



Covenant & Conversation



Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

עקב · EIKEV

BASED ON THE TEACHINGS OF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS זצ"ל

Greatness and Humility

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

A sequence of verses in this week's sedra gave rise to a beautiful Talmudic passage, one that has found a place in the Siddur. It is among the readings we say after the Evening Service on Saturday night as Shabbat comes to an end:

"For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, mighty and awe-inspiring God, who shows no favouritism and accepts no bribe. He upholds the cause of the orphan and widow, and loves the stranger, giving him food and clothing."

The juxtaposition could not be more striking. The Power of powers cares for the powerless. The Infinite One shows concern for the small. The Being at the heart of being listens to those at the margins: the orphan, the widow, the stranger, the poor and the outcast.

On this idea, Rabbi Yochanan taught: *"Wherever you find the greatness of the Holy One, blessed be He, there you find His humility."* The Torah, the Prophets and the Writings all make the same point: **God's greatness is seen not only in His power, but in His care for the vulnerable.**

This passage reminds us, as Shabbat ends and we return to our weekday concerns, not to become so caught up in our own interests that we forget others less favourably situated. To care only for ourselves is not "the way of God."

One of the more unusual aspects of being a Chief Rabbi (as Rabbi Sacks, who was Chief Rabbi of Great Britain for 22 years shared) is meeting people you otherwise may never know. Three encounters made a deep impression on me.

At a dinner Elaine and I hosted, one guest not only

thanked us but asked to go into the kitchen to thank those who had prepared and served the meal. That guest was the British Prime Minister, John Major. Greatness is humility.

At the tercentenary service of Bevis Marks Synagogue in 2001, Prince Charles spent as much time talking to the young volunteers doing security duty as he did to community leaders. Many people walk past security volunteers without noticing them. He made them feel as important as anyone else. Greatness is humility.

Sarah Levene (not her real name) and her husband gave tzedakah on a remarkable scale. Yet what people remembered most was not only their generosity but their humanity. Sarah knew the names of the hotel staff where they stayed, their families, and the challenges they faced. She helped quietly, personally and without seeking recognition.

Before they were married, Sarah borrowed money from her future husband to give a struggling beggar far more than he had offered. When he asked why, she replied, "What you gave him was enough to help him for today but not enough to make a difference to his life." He later said, "It was then that I decided to ask her to marry me – because her heart was bigger than mine."

This idea – counter-intuitive, unexpected, life-changing – is one of the great contributions of the Torah to Western civilisation. **As Moshe told the people, the "God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, mighty, and awe-inspiring God" reveals His greatness by the fact that "He upholds the cause of the orphan and widow, and loves the stranger, giving him food and clothing." Those who do this are the true men and women of God.**

Around the Shabbat Table



1. How do you think 'greatness' can be measured? Can you suggest a few ways?
2. Why does the Torah connect God's ultimate power with His care for the most vulnerable people?
3. Can you think of a time when a powerful person treated you with unexpected kindness? How did it impact you?

A Takeaway Thought

The measure of greatness is not how high we stand, but how deeply we care for those most in need.



Exploring the Parsha

WITH SARA LAMM

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



The Parsha in a Nutshell

In this week's parsha, Moshe continues his final speech to Bnei Yisrael, reminding them of the journey they have taken and the challenges that lie ahead. He warns them not to become arrogant when they enter the land and become successful. It is human nature to think "my power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me," but Moshe insists they must remember that everything comes from God. He reminds them of their past mistakes, particularly the Golden Calf, and how

he had to pray for their forgiveness. But he also reassures them of God's immense love.

Parshat Eikev contains the second paragraph of the Shema, which links the weather and the success of the crops to the people's faithfulness. Finally, Moshe describes the beauty of the Land of Israel, a land flowing with milk and honey, but reminds them that it requires their moral commitment to sustain it.



Parsha Activity

The Greatness Game

Give each person the chance to name someone they know personally who is great. Not for being famous or powerful, but someone who does small, kind acts that often go unnoticed. It could be a neighbour, a teacher, a grandparent, or a friend. After everyone has shared, discuss: what makes these people great? How does their kind of greatness compare to the type of greatness the world usually celebrates?



Secrets under the Tree

Irena Sendler was raised in a Polish Catholic family with a strong moral compass. Her father, a doctor who often treated Jewish patients when other doctors refused, left an indelible mark on her young heart. Before he passed away when Irena was just seven years old, he shared a piece of wisdom that would define her entire life: "If you see someone drowning, you must jump in to save them, no matter what."

Irena carried those words into adulthood. Growing up alongside Jewish friends and learning Yiddish, she viewed people through a lens of shared humanity. By the outbreak of World War II, she was working as a social worker in Warsaw, passionately devoted to aiding families in need. *All families.*

When the Nazis forced hundreds of thousands of Jewish families into a walled ghetto - Irena's conscience demanded she take action. She quietly began using her position to smuggle

food, medicine, and forged identity documents past the city checkpoints to help her neighbours survive.

Irena's brave efforts soon caught the attention of Żegota, a secret underground council established specifically to aid Jewish citizens. Noting her fierce dedication, deep empathy, and practical cleverness, they enlisted Irena to join the movement and head its Children's Division.

Through Żegota, Irena carefully coordinated a rescue operation. Armed with an official health inspector's permit, she entered the restricted district each day. With extraordinary tenderness, she met with desperate parents, promising to protect their children until peace could be restored. Working with a network of trusted companions, Irena safely guided young boys and girls out of the guarded areas. She placed them with caring Polish foster families, convents, and



orphanages, where they were protected.

To preserve their true heritage, Irena meticulously recorded each child's birth name and new assumed identity on narrow slips of paper. She stored these precious records inside glass jars and buried them under an apple tree in a quiet garden, so that the families could one day be reunited.

By the end of the war, Irena had saved approximately 2,500 children. Yet, despite her incredible bravery, she remained remarkably humble throughout her long life. She continually deflected praise, insisting that she was no hero, but simply a person who fulfilled her basic human duty to love, value, and honour others above herself.



Cards & Conversation

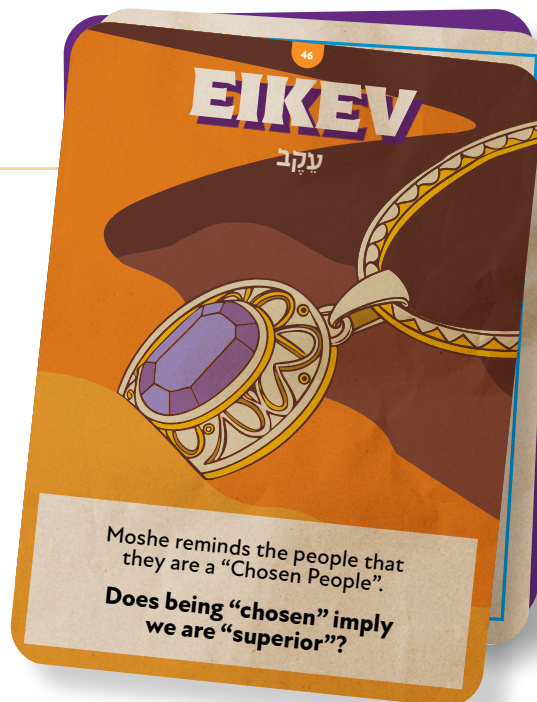
"Not for your righteousness..." - Devarim 9:5

Moshe reminds the people that they are a "Chosen People".

QUESTION: Does being "chosen" imply we are "superior"?

Rabbi Sacks' commentary on Devarim 9:5 explains: "A chosen people is the opposite of a master race, first, because it is not a race but a covenant; second, because it exists to serve God, not to master others. A master race worships itself; a chosen people worships something beyond itself. A master race produces monumental buildings, triumphal inscriptions, and a literature of self-congratulation. Israel, to a degree unique in history, produced a literature of almost uninterrupted self-criticism."

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

Devarim 7:25

Eikev includes the command not to derive benefit from the ornaments of idols. In the ancient world, idols were plated with gold and silver to make them look powerful and desirable. The Torah says: do not be seduced by the shiny exterior of something false. Idolatry was never really about statues. It was about placing ultimate value in the wrong things -- wealth, power, beauty, status. The Torah asks us to look past the surface and ask: what am I actually worshipping? The answer to that question reveals what we truly believe in.

"To be a child of Avraham is to have the courage to be different, to challenge the idols of the age, whatever the idols and whichever the age." - Rabbi Sacks

Practically Speaking

How will you re-evaluate?

The Torah's prohibition on idolatry is not just about ancient statues. The Rambam understood idolatry as the human tendency to treat something finite as if it were infinite: to give ultimate loyalty to something that does not deserve it. In the modern world, this could be money, fame, physical appearance, or political ideology.

We all have modern idols, even if we do not call them that. This week, pay attention to what pulls at your attention most. Is it the number of likes on a post? The brand on someone's trainers? A celebrity's lifestyle? Ask yourself honestly: is this something I genuinely value, or is it just a shiny ornament? The Torah does not ask us to ignore the world. It asks us to see it clearly.



Try it out

YOUNG STUDENTS:

In the Torah, an idol is anything people treat as more important than God. Long ago, people bowed down to statues made of gold and silver. Today people have new ways of mis-directing their attention. Some spend hours staring at screens, trying to get more 'likes' and followers, or wishing they had what someone else has, from the newest phone to the most fabulous clothes. What is one thing in your life that sometimes feels more important than it should? How can you refocus your priorities?

ADVANCING STUDENTS:

What do you think are the most powerful modern idols? How does a person know when something has crossed the line from a legitimate value into an idol?



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.

Birkat Hamazon

LAYER 1: FIND THE TORAH TEXT: DEVARIM 8:10

"וְאָכַלְתָּ, וְשָׂבַעְתָּ - וּבֵרַכְתָּ..."

LAYER 2: READ RABBI SACKS' TRANSLATION

"And when you eat and are satisfied, you shall bless the Lord your God for the good land that He has given..."

LAYER 3: THINK ABOUT WHAT IT MEANS

Birkat Hamazon, is a biblical command, straight from the Torah. Why do you think the after-blessing is considered more fundamental than the before-blessing?

LAYER 4: LEARN FROM RABBI SACKS' COMMENTARY

"Grace after Meals [Birkat Hamazon] is one of the elements of Jewish liturgy already specified in the Bible; it is commanded in this verse. Eating is a biological function. Judaism – with its emphasis on sanctifying the physical – is particularly concerned to turn the act of eating into a moment of spiritual affirmation.

"It is said that Avraham and Sara drew people into the service of the One God by extending them hospitality. After their guests had eaten, they would turn to thank their hosts. Avraham would reply, "Thank not us but God, who provides food for all"... This is more than a beautiful tradition. It is a basic theme of Judaism. It is in the physical that we find the spiritual. God made the world; therefore it is in the world that we find God.

"The commentators ask why the Grace after Meals is a biblical command, whereas the blessing before meals is only a rabbinic injunction. Their answer is that to thank God when we are hungry is natural. To thank Him when we are sated is more difficult. It is precisely when we are most likely to forget that we need reminding – that what we have, we have from God, creator and sustainer of all."

LAYER 5: REFLECT AND RESPOND

We say Birkat Hamazon specifically when we are full – the moment we are most likely to forget that we need anything at all. It reminds us that gratitude is hardest, but most important, when life is going well.

1. Why is it harder to remember God when we are full and satisfied than when we are hungry or in need?
2. How does the act of saying Birkat Hamazon change the physical act of eating into something spiritual?
3. In which area of your life where you are so comfortable that you have stopped noticing how much you have?

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



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