



Covenant & Conversation



Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

ACHAREI MOT - KEDOSHIM · אַחֲרֵי מוֹת - קְדוּשִׁים

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

Of Love and Hate

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

At the centre of the Mosaic books is Sefer Vayikra. At the centre of Vayikra is the “holiness code” (chapter 19) with its call: “You shall be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy.” And at its centre is a brief paragraph, the high point of the Torah:

Do not hate your brother in your heart.

Admonish your fellow and do not bear guilt on his account.

Do not take revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbour as yourself. I am the Lord.

What does it mean to “admonish your fellow”? Rambam and Ramban give two interpretations. One is social: if we see someone doing wrong, we must try to help them change. We cannot say, “That’s between them and God” for we know that “all of Bnei Israel are responsible for one another.”

But both agree that the simpler meaning is interpersonal. If someone hurts you, do not hate them in silence. Speak to them. Say: “Why did you do this to me?” Give them the chance to explain, apologise, and allow yourself to forgive.

This teaches something deep about the psychology of relationships. Judaism has sometimes been accused of focusing on justice rather than love. This is untrue. The Torah commands love, but it also understands how hard that can be. When someone hurts us, we feel pain and anger. The question is what we do next.

The Torah’s answer is simple but powerful: **Speak. Converse. Challenge. Remonstrate.** It may be that we misunderstood. Or it may be that the other person was wrong but will now regret it. Either way, talking is the best way of repairing a relationship. **As Judaism teaches us time and again, speech has the power to create, sustain, and mend human relationships.**

A powerful example is the story of King David’s sons, Avshalom and Amnon. After Amnon harms Tamar, Avshalom says nothing. He appears calm, but his silence hides hatred. Two years later, he takes revenge and has Amnon killed. His silence was not due to forgiveness. Instead, he remained quietly angry, and it festered into a need for action, for revenge.

Another example appears in the story of Yosef and his brothers. They hated him so much that “they could not speak with him peacefully.” As Rabbi Jonathan Eybeschuetz notes had they spoken, they might have resolved their conflict. The tragedy was their silence. **A failure to communicate is often the beginning of revenge.**

The inner logic of the Torah’s command this week is this: Love your neighbour as yourself. But not all neighbours are easy to love. Some hurt us. The Torah does not ask us to pretend otherwise. It does, however, forbid us to hate silently. Instead, we must speak honestly about our pain. Through this, misunderstanding can be cleared, or wrongdoing admitted and forgiven.

If we do not speak, resentment grows. Grudges form. Eventually, this can lead to revenge, as it did with Absalom. But if we do speak, there is a chance of healing.

What is so impressive about the Torah is that it sets high ideals while still understanding human nature. It does not expect us to be angels. Instead, it gives us a realistic way to live up to those ideals.

By being honest with one another, talking things through, we may be able to achieve reconciliation – not always, to be sure, but often. How much distress and even bloodshed might be spared if humanity heeded this simple command.

Around the Shabbat Table



1. How might Jewish history have been different if Yosef’s brothers had found a way to talk to him?
2. Why is silence sometimes more dangerous than an argument?
3. Think of a time you were annoyed with someone but did not say anything. What happened to that feeling?

A Takeaway Thought

Love in Judaism is not expressed with silence. When hurt, we must speak honestly, not hide resentments. Open communication prevents hatreds, heals relationships, and halts the cycle of grudges and revenge before it begins.



Exploring the Parsha

WITH SARA LAMM

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

THIS WEEK'S TORAH PORTION



The Parsha in a Nutshell

This week we read the double parsha of **Acharei Mot-Kedoshim**.

Acharei Mot opens after the death of Aharon's two sons and lays out the holiest service of the year: the Yom Kippur ritual in the Mishkan. It details how the Kohen Gadol (the High Priest) enters the Holy of Holies on this holiest of days.

Then comes the Yom Kippur ceremony of the two goats. One is sacrificed to God as a sin offering. The other, the scapegoat, has the sins of the nation confessed over it and is

sent into the wilderness 'to Azazel'. The parsha also sets out some laws, as aspects of the life of purity God asks of the Jewish people.

Kedoshim follows, with one of the most sweeping ethical codes in the Torah, including the famous commandment 'Love your neighbour as yourself', and a wide range of laws governing how we treat one another in daily life.



Parsha Activity

Family Feuds

Split into two teams. One person poses a question and each team races to call out answers. The team with the most answers wins the round. Suggested questions: 'Name something siblings fight about.' 'Name something neighbours argue over.' 'Name something people hold a grudge about for way too long.' The sillier the answers, the better. After a few rounds, ask: how many of these feuds could have been solved with one honest conversation?

A STORY FOR THE AGES



Brother versus Brother

In 1924, two German brothers, Adolf and Rudolf Dassler were in their mother's laundry room in a small Bavarian town when they started a shoe factory together. They were a perfect team: Adolf designed the shoes and Rudolf sold them. By 1936, their shoes were on the feet of Jesse Owens at the Berlin Olympics as he won four gold medals. They were on top of the world.

Then, sometime during World War II, something went wrong between them. Nobody knows exactly what was said, or what was left unsaid. But by 1948, the two brothers had stopped speaking. Adolf split off and founded Adidas. Rudolf went to the other side of the river and founded Puma. The feud consumed their entire town. Locals chose sides. Shopkeepers put their preferred brand in the window to signal

which side of the river they were on.

The brothers never reconciled. They both died in the 1970s and are buried in the same churchyard in Herzogenaurach, their graves placed as far apart as possible. Whatever the original grievance was, neither of them ever said it out loud to the other, and then it was too late.

In contrast, Rabbi Sacks often retells the story of Yaakov's sons as an example of a sibling rivalry that turned into a beautiful example of reconciliation.

Yosef's ten elder brothers were bothered by him, could not speak peaceably to him, and even plotted to kill him. They threw him in a pit, and sold him as a slave, then told their father he had been killed by a wild animal.

Alone in Egypt, Yosef toiled away as a slave and was even thrown into prison



before finally rising up again to become Paroh's right-hand man. All this time, the brothers never spoke to Yosef, and he never spoke to them. But when he met them again years later, he saw that they have grown up, done *teshuvah*, and would protect Binyamin the way they never protected him. So he revealed himself to them, and asked them to forgive themselves, making it clear that he forgave them too. The brothers fell into a 12-way hug, with tears falling upon their cheeks. They were finally a family reconciled.

If only they had spoken to each other at the beginning of the story!



Cards & Conversation

“Do not hate your brother in your heart...”

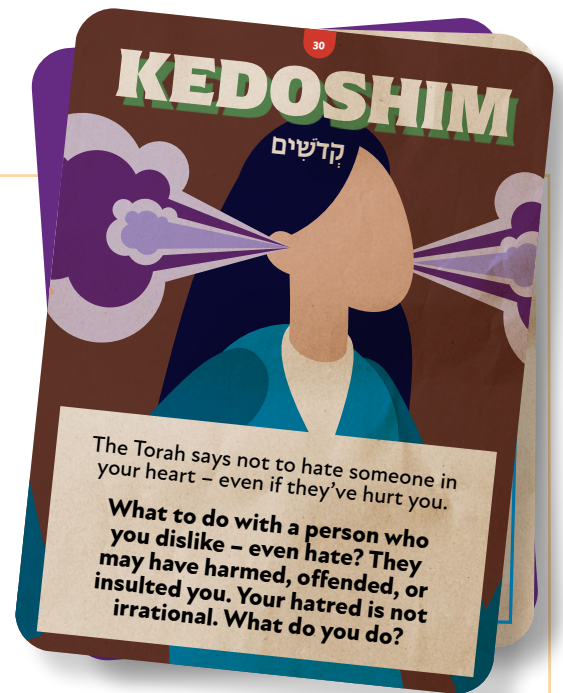
- Vayikra 19:17-18

The Torah says not to hate someone in your heart – even if they’ve hurt you.

QUESTION: But what to do with a person whom you dislike – even hate? They may have harmed you, offended you, or insulted you. Your hatred is not irrational. What do you do?

Rabbi Sacks' commentary explains: “God does not command us to be angels, without any of the emotions natural to human beings. He does, however, forbid us to hate. That is why, when someone does you wrong, you must confront him... The Torah sets out a realistic programme. By being honest with one another, and talking things through, we may be able to achieve reconciliation – not always but often. How much distress and bloodshed might be spared if humanity heeded this command.”

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



Parsha in Practice

Mitzva of the Week

Love Your Neighbour

(Vayikra 19:18)

Rabbi Akiva called this mitzva the greatest principle in the entire Torah. We are commanded to extend to the people around us the same patience, generosity, and good faith that we automatically extend to ourselves.

We understand our own context, our own pressures, our own bad days, and therefore we can forgive ourselves our mistakes most of the time. The mitzva of *v'ahavta l'reiacha kamocho* asks us to do exactly that for everyone else.

“And do these things because, being human, we are bound by a covenant of human solidarity, whatever our colour or culture, class or creed. These are moral principles...”

- Rabbi Sacks

Practically Speaking

How will you show love?

The Torah does not ask us to *feel* warmly towards everyone. It asks us to *act* lovingly. And amazingly, from action, the feelings often grow.

Pick one person in your life who is easy to overlook - not necessarily someone you dislike, just someone you have not really seen lately. A neighbour you walk past. A colleague you do not really talk to. A family member you take for granted. Do one concrete thing for them this week, not because they asked, and not because you will get credit for it. Cook something. Send a message. Show up. The feeling, more often than not, follows the action.



Try it out

YOUNG STUDENTS:

Find something kind to do for someone in your family or class without being asked and without telling anyone. Save them the last biscuit, let them go first, cheer them on, anything positive! At the end of the week, think about how it felt to do something loving quietly, just because. That is *v'ahavta l'reiacha kamocho* in action.

ADVANCING STUDENTS:

Can you make a deliberate effort to help out someone you might otherwise take for granted? Treat them the way you would want to be treated on your hardest day. Be extra patient. Ask how they are and actually wait for the answer. Reflect on how much effort it takes to love your neighbour as yourself, and why the Torah made it a principle, and a mitzva, rather than just a nice idea.



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 Punishment of Karet

LAYER 1: LOOK AT THE TORAH TEXT: VAYIKRA 17:4

"... וְנִכְרַת הָאִישׁ הַהוּא, מִקֶּרֶב עַמּוֹ."

LAYER 2: READ RABBI SACKS' TRANSLATION

"...and he shall be severed from his people."

LAYER 3: THINK ABOUT WHAT IT MEANS

Karet is the harshest of all punishments in Judaism. It means being cut off from the whole people, for life. Why is this so terrible? When might this be necessary?

LAYER 4: LEARN FROM RABBI SACKS' COMMENTARY

Every commandment in Judaism, every "thou shalt" and "thou shalt not," is a way of putting the "we" before the "I." When we rest on Sabbath, for example, we do not engage in private relaxation. If we did, we would spend the seventh day pursuing individual hobbies or whatever else we chose. Shabbat is instead a day of public rest. It is a day of "we," not "I." Similarly, here, sacrificial slaughter is centralized... Judaism is a faith less of individual salvation than of collective redemption.

"Correspondingly, every transgression in Judaism is a way of putting the "I" before the "we." Whenever we put personal advantage over collective interest, or private inclination before the laws of the community, sooner or later, we sin. That is why the severest punishment in Judaism is one that is not inflicted by people: *karet*, literally being "severed" from the community."

LAYER 5: REFLECT AND RESPOND

When the harshest punishment in all of Jewish law is not execution but karet - being cut off from the community - this tells you everything about what the Torah thinks a human being is.

To transgress is to choose personal advantage over communal responsibility. The punishment fits the crime exactly: if you choose to act alone, selfishly, outside the community, then outside the community is where you must go.

1. Can you think of a mitzva that feels *personal* but is *communal* at its core?
2. Karet is described as the severest punishment in all of the Torah. Why might exclusion from community be considered worse than physical punishment?
3. Rabbi Sacks says that when we put personal advantage over collective interest, sooner or later we sin. Do you agree? Can you think of an example from your own life or from the news?

- 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.

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