



# Covenant & Conversation



Jonathan Sacks  
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

MATOT-MASEI · מטות-מסעי

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

COVENANT & CONVERSATION SUMMARY

## The Danger of Suspicion

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

It is a fascinating story, and from it comes one of the great principles of Judaism. Two tribes, Reuben and Gad, see that the land east of the Jordan is ideal for their livestock. They ask Moshe for permission to settle there instead of crossing the Jordan.

Moshe is initially furious. Their request, he says, could demoralise the rest of the people: "Shall your fellow countrymen go to war while you sit here?" Had they learned nothing from the sin of the spies, who caused an entire generation to wander for forty years?

The Reubenites and Gadites explain that they do not want to avoid responsibility. They promise to fight alongside the other tribes until everyone has received their inheritance. Moshe accepts, but only after they make a public pledge. He tells them that if they keep their word, they will be "innocent before God and Israel."

This phrase became a major ethical principle in Judaism. It is not enough to do what is right in the eyes of God. We must also act in ways that are clearly seen to be right by others. We must be above suspicion.

This idea shaped Jewish law and life. The Mishnah describes how money was taken from the Temple treasury. The person collecting it could not wear clothing with pockets, shoes, tefillin, or anything in which coins could be hidden. He was searched before and after. Why? Not because he was suspected of wrongdoing, but because there must not even be suspicion of wrongdoing.

The same principle applied to families who served in the Temple. The family that baked the showbread never had fine bread in their homes, so no one could accuse them of benefiting from Temple food. The family that prepared the

incense made sure their brides never wore perfume, so no one could suspect misuse of sacred ingredients.

From this came two halachic principles. The first is *chashad* - suspicion. Even permitted actions may be avoided if they could make others suspect wrongdoing. The second is *marit ha-ayin* - appearances. Sometimes an action is forbidden because others may misunderstand it and think something prohibited is allowed.

At first this seems strange. Surely what matters is what God thinks, not what people think. Yet Judaism insists that they both matter.

Why? Because we are role models. People learn not only from books but from people. **To be a Jew is to become a living Sefer Torah. Our behaviour teaches others how a Jew should live.**

That is why these rules apply to every Jew, not just rabbis or scholars. Each of us is called to live with integrity and responsibility.

Suspicion can be deeply destructive. Judaism confronts this from both sides. We must judge others generously and give them the benefit of the doubt. At the same time, we must conduct ourselves in ways that avoid misunderstanding.

**Being innocent before God is one thing; being innocent before one's fellow human beings is another, and far more difficult. Yet that is the challenge - not because we seek approval, but because we are called to be role-models, living embodiments of Torah, and a unifying, not divisive, presence in Jewish life.** Even if others still judge us unfairly, we must do our best by being charitable in our judgement of others and scrupulous in the way we conduct ourselves.

### Around the Shabbat Table



1. Have you ever misjudged someone? How did it feel to find out later you were wrong?
2. Can you think of a character in the Torah who was mistakenly suspected of some wrongdoing? What happened?
3. What is the difference between being a good person and being seen to be a good person?

### A Takeaway Thought

True Jewish integrity means being innocent before both God and people. Judging others generously while living in ways that build trust and avoid suspicion.



# Exploring the Parsha

WITH SARA LAMM

BASED ON THE TEACHINGS OF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS 7" ז ת

THIS WEEK'S TORAH PORTION



## The Parsha in a Nutshell

Parshat Matot opens with the laws of vows. A person who makes a vow to God must keep it, and the Torah sets out when and how vows can be annulled. Moshe then leads Bnei Yisrael in a war against Midian, and the parsha deals carefully with the laws of purification and the division of the spoils. Two of the tribes, Reuven and Gad, approach Moshe with a request: they have large flocks and the land east of the Jordan is ideal for grazing. They ask to settle there rather than cross the river. Moshe is initially

furious, fearing they are abandoning their brothers. But they clarify that they will fight alongside everyone else and return home only once the land is conquered. Moshe accepts their pledge.

Parshat Masei then lists all forty-two journeys of Bnei Yisrael through the wilderness, and concludes with the boundaries of the Promised Land, the cities of refuge, and the laws of the Levitical cities.



## Parsha Activity

### Innocent Until Proven Guilty

One person thinks of a strange or suspicious-sounding action, for example, "I hid something in my room" or "I avoided the soup." Everyone has to come up with the most innocent explanation they can. The person then reveals the real reason. Award a point to whoever came closest. The catch: no one is allowed to assume the worst. Take turns and see who is the most creative at giving the benefit of the doubt.

A STORY FOR THE AGES



## Worker Benefits

Three years. That is how long the worker from the Galilee had been away from his family, hired to work for a landowner in the south of Israel. As Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the year, approached, he went to his employer and asked for his wages. He wanted to go home. He wanted to be with them for the Yamim Noraim, and to bring them the fruits of his labour.

The employer shook his head. He said, "Things have changed. I have no money. I cannot pay you."

"Give me produce instead, then," said the worker.

"I have none."

"Land?"

"I cannot."

"Animals?"

"I cannot."

Desperately, the worker tried again.

"How about some cushions and blankets?"

"I have nothing to give you."

Dejected, the worker slung his tools over his shoulder and walked home alone, in anguish, with nothing.

He walked three days on foot, with no wages to show for his labour, no explanation, and every reason in the world to be furious. But he was not furious. Because at each refusal, he had quietly invented a reason. Perhaps the money was tied up in a business deal. Perhaps the animals were on loan to someone else. Perhaps the produce had not yet been tithed and could not be given away. Perhaps he had made a vow. There was always an innocent explanation, if you were willing to look for one.

After the Succot, the employer came to find him. He arrived with three donkeys loaded with food, and wine. He paid every penny he owed. Then he asked the worker: when I told you I



had no money, what did you think? The worker told him his reasonings, one by one, and how he had given him the benefit of the doubt. The employer's eyes filled. "I swear by the Temple service," he said, "that is exactly what happened. I had vowed away all my possessions in anger at my son, and the Sages have only just dissolved the vow. He looked at the worker and said, "Just as you judged me favourably, so may God judge you favourably."

*The Gemara (Tractate Shabbat 127b) records this story not as a parable, but as something that actually happened. One who judges another favourably will themselves be judged favourably.*



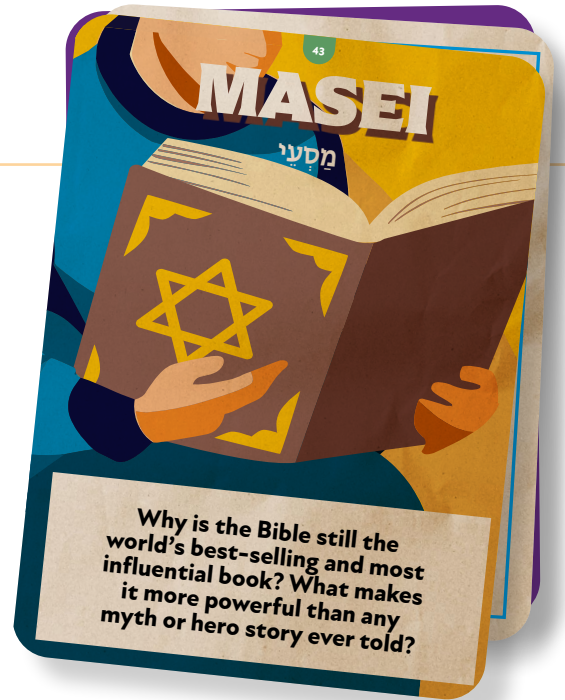
# Cards & Conversation

“These are their journeys...” - Bamidbar 33:2

**QUESTIONS:** Why is the Bible still the world’s best-selling and most influential book? What makes it more powerful than any myth or hero story ever told?

*Rabbi Sacks’ commentary explains:* “The Torah is not a myth but anti-myth. It focuses relentlessly on the drama of courage versus fear and hope versus despair. It emphasises the call, not to some larger-than-life hero but to all-of-us-together, given strength by our ties to our people’s past and the bonds between us in the present. The Torah is not some fabled escape from reality but reality itself, seen as a journey we must all undertake, each with our own strengths and contributions to our people and to humanity.”

*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](http://rabbisacks.org/cards-and-conversation)*



## Parsha in Practice

### Mitzva of the Week Laws of Inheritance

The tribes of Reuven and Gad made a request that looked, on the surface, like they were abandoning their brothers. Moshe was furious. But they explained themselves, and the truth was entirely different.

The Torah derives from this episode the principle that we must be innocent not only before God, but before other people.

Parshat Matot opens with the laws of vows. The Torah commands: when a person makes a vow to God, they must not break it. A vow is a promise made in the most serious way possible, calling on God as witness.

The Rambam rules that it is better not to make a vow at all than to make one and fail to keep it. But if you do make one, you

must honour it. The underlying principle is simple: our words carry weight. What we say, we must mean. What we promise, we must do.

### Practically Speaking What have you inherited?

This week, notice one moment where you are tempted to assume the worst about someone. Ask yourself: what is the most generous explanation for what they did? The habit of looking is itself a form of kindness.

And think about your own words. Is there a promise you made, even a small one, that you have not yet kept? Integrity starts with what comes out of our mouths.



## Try it out

### YOUNG STUDENTS:

Imagine you see a friend take something from a shop without paying. Before you decide what happened, think of three possible explanations. Maybe they already paid at another counter. Maybe they forgot and will go back. Maybe it was a mistake. The Torah teaches us to judge people fairly, which means giving them the benefit of the doubt before we make up our minds. Can you think of a time someone gave you the benefit of the doubt?

### ADVANCING STUDENTS:

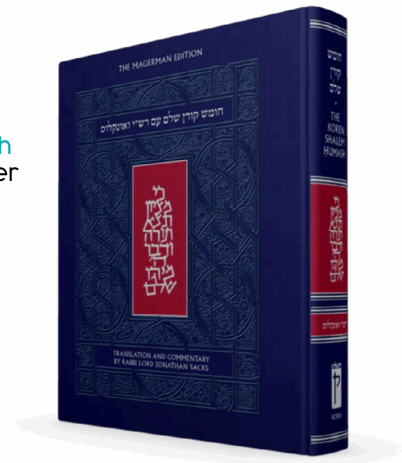
What does it mean to live in a way that is above suspicion, even when you know you have done nothing wrong?

How would it feel to trust others and see the best in them, even when others might look down upon their behaviour?



## 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.



### Travels

#### LAYER 1: FIND THE TORAH TEXT: BAMIDBAR 33:48

“וַיֵּצְאוּ... וַיַּחֲנֹךְ”

#### LAYER 2: READ RABBI SACKS' TRANSLATION

“They set out... and they camped.”

#### LAYER 3: THINK ABOUT WHAT IT MEANS

Every detail in the Torah is mentioned for a reason. What is the reason here? Why are so many journeys listed in the Torah, from starting-point to destination?

#### LAYER 4: LEARN FROM RABBI SACKS' COMMENTARY

“The dialectic between setting out and encamping, walking and standing still, is part of the rhythm of Jewish life. Rabbi Avraham HaKohen Kook spoke of the two symbols in Bilam's blessing, “How good are your tents, Yaakov, your homes, O Israel” (Bamidbar 24:5). Tents are for people on a journey. Homes are for people who have found permanence.

“In life, there are journeys and encampments. Without the encampments, we suffer burnout. Without the journey, we do not grow...”

“For us as Jews... ethics takes priority over aesthetics. Yes, there are moments when we should, indeed must, pause to see the beauty of the world, but then, like the Israelites in Parshat Masei, we must move on, for – to ourselves and to God – we have promises to keep.”

#### LAYER 5: REFLECT AND RESPOND

Every journey has moments when we want to stop and rest, and moments when we know we must keep moving. The Torah records every single encampment of Bnei Yisrael in the wilderness, not just the destinations.

1. Where are you on your own journey right now? Are you setting out, nearly at your destination, or encamped?
  2. What promises do you have to keep?
  3. What would it mean to move forward, even when you are tired, and what would it mean to stop?
- Find out more about the [Koren Sacks Humash](#) at [rabbisacks.org/books/the-koren-sacks-humash](https://rabbisacks.org/books/the-koren-sacks-humash) [↗](#)

*Jonathan Sacks*  
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

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