



Covenant & Conversation



Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

SHOFTIM • שופטים

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

Testing Prophecy

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

Whilst listing the various leadership roles within the nation, Moshe mentions not only the priest/judge and the king, but also the prophet: *"The Lord your God will raise up another prophet like me from among your own people. You must listen to him."*

Moshe would not be the last of the prophets. But how does one tell a true prophet from a false one? Unlike kings or priests, prophets did not derive authority from formal office. Their authority lay in their personality and their ability to give voice to the word of God. But this created the possibility of false prophets – or sincere but mistaken ones – misleading the people.

The Torah gives one test: *"If what a prophet proclaims in the name of the Lord does not take place or come true, that is a message the Lord has not spoken. That prophet has spoken presumptuously. Do not be afraid of him."*

On the face of it, the test is simple: if what the prophet predicts comes to pass, he is true; if not, he is false. Clearly, though, it was not that simple.

The classic case is the Book of Yonah. Yonah warns Nineveh: *"Forty more days and Nineveh will be destroyed."* The people repent, and the city is spared. Yonah is deeply dissatisfied because his prediction has not come true. Yet Yonah really did speak the word of God. How can this be?

The answer is found in the distinction between positive and negative prophecy. Yirmiyahu explains that **a prophet who prophesies peace will be recognised as truly sent by God only if his prediction comes true.** A negative prophecy is different. If it does not happen, the prophet can say that God relented and forgave, as happened to

Nineveh.

Rambam explains: *"As to calamities predicted by a prophet, if, for example, he foretells the death of a certain individual or declares that in a particular year there will be famine or war and so forth, the non-fulfilment of his forecast does not disprove his prophetic character."*

He concludes that *"only when he predicts good fortune can the prophet be tested."*

This leads to a fundamental conclusion: a prophet is not an oracle: a prophecy is not a prediction. Precisely because Judaism believes in free will, the human future can never be unfailingly predicted. People are capable of change. God forgives.

A prophet does not foretell. He warns. A prophet does not speak to predict future catastrophe but rather to avert it. If a prediction comes true it has succeeded. If a prophecy comes true it has failed.

There is a second, equally important lesson. The real test of prophecy is not bad news but good. Calamity, catastrophe, and disaster prove nothing. Anyone can foretell these things without risking his reputation or authority. It is only through the realisation of a positive vision that prophecy is truly put to the test.

The prophets of Israel were realists, not optimists. They warned of the dangers that lay ahead. But they were not simply people who warned Israel about the pitfalls, and prophesied doom. **They were also, without exception, agents of hope. They could see beyond the catastrophe to the consolation, and beyond failure to the possibility of change. That is the test of a true prophet.**

Around the Shabbat Table



1. Have you ever ignored a warning and later wished you had listened?
2. Why is it difficult to believe when someone tells you something you do not want to hear?
3. Is there someone in your life who will always tell you the truth, even when it is hard to hear?

A Takeaway Thought

A true prophet is an agent of hope. Their warnings allow people to actually change their ways and avert disaster.



Exploring the Parsha

WITH SARA LAMM

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



The Parsha in a Nutshell

Parshat Shoftim outlines the leadership structure of the Jewish nation. Moshe commands the people to appoint judges and officers in every city to ensure true justice, warning them never to accept bribes or show favoritism. He sets out the laws for a Jewish king, limiting how many horses, wives, and how much wealth he may accumulate, to prevent him from becoming arrogant. The king must write his own Sefer Torah and carry it with him always, reminding him that he too is subject

to God's law. The parsha details the roles of the Kohanim and Leviim, and introduces the concept of the prophet. Moshe gives the laws of war, including the command to offer peace before attacking, and the prohibition against destroying fruit trees. Finally, it describes the eglah arufah ritual, performed when a person is found murdered in an open field and the killer is unknown, demonstrating the community's responsibility for human life.



Parsha Activity

Warnings Dawning

Start by having one person leave the room. The rest of the family chooses a "danger zone" like a specific chair. When the person returns, they must try to cross the room. The family can only help them avoid the danger zone by making a sound (like humming) that gets louder as they get closer to the danger. Discuss: how did it feel to be guided away from danger? Why do we sometimes ignore warnings in real life?



A Wave of Disaster

It was Boxing Day in 2004. Ten-year-old Tilly Smith was walking along Mai Khao beach in Phuket, Thailand with her family. The Smiths had arrived from England a week earlier for a winter holiday and they were enjoying the beautiful sunshine of the early morning. As they strolled through the sand, Tilly noticed something strange about the ocean. The water was not gently rolling in and out as it usually did. Instead, it was pulling far back from the shore, exposing the sea floor, and the water that remained was frothing and bubbling like a shaken bottle of fizzy drink.

Two weeks earlier, in her geography class back in Surrey, England, Tilly's teacher Mr Karney had shown the class a video about earthquakes and tsunamis. He had taught them how the ocean is affected by these seismic changes,

including the early warning signs to look out for. Never expecting to see these things herself on a vacation that same month, Tilly recognised that Mr Karney's descriptions of how the ocean might behave during a tsunami were happening right before her very eyes.

Tilly stopped walking and turned to her family in horror. She told her mother that a tsunami was coming, but her mother did not understand and thought Tilly was overreacting. She became increasingly frantic, insisting that they were in terrible danger and had to leave the beach immediately. Her rising panic finally convinced her father to alert the hotel security guard. The guard listened to the terrified schoolgirl, and moments later, he received a radio confirmation of an earthquake in Indonesia.

Because Tilly had spoken up and



refused to be ignored, things happened quickly. The security staff cleared the entire beach, rushing everyone to the third floor of the hotel. Minutes later, a massive wall of water crashed into the shore, destroying everything in its path.

The Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004 was one of the deadliest natural disasters in history. But on Mai Khao beach, because one young girl saw the warning signs and refused to stay silent, more than a hundred people were saved.



Cards & Conversation

“...you must make thorough inquiry.” - Devarim 17:4

We are taught to seek justice and take responsibility.

QUESTION: What might change - in your relationships, your day, or life - if you stopped waiting for someone else to act, and stepped up yourself?

Rabbi Sacks' commentary on Devarim 17:3-4 explains: “Just as every life has a task, so every day brings an opportunity. If we are where we are because God wanted us to be, then there must be, in every situation, something He wants us to do, some act of redemption He wants us to perform. I found the best way of knowing what it is, is to turn the situation upside down. I used to hope that people would praise my work; then I realised that what I was here to do was to praise the work of others. There were times when, in crisis, I would await the reassuring word from a friend, until I suddenly saw that I should be the one giving reassurance. [That] discovery changed my life.”

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

“To them you must listen.”

Devarim 18:15-16

Shoftim commands us to listen to the prophet who speaks in God's name. Unlike kings or priests, a prophet's authority came entirely from their courage to speak an uncomfortable truth, to tell the people not what they wanted to hear, but what they needed to hear. We all have people like that in our lives: a parent, a teacher, a friend who cares enough to be honest. Think of a person who has played that role for you and find a way to let them know you are grateful.

Practically Speaking

How will you react?

It is easy to surround ourselves with people who agree with us, and avoid those who challenge us or point out our mistakes. But

the people who help us most are often the ones willing to say something difficult. Think about the last time someone told you something you did not want to hear. Were they right? The Torah says a false prophet is one whose prediction does not come true. But when Yonah warned Nineveh it would be destroyed in 40 days, the people repented and the city was saved. Yonah's prediction did not happen, yet he was a true prophet. How? Because a negative prophecy is a warning, not a fixed fate. If the disaster is averted, the prophecy succeeded. A positive prophecy, however, is a promise from God, and God does not break His promises of good. Therefore, a prophet can only be tested on promises of good news, never on warnings of bad news. What does this teach us about human freedom?



Try it out

YOUNG STUDENTS:

Imagine walking towards a big puddle, and a friend shouts, “Stop! You'll ruin your shoes!” If you stop and your shoes stay dry, was your friend wrong? No. Their warning did exactly what it was supposed to do. The prophets were like that friend. They warned the people about terrible things that would happen if they did not change their behaviour. When the people listened, the bad things did not happen. Who is someone you trust to warn you when you are making a mistake?

ADVANCING STUDENTS:

When someone offers honest feedback, try to hear it as care rather than criticism. Be open to considering the outcomes others warn you of, if they help you to become a better person.



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.

Royal Limits

LAYER 1: FIND THE TORAH TEXT: DEVARIM 17:17

"וְכִסֵּף וְזָהָב לֹא יִרְבֶּה-לוֹ מְאֹד."

LAYER 2: READ RABBI SACKS' TRANSLATION

"...nor should he amass large amounts of silver and gold."

LAYER 3: THINK ABOUT WHAT IT MEANS

The Torah places strict limits on a Jewish king. He must not have too many horses, lest he establish trading links with Egypt. He must not have too many wives, lest they lead his heart astray. And he must not accumulate vast wealth. These limits existed to keep the king humble, to remind him that his role was to serve, not to accumulate. Why do you think power so often tempts leaders to believe that the rules do not apply to them?

LAYER 4: LEARN FROM RABBI SACKS' COMMENTARY

"It was these three prohibitions that Shlomo, wisest of men, broke, marking the beginning of the long, slow slide into corruption that marked much of the history of the monarchy in ancient Israel. It led, after his death, to the division of the kingdom. But these were symptoms, not the cause. The cause was the feeling on the part of the king that since he is above the people, he is above the law." ...The arrogance of power is its downfall. Hence the Torah's insistence on humility, not as merely a good thing to have, but as essential to the role."

LAYER 5: REFLECT AND RESPOND

King Solomon believed he was wise enough to ignore the Torah's warnings without suffering the consequences. He thought the rules were for ordinary people, not for him. But the Torah's warnings are not challenges to be outsmarted; they are boundaries meant to protect us from our own flaws. True leadership requires the humility to accept that no one, not even the wisest king, is above the law.

1. Should King Shlomo - the wisest of all kings and all men - have been able to break the rules about horses and wives, being wise enough to avoid the pitfalls that might have come as a consequence?
2. How does arrogance make a person blind to the warnings around them?
3. What is the difference between knowing the rules and having the humility to follow them?

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



Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

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.

**With thanks to the Schimmel Family for their generous sponsorship of
Covenant & Conversation, dedicated in loving memory of Harry (Chaim) Schimmel**