



Covenant & Conversation



Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

RE'EH • ראה

BASED ON THE TEACHINGS OF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ר"צ ז"ל

Judaism's Social Vision

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

If you seek to understand Judaism's social vision, look at its anti-poverty legislation: *"There will never cease to be poor people in the land. And so I command you: open your hand."*

Although this passage appears in the context of the seventh-year cancellation of debts, the rabbis understood it as the foundation of the laws of *tzedakah* – usually translated as *charity*, but also meaning justice and fairness.

The Torah commands us to provide *"sufficient for his needs,"* meaning the basic requirements of life: food, clothing and shelter. But the rabbis added something remarkable. "That which he lacks" also includes helping someone who was once wealthy but has become poor regain their dignity.

They illustrated this with a famous story: Hillel the Elder bought a horse for a man from a wealthy family who had fallen on hard times. He even hired a man to run ahead of the horse on outings, and if the man was busy, Hillel himself ran by the horse. Hillel himself was famously poor, yet he gave both his money and his time to preserve another person's self-respect.

The laws of *tzedakah* address not only the reality of poverty but also its psychology. Poverty can demean, embarrass and humiliate. Therefore charity must be given in a way that protects dignity. Rabbi Yannai said that when someone gave a coin publicly to a poor person, *"It would have been better not to have given it to him than to have given it and put him to shame."*

Rambam described eight levels of *tzedakah*. The highest is not simply giving money. It is helping someone become self-sufficient by giving a loan, offering

employment, or helping them start a business. As he explains, the greatest kindness is to "strengthen him in such a manner that his falling into want is prevented."

The next highest levels involve giving anonymously, so that neither giver nor receiver knows the other's identity. This protects the dignity of the poor and prevents the rich from feeling superior. Lower levels include giving only after being asked, giving less than is appropriate, or giving reluctantly.

This finely balanced ethic is full of psychological insight. **What matters is not only how much you give, but how you give.** We help others because we belong to a covenant of human solidarity, and because God has entrusted us with what we have.

Especially striking is Rambam's insistence that helping someone find work is the highest form of *tzedakah*. Humanitarian aid is essential in the short term, but in the long term, enabling people to support themselves is the greatest gift because it restores independence and dignity.

Jewish law goes even further. Even someone who depends on *tzedakah* must give *tzedakah*. At first this seems strange. But the rabbis understood a profound truth: giving is itself part of human dignity. Everyone needs not only to receive but also to contribute.

Economics may be a secular discipline, but Judaism teaches that the way a society cares for its poor is a religious responsibility. As the Torah reminds us: "There will never cease to be poor people in the land. And so I command you: open your hand generously to your kinsmen, your poor and needy, who share your land."

Around the Shabbat Table



1. What is the difference between giving someone a gift and giving someone an opportunity?
2. What are your thoughts on Rambam's list of eight levels of giving? Would you want to add any levels, or re-order it? Why/why not?
3. Why might it matter how help is given, not just whether it is given in the first place?

A Takeaway Thought

Judaism teaches that how we give matters as much as what we give: true generosity protects dignity and builds independence.



Exploring the Parsha

WITH SARA LAMM

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



The Parsha in a Nutshell

Parshat Re'eh opens with Moshe presenting the Jewish people with a stark choice: blessing if they follow God's commandments, and curse if they do not. He then instructs them about the laws of the central place of worship, which will be established in the Land of Israel. All sacrifices and offerings must be brought there, not at local altars.

The parsha covers the laws of kosher food, including which animals, fish, and birds may be eaten. It addresses the laws of the Shemittah

year, when debts are cancelled and the land is given rest. Moshe warns against false prophets and against any person who tries to lead others into idol worship, even a close family member. The parsha also includes the laws of *tzedakah*, the obligation to give generously to the poor, and the laws of the three pilgrimage festivals: Pesach, Shavuot, and Succot, when every Jew was commanded to appear before God in Jerusalem.



Parsha Activity

The Game of Giving

Each person thinks of one thing they could give to someone else this week, but the gift must help the other person do something on their own, not just make them feel good in the moment. It could be teaching a skill, sharing a book, or spending time helping someone practise something. Go around the table and share your ideas. Discuss: what makes this kind of giving harder than just buying something?



Who do you save with your savings?

For most of her life, Oseola McCarty lived quietly in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, in a small house she had inherited from her aunt. She had left school in the sixth grade to care for her sick family and although she dreamed of returning to her studies, she knew she was needed by her mother, aunt, and grandmother, and she became a washerwoman like the rest of the family. Oseola spent the next seventy-five years scrubbing clothes by hand on a rubboard, boiling them in a pot, and hanging them out to dry on a long clothesline.

Oseola never owned a car. She walked nearly a mile to buy her groceries. She kept her life simple and her needs small. But every week, without fail, she put a little money in the bank. She never took it out, no matter what.

When Oseola retired at the age of eighty-six, her hands swollen with arthritis, she found that she had saved two hundred and eighty thousand

dollars.

Most people assumed she would keep it. Enough money to live comfortably for the rest of her life. Instead, Oseola made plans. She wanted 10% of the savings to be divided between three relatives. Another 10% was to be given to her church. Then Oseola called the University of Southern Mississippi and arranged to donate one hundred and fifty thousand dollars, the majority of everything she had ever saved, to fund scholarships for students who could not afford to pay for their education.

When reporters found out, they were intrigued by the story. Some called, asking her why. Why wouldn't she keep her own savings? Oseola simply answered: "I am spending it on myself." Then she would explain that she wanted to give young students the chance she never had. She had never set foot on the university campus. She had never met the students who would benefit. She



didn't want her name on a wall or a building. She simply wanted young people to have opportunities to learn, to grow, to become independent through education.

The first student to receive the Oseola McCarty Scholarship was a young woman named Stephanie Bullock. The two became close, and Stephanie visited her regularly until the end of Oseola's life in 1999.

Oseola once said, "There's a lot of talk about self-esteem these days. It seems pretty basic to me. If you want to feel proud of yourself, you've got to do things you can be proud of. Feelings follow actions." She also said, "I can't do everything, but I can do something to help somebody. And what I can do I will do. I wish I could do more."



Cards & Conversation

“Open your hand generously...” - Devarim 15:8

The Torah commands us to care for the poor – but it never asks us to become poor ourselves. **QUESTION:** Can we be spiritual and still enjoy material blessings?

Rabbi Sacks' commentary on Devarim 15:7-8 explains: “The whole tenor of the Torah is based on the idea that God is to be found in the physical world and its blessings. We are commanded to serve God in joy out of the abundance of good things, not through self-denial. Asceticism – always a temptation in the religious life – was never embraced by the Jewish mainstream. On the contrary, it was an implicit disavowal of this world which God created and pronounced good. Having regard for the poor did not mean in Judaism embracing poverty oneself. No poor person was ever helped by knowing that a saint had joined his ranks. He was helped by being given the chance not to be poor.”

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

“You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor in your land.”
(Devarim 15:11)

The Torah uses the word *tzedakah*, which means not only charity but justice. Giving to those in need is not an act of generosity that we may or may not choose to perform. It is an obligation rooted in the belief that all human beings are created in the image of God and deserve to live with dignity. The way we give matters as much as *whether* and *how much* we give.

Practically Speaking

How will you give?

The Rambam set out 8 levels of *tzedakah*. The highest level involves

helping someone find work, start a business, or become self-sufficient so that they no longer need to rely on others. He calls this the greatest form of giving because it removes the shame of dependence. But the rabbis also taught something equally surprising: even a person who receives *tzedakah* must themselves give *tzedakah*. Think about someone in your life who could use a hand this week, not a handout, but a hand. Perhaps a younger sister who is struggling with something you have already mastered, a friend who needs encouragement, or a neighbour who could use practical help. The Torah teaches that the highest form of giving lifts the other person up rather than making them feel small. How might you give in that spirit this week?



Try it out

YOUNG STUDENTS:

Imagine you have a younger brother or sister who always asks you to tie their shoelaces. You could keep doing it for them, or you could take the time to teach them how. Which is kinder in the long run? The Torah teaches that the best kind of help is the kind that helps someone not need help any more. Can you think of a time someone helped you become more capable, rather than just solving your problem for you?

ADVANCING STUDENTS:

This week, think of one person in your life who could use your help, not money, but your time, your skill, or your knowledge. Make a plan to offer it. Do your best to follow through.



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.

A Treasured People

LAYER 1: FIND THE TORAH TEXT: DEVARIM 14:1-2

"בָּנִים אַתֶּם לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם ... לְעַם סְגֻלָּה"

LAYER 2: READ RABBI SACKS' TRANSLATION

"You are children of the Lord your God... a treasured people."

LAYER 3: THINK ABOUT WHAT IT MEANS

The Torah describes our relationship with God in two ways: as subjects before a king, and as children before a parent. These are very different relationships. A king can banish a servant. But a parent and child share a bond that cannot be permanently broken. How does it change the way you think about God to hear Him described not as a ruler but as our parent? And how might that change the way we treat one another?

LAYER 4: LEARN FROM RABBI SACKS' COMMENTARY

"We experience God in two ways: in awe and in love. In awe, for He is our sovereign, the supreme power of the universe. But also in love, for He brought us into being. He is a parent to us. Between a servant and a king there can be estrangement. A king can send a servant into exile. But between a father and a child there can be no permanent estrangement. However far removed they are from one another, the bond between parent and child still holds."

LAYER 5: REFLECT AND RESPOND

If we are children of God, then every other person is also a child of God. That changes everything about how we are obligated to treat one another - as we are all, in a sense, spiritual siblings. The laws of tzedakah in this parsha are not simply rules about money. They are an expression of what it means to live as part of a family, God's family, where no member is left behind and every person's dignity is protected.

1. How does thinking of God as a parent rather than a king change your relationship with Him?
2. If all people are children of the same God, what does that mean for how we treat someone who is poor or struggling?
3. What is one way you could act this week as though every person you meet is part of your family?

- 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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