



Covenant & Conversation



Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

CHUKAT · חֻקַּת

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

COVENANT & CONVERSATION SUMMARY

Why Was Moses Not Destined to Enter the Land

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

It is one of the most perplexing passages, even disturbing, in the Torah. Moshe has been told that he will never cross the Jordan river and enter the Promised Land. No one made a greater impact on Jewish history than Moshe: the man who confronted Pharaoh, led the people out of Egypt, brought them the word of God, and prayed for them again and again. Yet he was not destined to complete the journey with the people he had devoted his life to. Why was this his fate?

The episode takes place near the end of the forty years in the wilderness. The people arrive at Kadesh and find there is no water. They complain, as they had many times before. God tells Moshe: *“Take the staff... and in front of them all, speak to the rock and it will yield water.”*

Instead, Moshe says, *“Listen to me, you rebels,”* and strikes the rock twice. Water flows abundantly. Yet God tells Moshe and Aharon: *“Because you did not believe in Me to sanctify Me in the eyes of the children of Israel, therefore you shall not lead this assembly into the land.”*

What exactly was Moshe’s sin? Many explanations have been offered. Rashi says he struck the rock instead of speaking to it. Rambam says his failing was anger when he called the people “you rebels.” Ramban says he implied that he and Aharon were producing the water rather than God. Yet none of these explanations fully resolve the mystery. Why should this one incident prevent Moshe from entering the land, after everything he had done for the people?

Perhaps the answer lies elsewhere. One of the most striking features of Judaism is that it is not centred on a single leader. Every age produces its own leaders, because different generations face different challenges.

Moshe took a nation of slaves and led them to freedom. But by the time of this incident at the rock, he was facing a new generation. They had been born in

freedom in the wilderness.

There is a critical difference between slaves and free human beings. Slaves respond to orders. Free people do not. They must be educated, informed, offered suggestions. Slaves understand force. Free people respond to persuasion.

That sheds light on the key difference between God’s commands. Forty years earlier God had told Moshe to strike the rock. Now He told him to speak to the rock. The symbolism had changed because the people had changed.

Moshe, remembering the earlier episode, acted as he had before. He struck the rock. What he failed to understand was that a new generation required a different kind of leadership.

This was not a moral failing but the reality of leadership. The leader who brings slaves out of Egypt is not necessarily the one who brings free people into their land. **Great change requires more than one generation of leaders.**

The fact that Moshe was not destined to enter the Promised Land was not a punishment but the very condition of his - and our - mortality. For each of us, there is a Jordan we will not cross. **What we begin, others will complete - if we have taught them how. The message of the rock is not that leadership does not matter: it is that leadership must be of its time. A teacher may live in the world of ancient texts and distant hopes, but a leader must hear the music of the age and address the needs and possibilities of now.**

The great leaders are those who, knowledgeable of a people’s past and dedicated to its ideal future, are able to bring their contemporaries with them on the long journey from exile to redemption, neither longing for an age that was, nor rushing precipitously into an age that cannot yet be. And, as Moshe understood more deeply than any other human being, the great leaders are also teachers, empowering those who come after them to continue what they have begun.

Around the Shabbat Table



1. Moshe made a human error in judgment. Does that make him less impressive to you?
2. Which other leaders from Tanach had moments that made them seem more human? What do we learn from their leadership?
3. Can you be a truly great leader without also being humble?

A Takeaway Thought

Moshe’s mistake does not lessen his greatness. Every leader belongs to a specific moment in time, and every leader should serve from his mortal side first.



Exploring the Parsha

WITH SARA LAMM

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

THIS WEEK'S TORAH PORTION



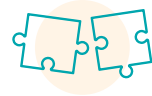
The Parsha in a Nutshell

Chukat opens with the laws of the Red Heifer (Parah Adumah), the ritual for purifying someone who has come into contact with death. It is one of the Torah's most mysterious commandments, with no straightforward rational explanation, and is considered a *chok*, a law we observe even without fully understanding it.

The parsha then moves forward nearly forty years. Miriam dies, and the miraculous water supply that had accompanied the Israelites dries up. The people complain, and God tells

Moshe to speak to a rock so it will bring forth water. Moshe strikes it instead. Water flows, but God tells Moshe and Aharon they will not enter the land. Aharon dies on Mount Hor; his son Elazar takes his place as Kohen Gadol. The people complain again, and God sends venomous snakes as a consequence. Moshe makes a copper snake, and those who look at it are healed.

The parsha ends with the Israelites defeating the Amorite kings Sichon and Og, taking their territories east of the Jordan.



Parsha Activity

Different Rules

Assign each person a secret rule for the next five minutes. One person may only speak in questions. One may only whisper. One must rhyme every sentence. One may only use three words at a time. Then give everyone a simple task to agree on together, such as planning tomorrow's game. Afterwards, discuss how hard it was to get your point across when your style did not match the situation, and how Moshe had to learn to do exactly that.

A STORY FOR THE AGES



Seen and Unseen

Mr Aviv had been teaching history at the same school for twenty-two years. He was not the kind of teacher who got standing ovations or had films made about him. However, he was steady and de and cheered them on along the way.

One winter, the school's elderly cleaner, Mr Petrov, broke his wrist and could not manage the heavy rubbish bins on his own. Nobody asked Mr Aviv to help. He just started doing it. Every morning before his first lesson, he would wheel the bins out to the kerb alongside Mr Petrov. They did not talk much. Mr Petrov did not know a lot of English, and Mr Aviv did not speak much Russian. But they worked together quietly for three months, while the broken wrist healed.

Years later, one of Mr Aviv's former students became a journalist and wrote

a piece about the teachers who had shaped her life. She did not mention his lessons on the Second World War or his clear explanations of the Cold War. She wrote about the morning she had arrived at school very early and seen him pushing out the bins.

The article explained that she had been going through a difficult time, feeling invisible and unimportant. Watching her teacher take on the duties of Mr Petrov, quietly helping the man - and the school - run smoothly, for no reason other than it needed doing, fundamentally changed the way she thought about what it meant to be a person of standing. And while she had been feeling like nobody noticed or appreciated her, she was only now realising how many people around her were quiet, unsung heroes, making small



but important efforts to help each other. Suddenly she stopped caring if others valued her, and started thinking how she could support others instead.

Mr Aviv's daughter read the article to her father. He listened without saying anything. He only vaguely remembered those mornings. He had just done what seemed needed at the time. Mr Petrov's grandchildren read the article too. They knew the story well, from their grandfather. He'd told his family, and retold the story every winter as the trees grew bare. They still talked of it, even now. For the good we do lives on, and even if *we* don't remember it, somebody treasures the memory.



Cards & Conversation

“...Moshe said to them, “Listen now, rebels! Shall we produce water for you from this rock?”

- Bamidbar 20:10

Instead of speaking to a rock to miraculously bring forth water, as God had commanded, Moshe hits it.

QUESTION: Have you ever followed your own instincts instead of doing what you were told? What happened?

Rabbi Sacks' commentary explains: “Every life-form has drives, inherent instincts of survival. Humans alone are capable of what philosophers call second-order evaluations, deciding which drives to pursue and which not. Other animals act. We alone bear responsibility for our acts because we could have chosen to act otherwise. Freedom is God's greatest gift to humankind but it is also the most fateful and terrifying... This is the central drama of Tanach and of Judaism as a whole. Will we use our freedom to respect order or misuse it to create chaos? Will we honour or dishonour the image of God that lives within the human heart and mind?”

Cards & Conversation: Chumash Edition - Each card holds a question based on the Torah portion. Flip it over to discover a Rabbi Sacks idea that shines a new light on the parsha. Find out more by visiting rabbisacks.org/cards-and-conversation



Parsha in Practice

Value of the Week

Watching Your Words

When God told Moshe to speak to the rock, He was teaching an important lesson about education and leadership. Slaves respond to force, but free people respond to words. The idea here is the obligation to use persuasion rather than power. When we want to change someone's behaviour, our first instinct is often to demand or force compliance, because it feels faster and easier. The Torah challenges us to do the much harder work of explaining, teaching, and speaking, always respecting the freedom and dignity of the person standing before us.

“Never use force, physical or psychological. The only legitimate weapons are logic, argument, tradition and persuasion.” - Rabbi Sacks

Practically Speaking

How will you communicate?

Have you ever noticed that when someone yells at you to do something, you want to do it less? But when someone explains why it is important, it is much easier to listen. The next time you are frustrated that someone is not listening to you, stop before you raise your voice. Ask yourself if you are trying to force them or bring them closer. Take a breath, lower your volume, and try explaining your reasons instead of just giving a direct order.

Words build deep understanding and respect; force only builds lasting resentment and distance between people.



Try it out

YOUNG STUDENTS:

Try a listening challenge. When someone is talking to you, a parent, a teacher, or a friend, put down whatever you are doing and really listen. Don't just wait for your turn to speak. Actually listen. Each evening, try to remember one thing someone said to you that you might have missed if you had not been paying attention. You might be surprised by what you hear!

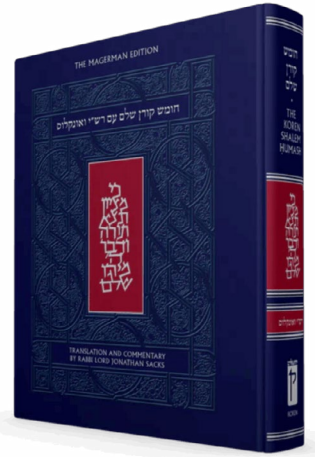
ADVANCING STUDENTS:

From Moshe we learned that leaders must adapt to the people they are leading, rather than forcing them to adapt to you. Think about a time when you had to change the way you interact with someone because they had grown up and changed. How hard is it to adjust your own style to fit someone else's new reality?



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 Water that Purifies

LAYER 1: FIND THE TORAH TEXT: BAMIDBAR 19:17

"בַּמַּיִם הַיִּים..."

LAYER 2: READ RABBI SACKS' TRANSLATION

"For this impure person they shall take some of the ashes of the burnt purification offering, and place living water along with it into a vessel."

LAYER 3: THINK ABOUT WHAT IT MEANS

This verse comes in the middle of the laws of the Red Heifer, the Torah's most mysterious ritual. But how are the law and the narrative around it are connected? (Think about how - after Miriam's death - the water disappears. The well that had sustained the people was linked to her life.) What does it mean that water is described as "living"? And why does the Torah place this law right before the deaths of Miriam, Aharon, and the decree against Moshe?

LAYER 4: LEARN FROM RABBI SACKS' COMMENTARY

"The phrase "living water" is an explicit metaphor. Water is the source of all life – plant, animal, and human. In the desert, or more generally in the Middle East, you feel this with a peculiar vividness. Hence it became the symbol of God-who-is-life. We die, but life goes on – that is the symbolic statement of the Red Heifer rite. So long as there is a covenant between the dead, the living, and those not yet born, mortality is redeemed from tragedy. We will live on in our children or in those whose lives we touch...The law of the Red Heifer is thus intimately related to the narrative that follows. Before we are exposed to the death of Miriam and Aharon and the decree of death against Moshe, the Torah provides us with metaphysical comfort. They died, but what they lived for did not die. The water ceased, but after an interval, it returned. We are destined to mourn the death of those close to us, but eventually we reconnect with (the water of) life. Law informs the narrative, and narrative explains the law."

LAYER 5: REFLECT AND RESPOND

The Red Heifer purifies those who have encountered death, and "living water" is the agent of that purification. Rabbi Sacks sees this as the Torah's quiet message about mortality: death is real, but it does not have the final word. What we build, teach, and pass on continues to flow.

1. Why do you think the Torah places the laws of the Red Heifer right before the deaths of Miriam and Aharon?
2. What does it mean to you that "what they lived for did not die"?
3. Who in your life has left behind something that continues to flow, even after they are gone?

- 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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