



Covenant & Conversation



Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

SHELACH LECHA · שלח לך

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

COVENANT & CONVERSATION SUMMARY

Beyond the Fringe

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

Our Torah portion ends with one of the great commands of Judaism – tzitzit, the fringes worn on the corners of our garments as a reminder of our identity as Jews and our obligation to keep the Torah’s commands: “*Seeing it, you shall remember all the Lord’s commands and keep them.*” So central is this command that it became the third paragraph of the Shema, the supreme declaration of Jewish faith.

Rabbi Nachum Rabinovitch (Rabbi Sacks’ own Rav) pointed out some strange features of this mitzva. On the one hand, the Sages said that tzitzit is equal to all the other mitzvot together. On the other hand, it is not absolutely obligatory. It is possible to avoid the command altogether by never wearing a four-cornered garment. Rambam says that although one is not obligated to acquire such a garment, “*it is not fitting for a pious individual to exempt himself from this mitzva.*”

Why is such an important command conditional? Surely it should be obligatory, like tefillin. Furthermore, there is another unusual feature. Over time, Jews kept the mitzva in two different ways: first, in the form of a tallit worn over our clothes while praying; second, in the form of an undergarment (tzitzit) worn beneath our outer clothing throughout the day.

Rabbi Rabinovitch explained that there are two kinds of clothing. There are clothes we wear to project an image. A king, judge, or soldier wears clothing that proclaims a role or rank. Such clothes can disguise the individual beneath. They are like a mask, hiding the person we really are.

Then there are other clothes we wear when we are alone: the artist in his studio, the writer at his desk, the gardener tending the roses. These clothes are not worn to create an impression. They express who we really are.

The two kinds of tzitzit represent these different forms of dress. When we pray, we often feel unworthy of the high demands God has made of us. We wrap ourselves in the tallit, the great symbol of the Jewish people at prayer. It is as if we were saying to God: I may only be a beggar, but I am wearing the royal robe of Your people, Israel. The tallit represents the person we would like to be.

The deeper symbolism of tzitzit, however, is that it represents the mitzvot as a whole – and these become part of who we are only when we accept them freely. That is why the mitzva is not categorical. We do not have to keep it. We can *choose* to wear four-cornered garments. *Then we choose* to wear tzitzit. We willingly obligate ourselves. **It symbolises the free acceptance of all the duties of Jewish life.**

This is the inward, intensely personal aspect of faith. It is not for public show. It is who we are when we are alone, not trying to impress anyone. This is the tzitzit worn beneath our clothing. What matters is not the mask but the reality, not how we wish to appear, but what we really are.

In this striking way tzitzit represent the dual nature of Judaism. On the one hand, Judaism is public and communal. We keep Shabbat and the festivals together as a people. That is the public face of Judaism – the tallit we wear.

But there is also our inner life as people of faith. We speak to God in the privacy of the soul, and He listens. That internal conversation – the opening of our heart to Him who brought us into existence in love – is not for public show. Like the fringed undergarment, it stays hidden. But it is no less real an aspect of Jewish spirituality. **The two types of fringed garment represent the two dimensions of the life of faith – the outer persona and the inner person, the image we present to the world and the face we show only to God.**

Around the Shabbat Table



1. Do you act differently when you know people are watching you?
2. Do you feel different when wearing a uniform (or dressed for shul, school, or work) rather than wearing your favourite clothes at home?
3. Why is it sometimes harder to do the right thing if no-one will ever know about it?

A Takeaway Thought

The tallit represents the person we would like to be; the tzitzit represents who we really are when, alone before God, we freely choose faith and commitment.



Exploring the Parsha

WITH SARA LAMM

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

THIS WEEK'S TORAH PORTION



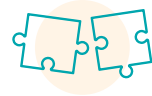
The Parsha in a Nutshell

Parshat Shelach Lecha tells the story of one of the most painful moments in the wilderness. Moshe sends twelve men into Canaan to scout the land. They return forty days later carrying an enormous cluster of grapes - proof that the land is everything God promised.

But ten spies are terrified by how difficult they believe it will be to settle in the land. They tell the people the cities are impenetrable and the inhabitants are giants. Only Yehoshua and Calev try to convince the nation

to trust in God and go forward. Sadly, the people lose faith. They weep, they panic, and they talk of going back to Egypt. God's response is devastating: this entire generation will wander the desert for forty years and never see Israel. A group of Israelites, realising too late what they have done, tries to enter the land anyway, and are badly defeated.

The parsha ends on a more practical note, with laws about offerings and the commandment to wear tzitzit on the corners of our garments.



Parsha Activity

Dress the Spy

One person leaves the room. Then the group selects one player to be the 'Spy' and agree on making one small, secret change to their appearance: an untucked shirt/a rolled-up sleeve/shoes on the wrong feet. When the absent player returns, everyone tries to look 'innocent' while the returned player has three guesses to spot which person is the Spy, and what has changed. Then discuss: do we notice what people look like more easily than seeing what is really going on inside them? Why so?

A STORY FOR THE AGES



Unseen on the Pitch

By the time she was ten years old, Hannah was the top athlete in her school. Everyone knew it. She was naturally fast, strong, and quick-thinking, and she also trained hard to build her co-ordination, balance, and agility. She loved being part of a team, and when she wasn't captain herself, she was always first to be picked. She also loved to win.

On the day of the big inter-school football match, there were hundreds of parents lining the pitch on both sides, a trophy gleaming on the table by the gate, and Hannah's whole class cheering from the stands. Hannah scored the winning goal in the final minute, and the crowd went wild. Her teammates ran towards her to celebrate, and lifting her off the ground and onto their shoulders.

Yet something had happened twenty minutes earlier. Something that almost nobody knew about. A player from the other team fell down in pain, clutching a twisted ankle. Hannah had been the closest player on the pitch. Without thinking, she turned, jogged over, and helped the girl to her feet, quietly asking if she was alright. The referee had not seen it. Her coach had been shouting instructions at the other end. Her parents had been looking the other way. After the match, the injured girl's father found Hannah in the crowd. He did not know her name, only her face and the number on her football jersey. "I'm Lea's dad," he said, smiling. "I saw what you did out there." Hannah shrugged and grinned back awkwardly. The man looked closely at Hannah. "You know,



in over thirty years of watching football, I have never seen that before. Thank you for helping someone who needed you, even though she was on the other team."

Hannah walked home that evening with the trophy under her arm and mud still caked onto her boots. But the thing she kept thinking about all the way home was not the winning goal and the roar of the crowd. It was the look on Lea's face. She had not stopped to help because anyone was watching. She had just done it because it had felt like the right thing to do. And now she knew she would do it again. No matter what.



Cards & Conversation

“They gave the Israelites an adverse report of the land that they had scouted.”

- Bamidbar 13:33

The spies return, afraid of what they’ve seen in the Land.

QUESTIONS: Are they lying? Have you ever let your own fears or self-doubt colour how you see the world?

Rabbi Sacks' commentary explains: “[The spies] assumed that others saw them as they saw themselves, projecting their inadequacy onto the external world, with the result that they misinterpreted what they saw. Instead of ordinary people, they saw giants. Instead of towns, they saw impregnable fortresses, and they were afraid. The spies’ confirmation bias meant that they paid selective attention to phenomena that gave them reason to be afraid. Their perception was not in the world but in the mind.”

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

Wearing Tzitzit

The mitzva of tzitzit involves placing fringes on the corners of any four-cornered garment. The Torah tells us to look at the tzitzit and remember all of God's commandments. Interestingly, wearing tzitzit is not an obligation; you only need to wear them if you choose to wear a four-cornered garment!

By choosing to wear tzitzit, we actively obligate ourselves. It becomes a deeply personal, free-will acceptance of the Torah's laws.

“Tzitzit, with their thread of blue, remind us of heaven, and that is what we most need if we are consistently to act in accordance with the better angels of our nature.” - Rabbi Sacks

Practically Speaking

What does this teach us?

We increasingly live in an age where our personal life is public. Social media adds the pressure of curating an image of who we want the world to think we are. But the most important aspects of our identity are not the images we project, but the quiet commitments we hold in our innermost souls.

The tzitzit represents this hidden, intimate relationship with God. It is a reminder that you are not defined by your public persona, but by the integrity of your private choices.



Try it out

YOUNG STUDENTS:

Have you ever cleaned your room just because your parents told you to? That is obedience. But have you ever cleaned it as a surprise for them, without being asked? That is love. The Torah gives us many rules to follow, but God does not just want us to be obedient. He wants us to choose to do the right thing from our own hearts, especially when no one is watching us.

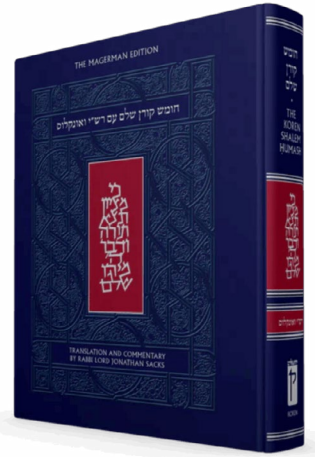
ADVANCING STUDENTS:

It's human instinct to focus on building our public reputation, but our private character is far more important. This week, choose one small, positive action to do entirely in secret. You could clean up a mess someone else left, give tzedakah anonymously, or say a quiet prayer for a friend without them knowing. Do not tell anyone you did it.



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 Hoshea to Yehoshua

LAYER 1: FIND THE TORAH TEXT: BAMIDBAR 13:16

"וַיִּקְרָא מֹשֶׁה לְהוֹשֵׁעַ בֶּן־נּוּן יְהוֹשֻׁעַ."

LAYER 2: READ RABBI SACKS' TRANSLATION

"And Moshe named Hoshea bin Nun, 'Yehoshua.'"

LAYER 3: THINK ABOUT WHAT IT MEANS

Moshe changes Hoshea's name to Yehoshua. Whenever the Torah notes a name-change, it is never just a technicality; it always signals something important. In Yehoshua's case then, what is the significance of the change? Why did he need a new name and a new sense of identity? And can we detect a shift in his destiny or character during/after this specific mission? Who else stands up like Yehoshua at this mission, and what attributes do they share?

LAYER 4: LEARN FROM RABBI SACKS' COMMENTARY

"A change of name in the Torah always implies a change of character or calling... When our name changes, says Rambam, it is as if we or someone else were saying, 'You are not the same person as you were before.' Could this hint at what gift, what strength of character, Yehoshua and Calev possess that the other ten spies do not? Calev comes from the tribe of Yehuda, and Yehuda, as we learn in the book of Bereishit, was the first baal teshuvah, the first penitent. He matured... Yehuda is the clearest example in Bereishit of someone who takes adversity as a learning experience rather than as failure..."

"People with a growth mindset do not fear failure. They relish challenges. They know that if they fail, they will try again until they succeed. I do not think it is coincidence that the two spies with a growth mindset are also the two who are unafraid of the risks and trials of conquering the land."

LAYER 5: REFLECT AND RESPOND

A growth mindset allows us to make mistakes without fear of failure, knowing we continue to try, and improve. Yehoshua and Calev were the only two spies who did not give in to fear. Their strength came from their ability to grow and change - Yehoshua through his new name and calling, and Calev through the legacy of his ancestor Yehuda, the first person to admit he was wrong and learn from his mistakes.

1. When was the last time you admitted you were wrong and learned from it, like Yehuda did?
2. Why is the ability to change and repent (teshuvah) such an important quality for a leader to have?
3. If you could adjust your name to represent the person you are trying to become, what would it be? Why?

- 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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