



Covenant & Conversation



Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

EMOR · אָמור

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

COVENANT & CONVERSATION SUMMARY

Faith as a Journey

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

In its account of the *chaggim*, this week’s parsha says: “For seven days you shall live in huts [*succot*]. All those native-born in Israel must live in huts, so that future generations may know that I had the Israelites live in huts when I brought them out of the land of Egypt; I am the Lord your God.” (Vayikra 23:42)

What huts are they talking about? Two great Sages, Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Akiva, disagreed. Rabbi Eliezer said the huts or shelters (*succot*) refers to the Clouds of Glory that protected the Israelites in the desert. By contrast, Rabbi Akiva said it is literal, the *succot* were the huts that sheltered us in the *midbar*.

This debate continues among commentators. Rashi and Ramban favour the Clouds of Glory, seeing Succot as a reminder of miracles. Ibn Ezra and Rashbam take the word “huts” literally. Rashbam explains that the festival of Succot arrives when the harvest-time is complete and the people are surrounded by the blessings of the land, but this was precisely the time to remind Bnei Yisrael of how they came to be in the Promised Land. As we relive the wilderness years, back when we had no permanent home, we feel a sense of gratitude to God for bringing us to the land. As Moshe warned: when you have plenty, you may forget God and say, “My power has brought me this wealth.”

But a question remains. If the *succot* were just huts, where is the miracle? The *chaggim* of Pesach and Shavuot celebrate miraculous moments that God gave to us. Pesach recalls dramatic signs and wonders. Shavuot marks the giving of the Torah. There is nothing exceptional in living in a portable home if you are a nomadic group living in the Sinai desert. It is what Bedouin do to this day. **Where then is the miracle?**

A beautiful answer comes from Yirmiyahu: “I remember how... you loved Me and followed Me through the desert, through a land not sown.”

Most accounts of the wilderness focus on the people’s complaints. Yirmiyahu instead recalls their faith. They left a known land and followed God into an unknown future. They travelled through danger, trusting that God would guide them. This was not a miracle of what God did for them, but of what they did for God. Perhaps this is Rabbi Akiva’s insight. The greatness of the wilderness years was not the Clouds of Glory, but the miraculous courage of a people without a home, exposed and vulnerable, who continued their journey, believing in God’s protection.

Succot later came to symbolise Jewish history itself. For centuries, Jews lived without permanent security. They were often forced to move, never fully safe, never in a permanent home. Yet they held onto their faith. Even when they could have escaped suffering by giving it up, they did not.

That is why Succot is called *zeman simchatenu*, “the season of our joy.” **Despite uncertainty, Jews celebrated life. With no protection other than faith, they affirmed hope and meaning.**

Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev explained that Pesach has two names: one praising God, the other praising Israel. So too with Succot. Rabbi Eliezer saw God’s miracle. Rabbi Akiva saw the miracle of Israel - their willingness to follow God into the unknown.

Why celebrate this at harvest time? Yirmiyahu gives the answer: “Israel is holy to God, the first fruit of His harvest.”

Just as, during the month of Tishrei, the Israelites celebrate their harvest, so God celebrates His too – and His harvest is us, the people who, whatever else their failings, have stayed loyal to Heaven’s call for longer, and through a more arduous set of journeys, than any other people on earth.

Around the Shabbat Table



1. Why do we need faith to embark upon a journey without knowing the destination?
2. As a people, do you think we turn to God more when times are hard or when things are working out? Is this lamentable?
3. How can sitting in a flimsy succah make us feel safe?

A Takeaway Thought

There’s a beautiful duality in the chag of Succot. God gave us miraculous protection, but as a people we performed a miracle also, by having the courage to follow Him into the unknown. The succah represents trust, humility, and loyalty even in uncertainty.



Exploring the Parsha

WITH SARA LAMM

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

THIS WEEK'S TORAH PORTION



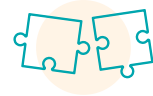
The Parsha in a Nutshell

Parshat Emor contains the Jewish calendar's complete cycle of *chaggim* (festivals), mapping out the sacred rhythm of our year.

The parsha begins by outlining the special laws of purity and marriage for the Kohanim, the priests, ensuring they maintain the highest level of sanctity for their service in the Mishkan. The Torah then transitions into the holy times, namely the *chaggim*, although it begins with the weekly holiness of Shabbat. It details Pesach in the spring, Shavuot seven

weeks later, and the High Holy days of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur in the autumn. Finally, it describes Succot, commanding us to dwell in temporary huts for seven days to remember the wilderness journey.

Emor concludes with the laws of the eternal light in the Sanctuary, the showbread, and a sobering narrative about a man who blasphemes God's name, reminding us that words have immense power and that the sanctity of speech is just as vital as the sanctity of time and space.



Parsha Activity

The Hidden Journey

Clear a safe path across the room. One person is blindfolded while another acts as their guide. The guide cannot touch the blindfolded person; they can only use their voice to give directions around obstacles. Time just how long it takes to cross the room. Now switch roles and see who is the most trusting traveller and who is the clearest guide. It's a fun way to experience what it feels like to step into the unknown, relying entirely on someone else's voice to keep you safe.

A STORY FOR THE AGES



The Nail of Faith

Many years ago, a young Rabbi Sacks got married and was excited to build his very first succah. There was just one problem. He had never built anything before. Not knowing where to start, he felt lucky to have a friend who knew all about construction, and who had built many succot before. Together, they went to the timber yard.

The friend had drawn up architectural plans. He measured everything perfectly, and bought an impressive pile of heavy beams, planks, hinges, and screws. Rabbi Sacks watched his friend in awe. But with no experience with woodwork, he decided to simplify things. He bought just a few large boards, some wooden supports, and a bag of nails. The two friends went to their respective homes, and each began to build a succah.

Rabbi Sacks would chuckle as he told this part of the story, for as his friend

was busy constructing a magnificent, sturdy summer house. Rabbi Sacks managed to nail three simple walls together. Then he leaned them against the back wall of his house, securing the corner with another nail. It looked, he thought, like a large packing case. But it would fulfil the mitzva, and he and his wife would be able to eat there on Succot.

On the second night of the *chag*, a massive storm blew through England. The wind howled and wailed as trees were toppled all over the country. It was the hurricane of the decade! The next morning in shul, everyone was discussing the damage that they had woken up to find. But Rabbi Sacks was sure that his friend's succah must have survived. It had been constructed so beautifully. Sadly, his friend admitted that his sturdy, elaborate succah had completely collapsed. He would have



to rebuild. "Would you like me to help rebuild your succah too?" asked the friend. "Thank you, but my succah is still standing," Rabbi Sacks replied.

The friend could not believe it. He walked home with Rabbi Sacks to see for himself, and he soon found the answer. "My beautiful structure stood independently, and took the full force of the wind. Yours was attached to the solid wall of your house by this one nail. You see?" Rabbi Sacks smiled. "Now I understand Succot. You can build the most sophisticated structure, but if it stands alone, a storm will destroy it. But even a frail shelter can hold fast, if it's joined to something immovable. It's just like faith. This nail is faith."



Cards & Conversation

“Take the one who cursed outside the camp. All the people who heard him shall lay their hands on his head – and then the whole community shall stone him.” - Vayikra 24:14

A man publicly curses God – and it becomes one of the most serious moments in the Torah.

QUESTION: Why do you think using God’s name with disrespect matters so much?

Rabbi Sacks’ commentary explains: “Life itself is holy: people, not just priests; and the whole of life, not just edited parts of it. So we have to be holy in the way we eat, the way we conduct relationships, and the way we use language. We must not curse even the deaf, let alone our parents, let alone God, because verbal abuse leads to physical abuse. When human beings lose respect for God, they eventually lose respect for humanity.”

Cards & Conversation: Chumash Edition Each card holds a question to consider 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

Dwelling in the Succah
(Vayikra 23:42)

The Torah commands us to live in huts for seven days to remember the wilderness journey. According to Rabbi Akiva, the succot were huts, not the miraculous Clouds of Glory. Therefore the miracle they symbolise is the extraordinary faith of Bnei Yisrael, who followed God into a desert without homes or provisions.

Building a succah, and dwelling within it, reminds us to step out of our secure houses and experience that same vulnerability. The biggest lesson to learn from this is that our ultimate security comes only from our faith in God.

“Succot celebrates the dual nature of Jewish faith: the universality of God and the particularity of Jewish existence.” - Rabbi Sacks

Practically Speaking

How will flex your faith?

Rabbi Sacks notes that people often remember God in times of distress but forget Him in times of plenty. When we have fine houses, jobs and savings, it’s easy to start believing we produced all our wealth and success on our own. The succah forces us to leave our solid homes and sit in a vulnerable hut, reminding us that everything we have is a gift.

Faith is like a muscle that needs stretching and strengthening to keep it in the best possible shape.

This week, try doing something slightly outside your comfort zone that requires trusting the process. Step into the unknown, just a little, and notice how it feels to rely on your faith.



Try it out

YOUNG STUDENTS:

Build a fort in your living room with just blankets, pillows, and chairs. Then sit in it, look around, and see how flimsy the walls are. If someone pushed a chair, the whole thing might fall down!

Think about how Bnai Yisrael lived in basic tents for forty years in the desert. They were unafraid, for they knew God was protecting them!

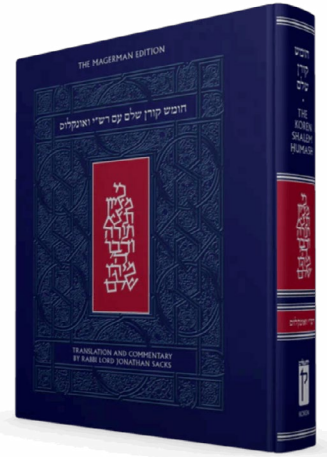
ADVANCING STUDENTS:

This week, look around your bedroom or your own home. Pick three things you use every day and take for granted, like your bed, the fridge, or the heating. Take a moment to genuinely thank God for each of them!



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.



From Blasphemy to Murder

LAYER 1: LOOK AT THE TORAH TEXT: VAYIKRA 24:16-17

“וַיִּקְרַב שָׁם-ה' מוֹת יוֹמֵת... כַּאֲזָרְחָ-בְּנִקְבוֹ-שָׁם, יוֹמֵת.”

LAYER 2: READ RABBI SACKS' TRANSLATION

“One who blasphemes the Lord's name shall be put to death.
One who takes the life of any human being shall be put to death.”

LAYER 3: THINK ABOUT WHAT IT MEANS

The laws and punishments for those who commit injury and murder are placed directly after the story of the blasphemer, a man who committed a sin against God. Why does the Torah suddenly shift to crimes against other people? What does this tell us about the connection between how we treat God and how we treat each other?

LAYER 4: LEARN FROM RABBI SACKS' COMMENTARY

“Something is being conveyed here beyond the detailed points of law. The implication seems to be that what begins as an offence in one area, a crossing of boundaries, never ends there. An offence against God eventually leads to assaults against humans. Spiritual sins lead to physical crimes. Sefer Vayikra has been about the sanctity of time, person, and place. The Torah now turns to sanctity of speech.

“Sacred and secular, spiritual and physical offences against God and crimes against human beings are indissolubly connected. Sacred order and social order go together. Lose one – either one – and you will eventually lose the other. A sense of the sacred is what lifts us above instinct and protects us from our dysfunctional drives. That is the message with which the book of Vayikra draws toward its close.”

LAYER 5: REFLECT AND RESPOND

Rabbi Sacks explains that disrespectful language, and speaking out against God, eventually leads to assaults against humans. Spiritual sins lead to physical crimes. In short, we cannot separate our religious lives from our social lives. Disrespecting boundaries in one area will inevitably cause a breakdown in the other. So by being aware of the sacred, and safeguarding our words, we can ultimately safeguard our actions too.

1. Do you think it is possible to be a good person without a sense of the “sacred”?
2. How does treating God's name with respect help us treat other people with respect?
3. What is one way you can bring a sense of the sacred into your everyday interactions with others?

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

Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

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**