



Covenant & Conversation



Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

VA'ETCHANAN · ואתחנן

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

The First Commandment

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

One of the most profound disagreements in Judaism is between Rambam and Yehuda Halevi on the meaning of the first of the Ten Commandments.

For Rambam (1135–1204), the first command is to believe in God, Creator of Heaven and Earth. God is the First Being who brought everything into existence, and acknowledging this truth is itself a mitzvah: “I am the Lord your God.”

Judah Halevi (c.1080–1145), author of *The Kuzari*, disagreed. He believed the God of the prophets is not the God of the philosophers. The philosophers found God in metaphysics; the prophets found God in history.

This is how Halevi’s rabbi character states his faith: “I believe in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, who led the Children of Israel out of Egypt with signs and miracles...”

He points out that God’s opening words at Sinai were not, “I am the Lord your God, Creator of Heaven and Earth,” but, “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.”

Ramban also disagreed with Rambam. Drawing on the Mechilta, he argued that the opening verse is not a command at all, but an introduction to the commandments. Before a king issues laws, the people must first accept his authority. Likewise, God first reminds the Israelites that He rescued and liberated them. Only then does He give them His commands.

Remarkably, modern archaeology supports this reading. Ancient Near Eastern treaties began with a preamble identifying the ruler, followed by a review of what he had done for his people, and only then came the terms of the covenant. The opening of the Ten

Commandments follows exactly this pattern: “I am the Lord your God” is the preamble; “who brought you out of Egypt” is the historical review; the commandments follow afterwards. Ramban and the Midrash are therefore correct in seeing the verse as an introduction rather than a command.

What is at stake in this disagreement? **At the heart of Judaism is a twofold understanding of God.** God is Creator of the universe and maker of humanity in His image. This is the universal aspect of God, accessible to everyone through reason, science, or a sense of awe and wonder. **The Torah calls this aspect of God Elokim.**

But Tanach also speaks of God as He acts in the history of one people. He rescues the Israelites from slavery, makes a covenant with them at Sinai, and guides them through history. **This is the God we refer to as Hashem.**

Rambam, the philosopher, emphasised the universal, metaphysical aspect of Judaism and the eternal, unchanging existence of God. Judah Halevi and Ramban - one a poet, the other a mystic - were more sensitive to the particularistic and prophetic dimension of Judaism: the role of God in the historical drama of the covenant. Both are true and valid, but in this case, Halevi and Ramban are closer to the meaning of the biblical text.

Judaism needs both voices: the philosopher who teaches us to seek God in creation, and the prophet who teaches us to find Him in history. But when the Torah introduces the Ten Commandments, it begins with a hint to the story of our redemption before the command of law, a reminder of the journey from liberation to the constitution of liberty.

Around the Shabbat Table



1. How does studying a piece of history that feels personal to you impact how you absorb the information?
2. If you could travel back to witness any moment in Jewish history, which one would you choose?
3. What is the difference between knowing facts and possessing wisdom?

A Takeaway Thought

There are two ways of knowing, and we need both: we need wisdom to understand the world and Torah to know who we are.



Exploring the Parsha

WITH SARA LAMM

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

THIS WEEK'S TORAH PORTION



The Parsha in a Nutshell

Va'etchanan begins with Moshe recounting how he pleaded with God to let him enter the land - a request that God gently but firmly refused. Moshe then urges the people to keep the laws of the Torah, warning them never to forget the awe-inspiring revelation they witnessed at Har Sinai. He reminds them that keeping the Torah will demonstrate their "wisdom and understanding" to the other nations of the world. He sets aside three cities of refuge east of the Jordan River to protect those who kill

by accident.

Then, Moshe repeats the Ten Commandments, reminding the new generation of the eternal covenant their parents made with God.

Finally, the parsha introduces the first paragraph of the Shema, commanding us to love God with all our heart, soul, and might, and to teach these words constantly to our children, ensuring the memory of the covenant lives on for all future generations to come.



Parsha Activity

Fact or Memory?

One person shares a statement and the rest of the table must define it as a 'Fact' (something true for everyone, like "water boils at 100 degrees") or a 'Memory' (part of a personal story, like "my grandfather baked bread on Fridays"). Take turns sharing both facts and memories around the table. Discuss: which one tells you more about who a person really is, and why?

A STORY FOR THE AGES



The Forest, the Fire, and the Tefillah

Israel ben Eliezer, the 18th century mystic, and founder of Chassidic Judaism, is most commonly known as The Baal Shem Tov (literally, 'Master of the Good Name') because he was a charismatic folk healer and spiritual leader who used the mystical names of God, practical Kabbalah, and tefillah to perform miracles and aid the common people.

Whenever the Baal Shem Tov was facing a great danger threatening his people, he would head deep into the forest and visit a particular clearing. Then he would light a mystical fire and recite a special prayer, and somehow the danger would always pass.

One generation later, his disciple, the Maggid of Mezeritch, faced similar worry about the people he was leading. He went to the same place in the forest,

hoping to follow the actions of the Baal Shem Tov. He thought to himself, "I no longer know how to light the fire, but I still know the prayer." He recited the words with all his heart, and the danger passed.

A generation after that, the Maggid's disciple, Rabbi Moshe Leib of Sasov, faced a new danger to the Jewish community. He went to the forest too.

Rabbi Moshe Leib said, "I do not know how to light the fire, and I don't even remember the prayer. But I know the place." He stood in the place, and the danger passed.

By the fourth generation, danger came again. The Rabbi of Rizhyn, now leader of the people, could not go to the forest. He did not know the fire, the prayer, or the place. He sat in his chair and said, "I cannot light the fire. I do not



know the prayer. I cannot even find the place in the forest. All I can do is tell the story." And just by telling the story of the Baal Shem Tov, and all the other generations... that was enough.

Elie Wiesel, who survived the Holocaust and won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1986, used this same story about the four generations of leaders to open his Nobel Prize speech. He understood what the Torah understood: that the story itself is the memory, and the memory is enough. You do not need to have been there. You do not need to know the fire, the prayer, or even the place. You only need to remember that there was a story, and that it belongs to you.



Cards & Conversation

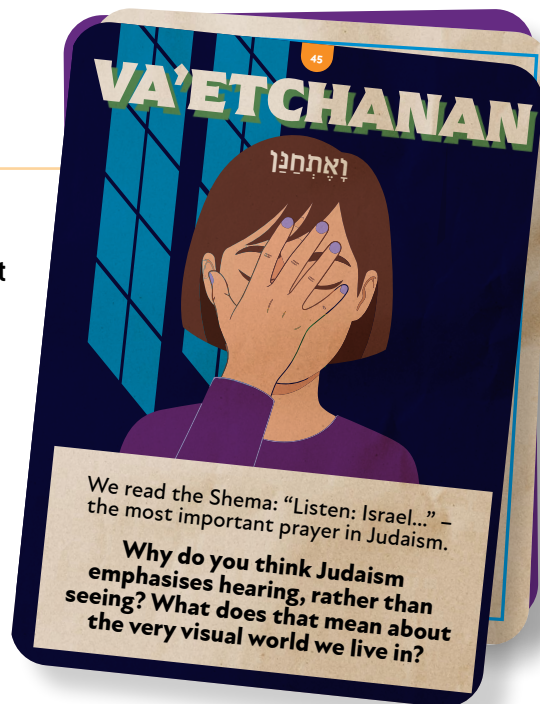
"Shema Yisrael - Listen: Israel!" - Devarim 6:4

We read the Shema: "Listen: Israel!..." – the most important prayer in Judaism.

QUESTIONS: Why do you think Judaism emphasises hearing, rather than seeing? What does that mean about the very visual world we live in?

Rabbi Sacks' commentary on Devarim 1:1 explains: "Stop looking; listen. Stop speaking; listen. Create a silence in the soul. Still the clamour of instinct, desire, fear, anger. Strive to listen to the still, small voice beneath the noise. Then you will know that the universe is the work of the One beyond the furthest star yet closer to you than you are to yourself – and then you will love your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your might. In God's unity you will find unity, within yourself and between yourself and the world, and you will no longer fear the unknown."

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

Value of the Week Reciting the Shema

Parshat Va'etchanan contains the command to recite the Shema twice daily (Deut. 6:7). The Shema is not a prayer asking God for anything. It is a declaration of memory and identity. When we say the Shema, we are reminding ourselves of the core truth of Judaism: that God is one, and that we are bound to Him in love. By reciting it every morning and every evening, we ensure that this truth is not just a historical fact we learned once, but a living memory that shapes every day of our lives.

"It was the Torah's insight that a people who told their children the story of freedom and its responsibilities would stay free for as long as humankind lives and breathes and hopes." - Rabbi Sacks

Practically Speaking Retelling Jewish history

Rambam believed the first of the Ten Commandments was about theology: knowing that God created the universe. But the poet Halevi disagreed. He pointed out that God does not introduce Himself at Sinai as the Creator of the universe. He introduces Himself as the God "who brought you out of Egypt." Philosophy is universal, but history is personal.

It is easy to think of Jewish history as something that belongs in a textbook. But in practice, we are also meant to treat our story as a form of memory. Ask an older relative to share a story about their own Jewish journey or their parents' journey. Ask them how it shaped who they became. Do not just listen to the facts; listen to the memory.



Try it out

YOUNG STUDENTS:

Imagine you read a book about how bicycles are made. Now imagine you remember the exact day your parent taught you how to ride your own bike, and how proud you felt when you finally balanced on your own. The book gives you facts, but the memory gives you a feeling of who you are. The Torah is not just a history book about things that happened long ago. It is our family's memory. What is your favourite memory with your family?

ADVANCING STUDENTS:

This week, think about the following question: Why do you think the Torah focuses so much on the story of the Exodus rather than the science of creation?



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.

Torah v'Chochmah

LAYER 1: FIND THE TORAH TEXT: DEVARIM 4:6

"יִרְקָ עַם-חָכָם וְנָבוֹן, הַגּוֹי הַגָּדוֹל הַזֶּה."

LAYER 2: READ RABBI SACKS' TRANSLATION

"Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people!"

LAYER 3: THINK ABOUT WHAT IT MEANS

Moshe tells the people that if they keep the laws of the Torah, the other nations will look at them and see their wisdom!" But what makes the Torah different from the wisdom of other nations? Why do we need both?

LAYER 4: LEARN FROM RABBI SACKS' COMMENTARY

"Judaism recognises... that there are two ways of knowing. One is called chochhma, "wisdom"; the other is Torah - teaching, instruction, law, guidance...

"To this day, the West, when it speaks of understanding, uses metaphors of sight. We talk of insight, foresight, and hindsight, of making an observation, of people of vision. When we understand something we say, "I see." ...In the Hebrew Bible, by contrast, instead of saying that someone thinks, the verse will say that he "said in his - or her - heart." Thought is not a form of sight but of speech...

"A world connected to the visible is an impersonal world, deaf to our prayers, blind to our hopes, a world without overarching meaning. Judaism, by contrast, is the supreme example of a person-centred civilisation - and persons communicate by words. They speak and listen. Words bridge the metaphysical abyss between soul and soul."

LAYER 5: REFLECT AND RESPOND

Wisdom is how we intuit the way the world works. It includes science, art, mathematics, and philosophy, and it belongs to all of humanity. Torah tells us who we are and how we should live. It is our specific family story.

1. Why is it important for Jews to study both Torah and general wisdom?
2. Can you think of a time when science (wisdom) and Jewish values (Torah) worked together to solve a problem?
3. What happens if a society has wisdom but no Torah, or Torah but no wisdom?

- 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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