



Covenant & Conversation



Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

BEHAR - BECHUKOTAI · בהר - בחוקתי

BASED ON THE TEACHINGS OF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS 7"87

COVENANT & CONVERSATION SUMMARY

The Chronological Imagination

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

One of Judaism’s most distinctive and least understood characteristics is the chronological imagination.

The ancient Greeks saw knowledge as a kind of seeing. Even today, we say, “I see” when we mean that we understand. Truth, for the Greeks, was about clear, consistent ideas. The Torah takes a different approach. It focuses less on seeing and more on listening. The key word is *shema* – “listen, hear, understand, respond.” Knowledge (*da’at*) is not detached observation but personal engagement. God is involved, not distant. Words do not just describe reality; they shape it. Words can bless or harm, create relationships, and change the world. **I call the Greek approach the logical imagination, and the Jewish approach the chronological imagination.**

Reality, the Torah suggests, is complex. Sometimes two opposing ideas can both be true – but not at the same time. What we cannot hold together at once, we can understand over time. That is the chronological imagination.

This idea is central to Judaism. There is more than one valid way of seeing the world. There is the perspective of God and the perspective of human beings, and they are very different. The Torah itself speaks in multiple voices – wisdom, prophetic, and priestly – each expressing part of the truth.

The Torah also shows events from different viewpoints. In one story, we see Sarah’s joy at having a child, and also Hagar’s pain when she is sent away. In another, we see both Yaakov receiving a blessing and Eisav’s heartbreak at losing it. These stories teach us that life is not simple. We must learn to see more than one side. But how do we live with these tensions? One answer is through time.

A famous example brought by Rav Soloveitchik is the two Creation stories in Bereishit. In the first telling, human beings

are powerful, made in God’s image, ruling the world. In the other, they are humble, formed from dust and told to serve and protect the earth. These seem to contradict each other. But Judaism resolves this through time.

“Six days you shall labour... but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God.”

For six days, we act as creators and builders. On the seventh, we step back and recognise God. Both are true, but they belong to different times.

This pattern runs throughout Jewish life. There is a rhythm between *chol* (the secular) and *kodesh* (the holy). We live in both worlds, but at different times. This allows us to honour different truths without confusion.

The same applies to the Jewish calendar. Some festivals recall Jewish history – Pesach, Shavuot, Succot. Others focus on universal themes – creation, judgment, and renewal. Judaism holds both the particular and the universal together through time.

One of the most beautiful consequences of this is how Judaism deals with ideal worlds. Instead of imagining a perfect society that never exists, it brings it into real life at certain times. On Shabbat, we live as if the world were already redeemed. In the Shmittah and Yovel years, debts are cancelled, slaves freed, and equality restored.

The chronological imagination allows us to live different truths in sequence. There is no other system quite like this, and it gives truth - not the truth we think or discover, but the truths we live and to which we owe loyalty - a three-dimensional character. **That is the power of dialogical and chronological thought, and it comes from the depth reality acquires when we add to the two-dimensional nature of humanity the third dimension that is God.**

Around the Shabbat Table



1. Why is dialectical thinking (holding two different truths in your head or heart at the same time) so difficult?
2. Which truths do you live, and owe loyalty to?
3. How does taking off one day each week change how you view success and worth?

A Takeaway Thought

The Torah resolves life's deepest contradictions through time. We cannot be both ambitious and humble at the same moment, but we can be each in its season.



Exploring the Parsha

WITH SARA LAMM

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

THIS WEEK'S TORAH PORTION



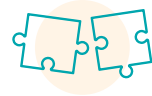
The Parsha in a Nutshell

The double parsha of **Behar-Bechukotai** brings Vayikra to a close. **Behar** begins on Mount Sinai, outlining the laws of the land. Just as we have a Shabbat every seven days, the land has a Shabbat every seven years, the Shmittah year, when the earth rests, and agricultural work stops.

After seven cycles of seven years comes the Yovel, the Jubilee year. In this fiftieth year, slaves go free, debts are cancelled, and land returns to its original owners. It is a total economic

reset. The Torah then outlines the rules for fair business, forbidding overcharging and taking advantage of others.

The second parsha, **Bechukotai**, lays out the blessings that will follow if the Jewish people keep the covenant, including peace, prosperity, and God's presence. It also delivers a stark warning about the tragedies that will unfold if they abandon the laws, culminating in exile. Yet it ends with a promise: even in the darkest exile, God will never break His covenant with His people.



Parsha Activity

The Rule Reversal

Divide into two teams. The goal of the game is to build the tallest tower out of plastic cups or blocks in two minutes. For the first minute, standard rules apply: teams compete, guard their pieces, and try to win. When the timer hits one minute, shout "Shmittah!" Then the rules reverse. For the second minute, teams must combine their pieces and work together to build one single, massive tower in the centre of the table.

A STORY FOR THE AGES



Shmittah Sacrifices

Doron Toweg was a successful farmer in central Israel for many years. He was the eggplant supplier (aka aubergine supplier) for Strauss, one of the largest food companies in Israel and he even featured in their TV adverts driving the tractors. Farming had been his family's profession for three generations. It was his identity.

In the summer of 2014, a young man stopped Doron near his fields. The Shmittah year was approaching, and Doron, like most Israeli farmers, had always relied on a legal loophole that allowed the land to keep producing anyway. The young man looked at him and said simply: "Will you give up so easily on a mitzva that we've waited two thousand years in exile to be able to perform?" Doron felt these words in his very soul. He thought to himself, "If

I won't do this mitzva, who will?" He called Strauss and told them he would not be supplying eggplants that year. They cut ties immediately.

Doron's contractors and creditors were furious. He had already planted 20,000 eggplant saplings when he decided to observe Shmittah in full. The plants were thriving, so turned off the water. He even injected poison into the irrigation lines, to ensure the eggplants would fail and not be sold. Doron lost a year of income. But his wife Ilana supported his decision wholeheartedly. She saw the spiritual and emotional growth that came from keeping this mitzva, and they have observed the Shmittah cycle ever since.

"It's about getting proportions and remembering what's important in life," Ilana said. "You stop the rat race and



suddenly you have time to focus on the spiritual and time to spend with your family."

Word spread across Israel. Some people came to the Toweg farm seeking a blessing from a family that had chosen God over profit. Two of the women who received a blessing from Ilana in 2014 actually gave birth to boys on the same day, nine months later. By the following Shmittah year (in 2021) 3,000 people visited the farm for a bracha.

God's blessing in Bechukotai is not abstract. Sometimes it shows up in a field in central Israel, where eggplants used to grow.



Cards & Conversation

“They are My servants whom I brought out of the land of Egypt...” - Vayikra 25:55

The Torah says the Israelites were freed from slavery in Egypt so they could serve God.

QUESTION: Is that true freedom? What does freedom look like?

Rabbi Sacks' commentary explains: “To be free is to refuse to be defined by circumstance. It is about action that is not reaction. Our ability to see and do the unexpected is the link between human creativity and freedom...”

The fly [trapped in a bottle] keeps banging its head against the glass in a vain attempt to get out. The more it tries, the more it fails, until it dies in exhaustion. The one thing it forgets to do is to look up.”

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

Fair Dealings
(Vayikra 25:14)

The Torah commands, “When you sell property to your neighbour, or buy from your neighbour, you shall not wrong one another.”

This is the foundation of Jewish economic ethics. It is strictly forbidden to overcharge, to hide a flaw in an item, or to use deceptive marketing.

In Jewish law, the burden of honesty falls entirely on the seller. There is no concept of “buyer beware.” Business is not a separate, secular zone where anything goes; it is a place where we are expected to treat other people with exact justice and deep integrity.

Practically Speaking

What is your business ethic?

This week, consider the way you handle your own transactions, whether you are selling one of your toys at a garage sale, or purchasing something at the local store. Are you being completely transparent? Would you point out a scratch on the item before taking the money?

The way that we handle our money is the truest test of our morals, and fair dealing is the foundation of community.

“Needless to say, in a faith as strongly moral as Judaism, alongside the respect for markets went a sharp insistence on the ethics of business.”

- Rabbi Sacks



Try it out

YOUNG STUDENTS:

From now on, when you swap or share something, make sure the other person is getting just as good a deal as you are. A fair trade means both people walk away smiling. When you are honest and fair, you build trust with your friends. True friendship is worth more than getting the best deal.

ADVANCING STUDENTS:

The way you handle your money reveals your true character.

So, apply the principle of fair dealing to your own life. If you are selling something, be very honest about its flaws. If you are buying something, do not push the seller to a price that hurts them. Choose honesty over profit.



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.



Fair Trades and Deals Made

LAYER 1: LOOK AT THE TORAH TEXT: VAYIKRA 25:14

"וְכִי-תִמְכְּרוּ מִמְּכָר לְעַמִּיתְךָ, אִו קָנָה מִיָּד עַמִּיתְךָ--אֶל-תֹּנוּ, אִישׁ אֶת-אָחִיו..."

LAYER 2: READ RABBI SACKS' TRANSLATION

"But when you sell land to your fellow or buy it from him, **brother must not cheat brother...**"

LAYER 3: THINK ABOUT WHAT IT MEANS

The Torah is deeply concerned with how we conduct business. It outlaws overcharging and deceptive practices, placing the responsibility for fairness entirely on the seller. Why does Judaism care so much about the details of the marketplace? What happens to a society when people stop trusting the people they buy from?

LAYER 4: LEARN FROM RABBI SACKS' COMMENTARY

"Ten times the laws in Parshat Behar use the word *ach*, 'brother'..."

"Your brother" in these verses is not meant literally. At times it means "your relative," but mostly it means "your fellow Jew." This is a distinctive way of thinking about society and our obligations to others. Jews are not just citizens of the same nation or adherents of the same faith. We are members of the same extended family. On the festivals we relive the same memories. We were forged in the same crucible of suffering. We are more than friends. We are *mishpacha*, family.

"In the long run they need one another. It is one of the tasks of religious teaching to show that the long run must always inform the short term, so that economic profit does not lead to moral loss."

LAYER 5: REFLECT AND RESPOND

Rabbi Sacks shares that a healthy economy requires more than just supply and demand. It requires ethics. Without honesty, fairness, and a commitment to mutual benefit, the market becomes a place of exploitation. Our business practices are a direct reflection of our values.

1. Why do you think it is so tempting to leave our morals behind when money is involved?
2. Have you ever felt cheated in a transaction? How did it affect your trust in others?
3. What is one practical way you can bring a mindset of "mutual gain" into your own life?

- 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