitzva teaches us to create protected, sacred time after moments of intense creation or change. We live in a culture that pressures us to recover immediately from major life events and changes. The Torah models a different way. It tells us to honour the process. Practically, this means giving ourselves and others permission to have a period of quiet integration after a big project, a move, a loss, or a new beginning. It is about recognising that creation requires recovery, and that there is a deep holiness in the calm moments after the storm.

*“Without rest for the body, peace for the mind, silence for the soul, and a renewal of our bonds of identity and love, the creative process eventually withers and dies.”*

- Rabbi Sacks



## Try it out

### YOUNG STUDENTS:

Plant a seed in a small pot. Be the guardian of this seed. Water it, ensure it has sunlight, and watch it every day. You are helping to bring new life into the world, just like a parent. Talk about what the tiny plant needs to grow and how it feels to be responsible for helping something live.

### ADVANCING STUDENTS:

Think of a time you completed a major project or went through a big change. Did you rush right into the next thing, or did you take time to reflect? This week, schedule a ‘purification period’ for yourself. It could be thirty minutes of quiet time after a big test, or an afternoon off after a major deadline. Do not use the time to be productive. Simply “to be”. Reflect on what you learn when you give yourself permission to pause.



## 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.



### What about those who you cannot afford the guilt offering?

#### LAYER 1: LOOK AT THE TORAH TEXT: VAYIKRA 14:21-22

"וְאִם-דָּל הוּא, וְאִין יָדוֹ מִשְׁנֵת - וְלָקַח... וּשְׁתֵּי תְרִים, אוֹ שְׁנֵי בְנֵי יוֹנָה אֲשֶׁר תִּשְׁיֵג יָדוֹ." "

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

"If, however, the person is poor and cannot afford so much, he shall take ...two doves or two pigeons, such as he can afford."

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

After laying out the details of the guilt offering provided by a Metzora, the Torah now offers an alternative for those that cannot afford to offer up what others can. What does this tell us about the Torah's requirements of us?

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

"SUCH AS HE CAN AFFORD: In the Talmud we find that fundamental to the Rabbis' conception of Judaism was the idea that its practice should never impoverish or be beyond the reach of the poor. This was not a theoretical issue. Judaism did make economic demands, and it is important that these should not be divisive. Hence, for instance, the institutions that burials should be as simple as possible (Moed Katan 27b)..."

"The rabbis were guardians of the tradition, but they were also guardians of the unity of the people, and they were aware that nothing could be more destructive of that unity than a Judaism that was identified with a particular economic class."

#### LAYER 5: REFLECT AND RESPOND

Rabbi Sacks points out that Judaism always reminds us to take care of those who are lonely, suffering, ostracised. But giving tzedakah to those in need is only a part of it. We are also careful not to make such large demands on others to the point that they would suffer from financial loss. There are therefore halachic rulings made to prevent others from becoming impoverished, or embarrassed by their lack of funds. For instance on days of festivity in Jerusalem, it was customary for every girl to wear borrowed clothes, so that there would be no shame brought to those who could not afford new dresses.

Here this rule extends even to those who are being punished and blighted by tzara'at.

1. Does this level of detail in the Torah surprise you? Why, or why not?
2. How might this idea change the way we think about the guilt offering?
3. What are other ways that we can help ensure that those with less money than others do not feel embarrassed or unable to contribute within our community?

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

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