



Covenant & Conversation



Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

DEVARIM • דברים

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

Tzedek: Justice and Compassion

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

As Moshe begins his great closing addresses to the Children of Israel, the last speeches of his life, he turns to a subject that will dominate Sefer Devarim, namely justice. He says to them:

"Hear the disputes among your people and judge fairly. . . Do not show partiality in judgment. . . Do not be intimidated by anyone, for judgment belongs to God."

The key word here is *tzedek*, and it is usually understood to mean *justice*. It appears throughout Devarim, most famously in the command: "Pursue *tzedek*, only *tzedek*, so that you may live and possess the land."

Yet *tzedek* is difficult to translate because it means more than legal justice. It also carries the ideas of righteousness, fairness, integrity, compassion and doing what is right.

The Torah often uses other words, such as *mishpat*, for legal judgment. *Tzedek* goes further. It also shares its root with the word *tzedakah*.

Here is an example to illustrate the point. If a poor person gives up their only cloak as security for a loan, the lender has the legal right to keep it. But the Torah commands that it be returned each evening so the borrower can sleep warmly. In Devarim, this is an act of *tzedakah*. In the parallel passage in Shemot, it is explained by God's compassion: "*I am gracious.*"

The Torah is teaching that justice alone is not enough. There are times when we may have a legal right, yet exercising that right would not be the right thing to do. *Tzedek* means justice tempered by compassion.

This helps us understand one of history's great misunderstandings. In *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare contrasts Christian mercy with Jewish justice, as if they

were opposites. But in Judaism they are inseparable. The very word *tzedek* embraces both justice and compassion. Ironically, even the imagery in Portia's famous speech about mercy falling "*like the gentle rain from heaven*" echoes Moshe's words in Devarim: "*May my teaching pour down like rain. . . For all His ways are justice.*"

Why is justice so central to Judaism? Because it is impartial. The Torah makes sure that the law is fair to all, to the rich and poor, the powerful and the powerless, the native-born and stranger. Equality before the law reflects equality before God. As Moshe tells the judges, "Judgment belongs to God." Justice must never be compromised by fear, bribery, or favouritism.

Judaism is a religion of love: "Love the Lord your God," "Love your neighbour as yourself," and "Love the stranger." But love alone is not enough. If we were guided only by love, who would not bend the rules, if they could, to favour their loved ones. So justice is essential to Judaism. Although justice alone is also insufficient. Without compassion, even the law can create hardship and inequality.

The Torah therefore asks us to hold these values together. We are called to build a society where people are treated fairly, where the vulnerable are protected, and where justice is always guided by humanity.

Judaism is a religion of both love and justice. It is a religion of compassion, for without compassion, the law itself can generate inequity. **Justice plus compassion equals *tzedek*, the first precondition of a decent society.**

Around the Shabbat Table



1. The word Tzedek has many translations. How do you interpret this word?
2. When Moses said, to fear no-one, for judgment belongs to God, what did he mean?
3. If you were a judge, what would be the hardest part of your job?

A Takeaway Thought

Justice without compassion can become harsh; compassion without justice can become unfair. Judaism calls us to hold both together..



Exploring the Parsha

WITH SARA LAMM

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



The Parsha in a Nutshell

Parshat Devarim opens the fifth and final book of the Torah. This entire volume is the series of farewell speeches given by Moshe to the new generation of Bnei Yisrael, just weeks before he is due to die and they are due to cross the Jordan River. It's his final message to the people.

Moshe begins by recounting the history of their journey from Mount Sinai. He reminds them of how he appointed judges to help him lead, and of the strict instructions he gave those judges: to be impartial, to listen to the

great and the small alike, and to fear no one, for judgment belongs to God. He then retells the tragic story of the spies, whose failure of courage caused the previous generation to wander in the wilderness for forty years.

Finally, Moshe describes the recent battles against King Sichon and King Og, and the allocation of the conquered land east of the Jordan to the tribes of Reuven and Gad.



Parsha Activity

The Judge's Dilemma

Select one person to play the Judge. Two other people are given a scenario in which one broke a rule, but for a very good reason (e.g., someone ate the last biscuit, but only because they were giving it to a crying child). The Judge must come up with a solution that upholds the rule (**justice**) but also shows understanding (**compassion**). Take turns being the Judge and see who comes up with the most creative *tzedek*.



The Line

It was December 2012, and Spanish long-distance runner Ivan Fernandez Anaya was trailing just behind Abel Mutai, a Kenyan Olympic bronze medallist and one of the best distance runners in the world, in a cross-country race in Navarra, Spain.

Ivan had been chasing Abel the entire race, but never quite fast enough to overtake. With the finish line in sight, something strange happened. Abel slowed down and stopped.

All the racecourse signs were in Spanish, a language he did not read. But it seemed to Abel that he must have already crossed the finish line. He was wrong. There were still several metres to go. Ivan was close behind Abel, and saw exactly what had happened. He could have sprinted past. He could have won the race. Nobody would have blamed him; in sport, mistakes have

consequences.

But Ivan did not sprint past. He shouted at Abel to keep running. But the Kenyan athlete did not understand Spanish and had no idea what it meant. So Ivan ran alongside him, gesturing with his hands, pointing towards the real finish line, guiding him forward as he kept just one pace behind. Abel crossed the line first. Ivan came second. Afterwards, a reporter asked Ivan why he had not just shot ahead and claimed the first place.

For Ivan, the answer was clear. "My dream is that someday we can have a kind of community life where we push and help each other to win."

The journalist insisted, "But why did you let the Kenyan win?" Ivan replied, "I didn't let him win, he was going to win. The race was his." The journalist insisted again, "But *you* could have won!" Ivan looked at him and replied,



"But what would be the merit of my victory? What would be the honour in that medal?"

When Ivan went to speak to his coach, he was met with disapproval. "You wasted a great chance," the coach said. "The goal of an athlete is to win!"

Ivan disagreed. And so, it seems, did the rest of the world. The story spread to every country on earth. Because Ivan understood something his coach - and the reporter - did not: that doing the right thing and winning are not always the same thing. And when they are not, the right thing comes first. Taking advantage of Abel's confusion? That was a line that he would not cross. In short, Ivan understood *tzedek*.



Cards & Conversation

“... You rebelled... You grumbled in your tents...”

- Devarim 1:26-27

Moshe begins his final speech by reminding the people of their past mistakes. **QUESTION:** Does criticism hold you back or help you grow?

Rabbi Sacks' commentary on Devarim 1:1 explains: “We are a self-critical people. The Tanach is the most self-critical of all national literatures. We know our failings, and there is something admirable about this honesty. But it must never leave us bereft of hope. Jewish leadership, as the Sages understood it, is about giving expression to love, respect, and even awe for the Jewish people, who – though it has come through an unparalleled history of suffering – still survives, still flourishes, and still bears witness to the living God. We are not short of critics, internal and external. What we need by way of balance is the voice of those who... see our faults but see our virtues also.”

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

Fair Judgment

Parshat Devarim contains a striking command about the justice system: “The judge must not fear a violent man in judgment” (Devarim 1:17). Justice must be completely impartial. A judge cannot favour the rich over the poor or bend the law out of fear of someone powerful. Because judgment belongs to God, it can never be compromised by fear or favouritism. This is not just a legal principle; it is the foundation of a society built in the image of God.

Practically Speaking

How do you judge?

This idea can be harder to put into practice than you might think. Whether out of a need for safety, to feel superior to others, or general distrust of the unknown, humans often look for the issues and find reasons to be critical of those around them.

This law comes to teach us to view others favourably, fairly, and without compromise or favouritism. So when you find yourself being full of criticisms, or enforcing a rule as a parent, a sibling, or a friend, pause before you react. Uphold the truth, but ask: how can I do this with compassion?

“We are not gods, but we are summoned by God – to do His work of love and justice and compassion and peace.” - Rabbi Sacks



Try it out

YOUNG STUDENTS:

Picture a game with a strict rule: if you drop the ball, you are out. Now imagine your friend drops the ball because they tripped over a skipping rope as someone else strolled by. The rule says they are out, but is that fair? We need rules, but we also need to look at the whole situation. How would you show *tzedek* to your friend?

ADVANCING STUDENTS:

In Hebrew, justice and mercy are not opposites; they are bound together in the single word *tzedek*. The very source Shakespeare used in his play ‘The Merchant of Venice’ to contrast the Christian understanding of ‘mercy’ as opposed to ‘justice’ was Jewish all along. Why is it so difficult to hold justice and compassion together?



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.

Remembering the Giants

LAYER 1: FIND THE TORAH TEXT: DEVARIM 2:10

"עַם גָּדוֹל וְרַב יָרֵם, כְּעֲנָקִים."

LAYER 2: READ RABBI SACKS' TRANSLATION

"As tall as the Anakites."

LAYER 3: THINK ABOUT WHAT IT MEANS

Moshe is retelling the journey through the wilderness, and he pauses his retelling to mention the Anakites and Og, terrifying giants who once dominated the land. But these fearsome peoples are now gone, forgotten by history. Meanwhile, Moshe's story is retold every year at the Shabbat table, and is told as vividly as ever. Why do you think one legendary story survives and the other disappears?

LAYER 4: LEARN FROM RABBI SACKS' COMMENTARY

"The Anakites and Og, so vivid in the legends of the time, are no longer a helpful reference point to us. Moshe's story however, repeated year after year, is as alive to us now as it ever was. The passing references to bygone peoples emphasize the profound difference between history and memory. History is his story – an event that happened sometime else to someone else. Memory is my story – something that happened to me and is part of who I am. History is information. Memory, by contrast, is part of identity. I can study the history of other peoples, cultures, and civilizations. They deepen my knowledge and broaden my horizons. But they do not make a claim on me. They are the past as past. Memory is the past as present, as it lives on in me. Without memory there can be no identity."

LAYER 5: REFLECT AND RESPOND

Jewish memory is not nostalgia. It is the act of making the past present, of saying: this happened to me, not just to someone else long ago. That is why we retell the Exodus story every Pesach, why we fast on Tisha B'Av, and why Moshe's words in Devarim still speak to us directly.

1. What is the difference between knowing Jewish history and feeling it as your own story?
2. Is there a moment from the Jewish past that feels personal to you? Why?
3. What memory of your own do you want to pass on to the next generation?

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



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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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