



Covenant & Conversation



Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

NASO · נאש

BASED ON THE TEACHINGS OF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS 7"52

COVENANT & CONVERSATION SUMMARY

What Counts?

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

Naso continues discussing the census that began in Bamidbar. This is the action that led to the book being called “Numbers” in English. But two things are puzzling. First, Jewish tradition seems to hold two opposite attitudes toward counting the people. Rashi notes that this was not the first census. The Israelites had already been counted before leaving Egypt, and again when each man gave a half-shekel toward the building of the Mishkan. **Why the repeated calculations?** Rashi answers: “Because they are dear to Him, God counts them often.”

God counted them when they left Egypt, after the Golden Calf, and now as His Presence was about to rest among them. For Rashi, counting was an act of Divine love.

Yet elsewhere the Torah sees censuses as dangerous:

“When you take the census of the Israelites... each must give ransom for his life to the Lord, so that no plague strikes them when you count them.”

Later, when King David counted the people, a plague struck Israel and thousands died. How can counting be both an act of love and a source of danger?

The second puzzle is the unusual phrase the Torah uses. Instead of one of the usual Hebrew words meaning ‘to count’ it uses the phrase: *naso et rosh* – “lift the head.” Why so?

To understand this, we have to enter the world of the ancient Near East. In early civilisations like Egypt and Babel, rulers counted people in order to measure military and economic strength. Human beings mattered as masses: armies, labour forces, taxpayers. The greater the numbers, the greater the power.

Judaism is a sustained protest against this view. The Hebrew Bible introduced a revolutionary idea: every human being, rich or poor, powerful or powerless, is in the image of God and therefore has non-negotiable value. Human worth

cannot be reduced to numbers.

That is why taking a census carries spiritual risk. Counting people can turn them into statistics rather than individuals. Israel was never meant to define itself by military strength or empire. It was a small nation whose power came not from numbers but from its relationship with God.

This explains the difference between David’s census and the censuses commanded by God. David counted the people as other kings did, measuring national strength. Soon after, Israel’s political greatness collapsed. The Hebrew Bible sees the census as the beginning of that decline.

A Divine census is utterly different. It has nothing to do with strength-in-numbers. It has to do with conveying to every member of the nation that he or she counts; that every person, family, household is held precious by God. That is why the Torah does not say “count the people” but “lift their heads.” Those conducting the census were commanded to make every individual stand tall in the knowledge that they were loved, cherished, and special to God.

There is a wonderful verse in Tehillim 147: “*He counts the number of the stars and calls them each by name.*” A name signals uniqueness. Only what we value, do we name.

God gives even the stars their names, all the more so human beings – on whom He has set His image. God counts to signal to us that each of us counts for what we are as individuals, not *en masse*. He “lifts our head” in the most profound way known to humankind, by assuring each of us of His special, enduring, unquantifiable love.

That is the nature of the census in the book of Numbers. As the Israelites prepared to become a society with the Mishkan at its centre, they had to remember that they were creating a revolutionary social order. “**Not by might, nor by strength, but by My spirit, says the Lord.**” (Zechariah 2:20)

Around the Shabbat Table



1. Think of a time when you felt seen and valued as an individual. What made that moment special?
2. In what ways can social media make people feel like numbers rather than individuals?
3. What is one thing you could do this week to make someone feel that they truly count?

A Takeaway Thought

It's not just a numbers game. Unlike ancient empires that counted to measure military strength, God counts us to lift our heads, for every individual is cherished and irreplaceable.



Exploring the Parsha

WITH SARA LAMM

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

THIS WEEK'S TORAH PORTION



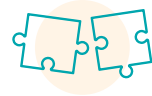
The Parsha in a Nutshell

Parshat Naso is the longest parsha in the Torah. It continues the detailed census of the Leviim, assigning specific duties to the families of Gershon and Merari for transporting the Mishkan.

The Torah then discusses the laws of the *sotah*, a woman suspected of being unfaithful to her husband, and the *nazir*, a person who takes a special vow of holiness, abstaining from wine, haircuts, and contact with the dead. Following this, God teaches Moshe the beautiful Priestly Blessing, instructing Aharon and his

descendants on exactly how to bless the Jewish people.

Finally, the parsha describes the extravagant dedication of the Mishkan. Over twelve consecutive days, the leader of each tribe brings an identical set of magnificent gifts and sacrifices. Even though every single leader brings the exact same offering, the Torah repeats the detailed list twelve separate times, showing that each tribe's contribution is equally valued and cherished by God.



Parsha Activity

Say My Name

Form a circle. One person starts by throwing a soft ball to someone else, but they must say that person's name out loud before they throw it. Once everyone has caught the ball once, try to repeat the exact same pattern as fast as possible. Discuss how using someone's name changes the way you interact with them, making them feel seen as an individual rather than just part of the group.

A STORY FOR THE AGES



My Wife's Foot

Rabbi Aryeh Levin was known as the Tzaddik of Jerusalem. He was a respected leader who always acted with "humility, kindness, and respect for all." He remains one of the most beloved figures in the history of modern Israel.

Rabbi Levin was not famous for great scholarship or political power. He was famous for the way he saw people. It was said that it was impossible to say 'Shalom' to him before he said it to you. No matter who crossed his path, whether a great scholar or a simple street cleaner, Rabbi Levin always greeted them first, with a full smile and complete attention, as if that person were the most important individual in the world at that moment.

One day, his wife, Tzipporah Hannah,

was suffering from a pain in her foot. Rabbi Levin took her to see a doctor in Jerusalem. When the doctor looked up and asked what had brought them in, Rabbi Levin answered without hesitation: "Doctor, my wife's foot is causing us such pain." That word - us - was most unusual.

The doctor was so struck by it that he repeated the story for the rest of his life. In one word, Rabbi Levin had expressed something profound: that he did not see his wife as a separate person whose problem was hers alone to carry. Her pain was his pain. Her reality was his reality. He had so completely lifted her head, so fully seen her as part of himself, that there was no distance between them at all.



This is what it means to truly count another person. Rather than observing them from a distance, you can feel their world as your own world too.

We are taught that all Jews are responsible for one another. This is sometimes explained by thinking of Am Yisrael as a single human body. Just as you might suffer pain when your foot gets hurt, and continue to suffer until it heals, so too if one Jew is in pain, all of Am Yisrael feels it, for we are all one. Not a scattered set of individuals, or mere numbers in a census. A people.



Cards & Conversation

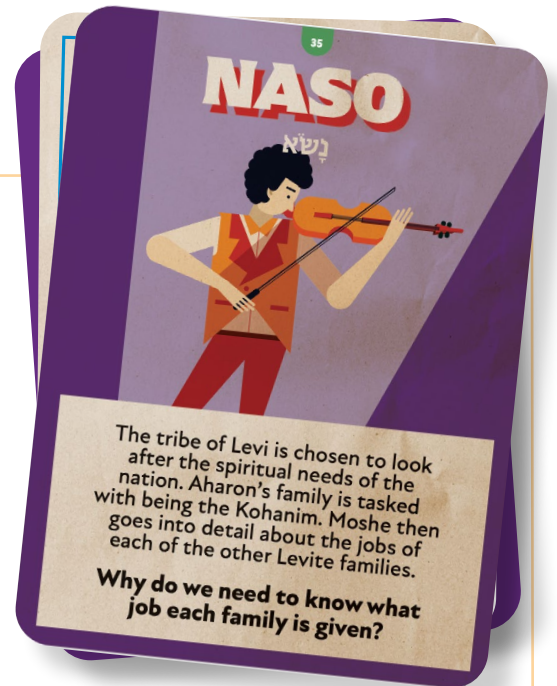
“All the Levites...” - Bamidbar 4:46

The tribe of Levi is chosen to look after the spiritual needs of the nation. One family - Aharon's - is chosen to become the Kohanim. Moshe then goes into detail about the jobs of each of the other Levite families.

QUESTION: Why do we need to know what job each family is given?

Rabbi Sacks' commentary explains: “There is no way of eliminating entirely the danger of jealousy and envy, but Moshe gives us some pointers. Honour everyone equally. Pay special attention to potential disaffected groups. Make each feel valued. Give everyone a moment in the limelight. Find ways in which those with a particular passion can express it, and ensure that everyone has a chance to contribute. Though there is no failsafe way to avoid the politics of envy, leaders can and must strive to minimise it.”

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

Kohanim Blessings
(Bamidbar 6:24-26)

Birkat Kohanim involves the priests spreading their hands and blessing the Jewish people with three verses: that God should protect you, shine His face upon you, and grant you peace.

This blessing has been recited in this exact form for over three thousand years, making Birkat Kohanim one of the oldest continuous prayers in the world.

What makes it so remarkable is its concluding line: “They shall place My name upon the children of Israel, and I will bless them.” The Kohanim do not generate the blessing themselves. They are simply the channel. The power to bless belongs entirely to God.

This is a radical idea: true greatness is not about

accumulating personal power or status, but about making yourself humble enough that something far greater can work through you.

Practically Speaking

How can we bless?

The Kohanim did not bless the people with their own power. They were simply the mechanism through which God's blessing flowed. And even if you're not a Kohen, you can do the same thing!

The Kohen's blessing teaches that we can be channels of bracha for those around us. Think of one person going through a difficult time. Rather than offering advice or trying to fix their problem, simply be present with them. A kind word or a phone call can itself be an act of blessing, a moment where God's warmth flows through you to someone who needs it.



Try it out

YOUNG STUDENTS:

Think of one person who could use a little extra kindness this week. It could be a parent, a friend, a sibling having a hard day, or someone sitting alone. A smile or a kind word is your way of being a channel. You do not need to be a Kohen to bring God's blessing into someone else's day.

ADVANCING STUDENTS:

Take some time to think of a leader, teacher, or parent you genuinely admire. In what specific ways do they embody this kind of transparent, selfless greatness, where brachot seem to flow from them to raise others up? And what can you learn from them about how to lead and give to others?



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.



Blessings

LAYER 1: FIND THE TORAH TEXT: BAMIDBAR 6:27

"וְשָׂמוּ אֶת-שְׁמִי, עַל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל; וְאָנֹכִי, אֲבָרְכֶם."

LAYER 2: READ RABBI SACKS' TRANSLATION

"They shall set My name upon the Israelites, and I will bless them."

LAYER 3: THINK ABOUT WHAT IT MEANS

The Kohanim stand before the congregation to offer the Priestly Blessing, but this final verse clarifies exactly how the blessing works. The power to bless does not actually belong to the Kohanim themselves. They are simply placing God's name upon the people, and it is God who provides the blessing.

LAYER 4: LEARN FROM RABBI SACKS' COMMENTARY

"The most profound element of the blessing lies in the concluding sentence: "They shall set My name upon the Israelites, and I will bless them." In the ancient world, magi, oracles, and religious virtuosi were held to have the power of blessing. It was thought that blessing or curse lay within the power of the holy person.

"Holiness is not, though it is often confused with, self-importance. This is the meaning of "They shall set My name upon the Israelites, and I will bless them." It is not the priests who bless the people, but God. In themselves, they have no power. They are intermediaries, channels through which God's blessing flows. True holiness is transparency to the Divine."

LAYER 5: REFLECT AND RESPOND

The Priestly Blessing teaches us a profound lesson about what it means to be truly holy. It is not about asserting our own power or importance, but about making ourselves transparent so that God's love and blessing can flow through us into the world.

1. Why do you think people often confuse holiness with self-importance?
2. How can we make ourselves more "transparent to the Divine" in our daily interactions with others?
3. What is the difference between doing a good deed to *look* good versus doing it as a channel for God's blessing?

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



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