



Covenant & Conversation



Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

BAMIDBAR · במדבר

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

COVENANT & CONVERSATION SUMMARY

Love as Law, Law as Love

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

What connects the sedra and haftara of Bamidbar? The sedra begins with a census of the people; the haftara, from Hoshea, speaks of a future when “the number of the children of Israel will be like the sand on the seashore which cannot be measured or numbered.” **So there was a time when the Israelites could be counted, but the day will come when they will be uncountable. The haftara contrasts the future with the past.**

The second connection is deeper. Bamidbar means “in the wilderness,” a time of wandering and conflict. But Hoshea, foresees a return to the wilderness as a place of renewal: “I will lead her into the wilderness and speak tenderly to her . . . There she will respond as in the days of her youth.”

The wilderness becomes not just a place of struggle, but of love – a second honeymoon between God and the people. This is especially powerful because Bamidbar is always read just before Shavuot, the time of the giving of the Torah. The choice of this haftara reveals something profound about how Judaism understands the Torah: as a living connection between a people and God.

Hoshea’s story is one of the most unusual among the prophets. He marries Gomer and loves her deeply, yet she is unfaithful, leaves him, and eventually falls into slavery. Still, Hoshea cannot let go of his love. He realises that his story mirrors that one between God and Israel. God rescued the people from Egypt, led them through the desert, yet they were unfaithful, turning to other gods. By rights, God could abandon them. Yet His love is inextinguishable. He will bring them back and renew the relationship.

The Sages add a striking insight. When God tells Hoshea that Israel has sinned, Hoshea suggests replacing them. God responds by telling Hoshea to marry an unfaithful woman and then send her away. When Hoshea finds he cannot, he

understands that just as he will not abandon his wife, God will not abandon Israel. There is a powerful truth in this story: a leader of the Jewish people must love the Jewish people. Although the prophets criticised, it was always out of love, and with the faith that they could change.

Hoshea then describes a future transformation in the relationship between God and Israel: “On that day – declares the Lord – you will call Me ‘my Husband’; you will no longer call Me ‘my Master.’” The Hebrew words here are *Ish* and *Baal*. *Baal* suggests power, ownership, and dominance. It reflects a world where relationships are based on control. *Ish*, however, evokes the first human relationship in Genesis – a bond of mutual respect and love: “This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh.” Hoshea is describing a shift from a relationship of power to one of love, trust, and faithfulness.

This idea shapes how we understand the Torah. It is more than a set of instructions. Of all the metaphors used to describe God, the most intimate is that of husband and bride. From this perspective, the Torah is a marriage contract – a covenant of love. Marriages come about through words: promises made and honoured. It is law suffused with love, and love translated into law. That is what happened at Sinai.

Hoshea was the supreme poet of marriage. By reading this haftara on the Shabbat before Shavuot, we affirm that in giving the Torah, **God was not asserting power or dominance. He was declaring His love.** That is why it is no accident that the final words of the haftara – among the most beautiful in the entire religious literature of humankind – are the words Jewish men recite every weekday morning as they wind the strap of the hand-tefillin like a wedding ring around their finger, renewing daily the marriage covenant of Sinai:

I will betroth you to Me for ever... I will betroth you to Me in faithfulness, and you will know God. (Hoshea 2:20)

Around the Shabbat Table



1. Is our brit with God similar to a business contract? Why do you think Hoshea compares our relationship with God to a husband-wife relationship?
2. How could wrapping tefillin like a wedding ring change the way you view prayer?
3. What is the difference between following the laws out of fear versus out of love?

A Takeaway Thought

The Torah is more than laws. It is a brit of love: a relationship of faithfulness between God and Israel, sustained not by power, but by commitment, trust, and enduring devotion.



Exploring the Parsha

WITH SARA LAMM

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

THIS WEEK'S TORAH PORTION



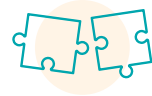
The Parsha in a Nutshell

We now begin the fourth book of the Torah. Sefer Bamidbar begins with a detailed census, working out how many men of Bnai Yisrael are now in the desert. God commands Moshe to count only the men of military age, tribe by tribe, exactly one month after the Mishkan is built. The total number comes to over six hundred thousand people.

The Torah then details exactly how the tribes are to camp in the wilderness. Their tents will form a massive square, three tribes on each side, with the Mishkan and the Leviim

in the exact centre. Every tribe has its specific place and its own unique flag.

The Leviim are counted separately because they are dedicated exclusively to the service of the Mishkan, thus taking the place of the firstborn who were originally meant for this role. The parsha ends by assigning highly specific duties to the different families of Leviim, specifying how they must carefully dismantle, carry, and reassemble the sacred vessels whenever the camp moves through the desert.



Parsha Activity

Silent Square

Everyone stands. Try to form a perfect square as a group, with your backs towards the centre, BUT you cannot speak or use hand gestures. You just move until you feel the shape is right. Once you think you have it, clap. Now try it again, but this time one person stands in the middle and directs everyone else into place. Discuss how much easier it is to find your place when there is a clear centre and guide, similar to the way Bnai Yisrael oriented themselves around the Mishkan.

A STORY FOR THE AGES



Natan and Avital

In the early 1990s, Natan Sharansky, the famous Soviet refusenik, finally made it to Israel after spending nine agonising years in the Gulag, the prison in Russia. During his imprisonment, he had been subjected to freezing punishment cells, near-starvation diets, and endless interrogations. Through it all, he held onto a tiny, hand-written book of Tehillim that his wife, Avital, had sent to him. It was his only tangible connection to his Jewish identity, and to her.

Avital spent those same nine years on a tireless campaign for her husband. She travelled the world, met with leaders and dignitaries, and worked relentlessly for Natan's release.

Their marriage had begun just

one day before he was arrested. This meant that for nearly a decade, their entire marriage had existed only in letters they rarely received, in protests, and in a shared, stubborn faith.

When Natan was finally released on the Glienicke Bridge in Berlin, he walked across the bridge to freedom in a coat that did not fit him at all. He didn't care. He flew to Israel almost immediately, and the moment he stepped off the plane, he and Avital embraced, finally reunited. The entire country watched and cheered.

Years later, someone asked him how their marriage had survived nine years of total separation, especially when they had only been together for a single day.



Sharansky smiled. He explained that a relationship built only on physical proximity can be broken by physical distance. But a relationship built on a shared covenant, on a mutual promise to something higher than themselves, cannot be broken by anything. Natan and Avital were not just two individuals, who could be parted by circumstance, for they were bound together by a shared destiny.



Cards & Conversation

“...in the Sinai Desert...” - Bamidbar 1:1

After receiving the Torah and building the Mishkan, the Israelites begin their journey through the wilderness.

QUESTION: Why don't they go straight from Egypt into the Land of Israel? What do they need to learn in the wilderness before they're ready to enter the Land?

Rabbi Sacks' commentary explains: “The way to the Holy Land lies through the wilderness. The desert was the place where the people could be alone with God. There, undistracted by the sight of natural or man-made beauty, they could hear God's voice directly. What they heard was a counterintuitive challenge: to take the pain of suffering in Egypt forward with them and redirect it into creating a society that would be the opposite of Egypt, not an empire built on power but a society of individuals of equal dignity under the sovereignty of God.”

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

Taking a Census
(Bamidbar 1:2)

“A Jewish leader has to respect individuals. They must “lift their heads.” - Rabbi Sacks

The parsha opens with God commanding Moshe to count the people. But the Hebrew phrase used, *se'u et rosh*, literally means “lift the head” of the people. In Judaism, counting is never just about finding out a total number.

When you lift someone's head, you are making them count as an individual. You are telling them that they matter, that they are not just a face in the crowd, but a vital, irreplaceable part of the community. Every single person brings something unique to the camp. This act ensures no one is forgotten.

Practically Speaking

How to lift heads

To think practically about this mitzva, we can look at how it feels to ‘be counted’, and what it means to be the one showing that every person counts.

This week, make an effort to “lift the head” of someone who might feel invisible in your daily life. It could be the person checking out your groceries, a quiet student in your class, or someone sitting alone at shul. Look them directly in the eye, use their name if you know it, and let them know they are truly seen and valued.

True leadership is not about managing a large group; it is about ensuring that every single individual knows they truly count and have a unique purpose to fulfil.



Try it out

YOUNG STUDENTS:

Next time you are in a large group, like at a school assembly or a busy park, look around. It is easy to just see a massive crowd of people. Try to pick out three distinct individuals and imagine what their specific job or unique talent might be. God sees every single person individually, and you can too.

ADVANCING STUDENTS:

Think about a time you felt like just a number, lost in a massive system or a large, crowd. Now think about a time someone made you feel truly seen, and valued. So try to be the person who creates that second feeling for someone else.



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 Campsite

LAYER 1: LOOK AT THE TORAH TEXT: BAMIDBAR 2:2

"אִישׁ עַל־דָּגְלוֹ בְּאֶתֶרֶת לְבַיִת אֲבֹתָם יִחַנוּ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מִנֶּגֶד סָבִיב לְאֹהֶל־מוֹעֵד יִחַנוּ"

LAYER 2: READ RABBI SACKS' TRANSLATION

"The Israelites shall camp, each by his banner, the ensign of his ancestral house, positioned around the Tent of Meeting at a distance."

LAYER 3: THINK ABOUT WHAT IT MEANS

The Torah describes a massive, perfectly ordered camp. Every tribe has its own flag and specific location, but they are all positioned at equal distances from the Mishkan in the centre. Consider what it means to be different from your neighbour, yet perfectly equal in your access to the holy.

LAYER 4: LEARN FROM RABBI SACKS' COMMENTARY

"Immediately after the census, we read of how the twelve tribes are to encamp, each equidistant from the Sanctuary. Each tribe is different, but (with the exception of the Levites) all are equal. They eat the same food; they drink the same water. None yet has lands of their own, for the desert has no owners. There is no economic or territorial conflict between them.

"They have not yet begun building a society with all the inequalities to which society gives rise. For the moment, they are together, their tents forming a perfect square with the Sanctuary at its centre."

LAYER 5: REFLECT AND RESPOND

The desert was a unique time in Jewish history. Before the tribes entered the land and built a complex economy with rich and poor, they lived in perfect equality, united around a single spiritual centre. It was a brief, beautiful shining moment of pure community.

1. Why do you think it is harder to maintain equality within a society once the people are settled and gaining wealth?
2. How can we create spaces in our modern lives where everyone feels equally close to the centre?
3. What is the difference between being identical and being equal?

- 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