



Covenant & Conversation



Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

כי תצא • KI TEITSE

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

The Parameters of Justice

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

In Devarim 24, we encounter - for the first time - the explicit statement of a law of far-reaching significance:

"Parents shall not be put to death for children, nor children put to death for parents: a person shall be put to death only for his own crime" (Devarim 24:16).

This excludes vicarious punishment: the idea that someone else may be punished for my crime. The obvious question is: how is this compatible with the idea that children may suffer for the sins of their parents? *"The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet He does not leave the guilty unpunished; He punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation."*

The short answer is the difference between human justice and Divine justice. We are not God. We can neither look into the hearts of wrongdoers nor assess the full consequences of their deeds. **Human justice must work within the parameters of human understanding and regulation.** Hence the straightforward rule: no vicarious punishment. Only the wrongdoer is to suffer, and only after his guilt has been established by fair and impartial judicial procedures.

However, the issue did not end there. The prophets Yirmiyahu and Yechezkel explicitly rejected the idea that children might suffer for the sins of their parents. Jeremiah said: *"In those days, people will no longer say, 'The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge.' Instead, everyone will die for his own sin."* Yechezkel similarly

declared: *"The soul that sins is the one who will die."*

The Talmud asks: If Yechezkel is correct, what then happens to the idea of children being punished to the third and fourth generation? Its answer is astonishing: "Our master Moshe pronounced four [adverse] sentences on Israel, but four prophets came and revoked them ... Yechezkel came and declared: *"The soul that sins is the one who will die."*

The Sages mean, I think, that perfect justice is beyond human understanding. We can never fully know the degree of guilt or responsibility.

Two things are clear from God's words to Moshe. First, He is a God of compassion but also of justice, for without justice there is anarchy, but without compassion, there is neither humanity nor hope. Second, in the tension between these two values, **God's compassion vastly exceeds His justice.**

Yirmiyahu and Yechezkel were fighting a mood of despair among the people during the Babylonian exile: What can we do? We are being punished for the sins of our forefathers. Not so, said the prophets. Each generation holds its destiny in its own hands. Repent, and you will be forgiven, whatever the sins of the past - yours or those who came before you.

Justice is a complex phenomenon, Divine justice infinitely more so. One thing, however, is clear. **When it comes to human justice, Moshe, Yirmiyahu, and Yechezkel all agree: children may not be punished for the sins of their parents. Vicarious punishment is simply unjust.**

Around the Shabbat Table



1. Can justice ever be completely fair? Is perfect justice beyond human understanding?
2. How can we balance justice and compassion when deciding how someone should be treated?
3. Can people truly escape the mistakes of previous generations? When, if ever, should a person be held responsible for the actions of their parents?

A Takeaway Thought

We must never punish others for sins they did not commit. Justice is essential, but perfect justice is beyond human understanding.



Exploring the Parsha

WITH SARA LAMM

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



The Parsha in a Nutshell

Parshat Ki Teitse contains more mitzvot than any other parsha in the Torah, covering almost every aspect of human life. It begins with the laws of going out to war, including how to treat a captive woman. It outlines family laws, including the rebellious son and the requirement to bury the dead promptly. The parsha commands us to return lost property, to help a struggling animal, and to build a safety fence around a flat roof. It forbids mixing wool and linen, and requires tzitzit on four-cornered garments. It

details the laws of marriage, divorce, and the protection of vulnerable people like the runaway slave, the orphan, and the widow. A worker is allowed to eat from the crops while harvesting, and a lender must not take a person's livelihood as collateral.

Finally, the parsha commands us to remember what Amalek did to the Israelites on their journey out of Egypt, attacking the weak and the tired from behind.



Parsha Activity

Tangles

Have everyone (the larger the group, the better) stand in a tight circle, reach across, and grab the hands of two different people (anyone but the people standing right next to you). Now, without letting go of anyone's hands, work together to untangle the human knot and form a single, unbroken circle.

Discuss: how is a long-held grudge like a tangled knot? What does it take to finally untangle it?



The Clothes of Justice

Mr Abramson had run the same small grocery store, on the same street, for almost thirty years. Although he was far from wealthy, he did make a fairly steady income from the shop, and so he would occasionally lend out money to those in need, helping whenever he could. He knew every family in the neighbourhood by name, knew their children, knew who bought a lot of eggs, who liked which loaves of brown bread, and sliced bread, who paid on time and who did not.

He was a fair man, but he had a long memory. Fifteen years earlier, during a difficult winter, a man named Yosef Shtielberg had visited him, requesting to borrow a significant sum of money. It was more than Mr Abramson could easily afford to lend out, but he wanted to help, and Yosef assured him that it would be a short-term loan, repaid in three weeks. Mr Abramson had never

received the money back. The loss had caused his family real hardship that winter, and although Mr Abramson had eventually written it off, he had never forgotten the struggle, or the man who had run off with his money.

One afternoon, a young man came into the shop looking for work. He was polite, neatly dressed, and clearly nervous. He introduced himself as Daniel Shtielberg.

Mr Abramson looked at him appraisingly. He recognised the surname immediately. "Are you related to Yosef Shtielberg?" he asked. "He was my father," Daniel said, with a slight wobble in his voice. "He passed away two years ago. I know he left debts behind. I have been going around to the people he owed money to, trying to make things right where I can. If he owed you something, I am sorry."

Mr Abramson studied the young



man's face. He saw no trace of his father's carelessness there, only honesty and a kind of quiet dignity. "Your father's debts are not yours," he said at last. "You did not borrow from me. You did not make me any promises."

The shopkeeper invited Daniel for a cup of tea. They spoke about the kind of work Daniel was looking for, and by the end of the conversation, Mr Abramson had hired Daniel as his bookkeeper.

Daniel's wife once asked Mr Abramson why he had been willing to hire him, after Daniel's father's actions. Mr Abramson told her, "Daniel is not his father. I could not hold a grudge against a young man for something he had no part in. That is not justice. That is just anger wearing the clothes of justice."



Cards & Conversation

"...if the mother is sitting on the fledglings or the eggs..." - Devarim 22:7

The Torah commands us to treat animals with care and compassion. **QUESTION:** What rights should animals have? And what responsibility do we have toward them?

Rabbi Sacks' commentary on Devarim 22:7 explains: "Cruelty to animals is wrong. not because animals have rights but because we have duties. The duty not to be cruel is intended to promote virtue, and the primary context of virtue is the relationship between human beings. But virtues are indivisible. Those who are cruel to animals often become cruel to people. Hence we have a duty not to cause needless pain to animals because of its effect on us. Animals may not have rights, but they have feelings, and we have duties toward them. We must respect them if we are to honour our role as God's partners in creation."

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

"Blaming the descendants"
Devarim 24:16

In the main summary of the Rabbi Sacks essay, we examined the command that "Parents shall not be put to death for children, nor children put to death for parents: a person shall be put to death only for his own crime." In the ancient world, if a person committed a crime, their whole family might be punished. The Torah introduced a revolutionary idea: individual responsibility. Justice means we only answer for our own actions, not the actions of our parents or our children. This week, if you find yourself blaming a sibling or a friend for a mistake you were both involved in, stop and take responsibility for your own part.

Practically Speaking

How will you let go?

When someone hurts us, our instinct is often to hurt them back. But revenge just creates a new problem. The Torah teaches that we must break the cycle of anger.

This week, think of a small grudge you have been holding against a friend. Make a conscious decision to let it go. You do not need an apology to forgive; you just need the desire to be free.

"Those who blame others, defining themselves as victims, are destined to remain victims. Those who accept responsibility transform the world because they have learned to transform themselves."

- Rabbi Sacks



Try it out

YOUNG STUDENTS:

If you build a tower of blocks, and your brother knocked it over, you might feel angry and want to knock over his toys. But if you do, he will just get angry and knock over your next tower! The Torah teaches us not to hold onto anger. If you forgive him and ask him to help you rebuild together, you break the cycle of fighting. What is one way you can make peace with a sibling after an argument?

ADVANCING STUDENTS:

Human beings cannot read hearts or understand the complex web of how one person's actions affect another over time. Therefore, human courts must stick strictly to individual responsibility. What does this limitation teach us about the humility required to judge others?



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.



Denying Responsibility

LAYER 1: FIND THE TORAH TEXT: DEVARIM 23:8

"לֹא-תִתֶּעֱב מִצָּרִי כִי-גֵר הָיִיתָ בְּאֶרֶץוּ."

LAYER 2: READ RABBI SACKS' TRANSLATION

"Do not despise an Egyptian, for you lived as a stranger in his land."

LAYER 3: THINK ABOUT WHAT IT MEANS

We are told several times in the Torah to treat strangers well, remembering how it felt to be an outcast in Egypt. But here we are told not to hold a grudge against the Egyptians who enslaved the Israelites, threw their baby boys into the river, and refused to let them go? We are commanded to remember our slavery in Egypt every year on Pesach. This passuk seems completely counterintuitive! Why would Moshe tell a nation of freed slaves that they are forbidden to hate their former oppressors?

LAYER 4: LEARN FROM RABBI SACKS' COMMENTARY

"Because to be free, you have to let go of hate. If the Israelites continued to hate their erstwhile enemies, Moshe would have succeeded in taking the Israelites out of Egypt, but he would have failed to take Egypt out of the Israelites. Mentally, they would still be there, slaves to the past, prisoners of their memories.

Freedom involves the abandonment of hate, because hate is the abdication of freedom. It is the projection of our conflicts onto an external force whom we can then blame, but only at the cost of denying responsibility. That is Moshe's message to those who are about to enter the Promised Land: that a free society can be built only by people who accept the responsibility of freedom, subjects who refuse to see themselves as objects, people who define themselves by love of God, not hatred of the other."

LAYER 5: REFLECT AND RESPOND

Hate feels like a weapon we use against our enemies, but it is actually a chain that binds us to them. To build a new, free society in the Promised Land, we needed to leave our grievances in the desert, and look ahead to the future instead of keeping hold of the grudges of the past.

1. How does holding onto a grudge make a person a "prisoner of their memories"?
2. Why is it easier to blame an external enemy than to take responsibility for our own future?
3. What is one thing you can do to make sure you define yourself by what you love rather than what you dislike?

- 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.

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