



Covenant & Conversation



Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

KI TAVO • כִּי תָבוֹא

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

A Sense of History

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

Ki Tavo begins with the ceremony of bringing first-fruits to the Beit HaMikdash. It was a magnificent ceremony, where music was played, people were welcomed into Jerusalem, and then came the most significant part - the declaration each person had to make:

"My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down into Egypt with a few people and lived there and became a great nation, powerful and numerous... Then the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror and with miraculous signs and wonders" (Devarim 26:5-10).

This declaration is well-known from its inclusion in the Pesach Haggadah. Its significance is revolutionary - more than we may first realise. The ancients saw the gods in nature. Whereas natural time is cyclical - the seasons, planets, birth, death, and new life, the first-fruits declaration is not about nature but about history. It paints a picture of the events from the days of the patriarchs to the Exodus and the conquest of the Land. Keeping hold of our history something Judaism values greatly.

Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi wrote that Ancient Israel "first assigned a decisive significance to history" and that "only in Israel and nowhere else is the injunction to remember felt as a religious imperative to an entire people."

This history was not academic or only for scholars. It belonged to everyone. The declaration was recited by everyone and, importantly, it was said in the first person: *"My father ... Then the Lord brought us out of Egypt... He brought us to this place"*. The rabbis therefore taught: *"In each generation, every person should see himself as if he personally came out of Egypt."*

This is history transformed into memory. To be a Jew is to be part of a story that extends across forty centuries and almost every land on the face of the earth. Memory is essential to identity. We did not come from nowhere; nor does our story end with us. We are leaves on an ancient tree, chapters in a long and still-being-written story, a letter in the scroll of the book of the people of the Book.

Judaism sees the individual as connected both horizontally with those around us - family, community and fellow Jews - and vertically to those who came before us. To be a Jew is to be a link in the chain of the generations, a character in a drama that began long before we were born and will continue long after our death.

There is something momentous about this historical sense. It reminds us that human beings need time to learn, grow, and reach moral and spiritual maturity. The *brit* is therefore extended over time, and we are not only inheritors of the past but guardians of the future.

That is as near as we get to immortality on earth: to know that we are the guardians of the hopes of our ancestors, and the trustees of the covenant for the sake of the future. That is what happened in Temple times when people brought their first-fruits to Jerusalem and, instead of celebrating nature, celebrated the history of their people from the days when *"My father was a wandering Aramean"* to the present. As Moshe said in some of his last words to posterity: *"Remember the days of old; consider the generations long past. Ask your father and he will tell you, your elders, and they will explain to you"* (Devarim 32:7).

To be a Jew is to know that the history of our people lives on in us.

Around the Shabbat Table



1. How does knowing where we come from shape who we are and the choices we make today?
2. Why might Judaism place such a strong emphasis on remembering the past?
3. What does it mean to see yourself as a "link in the chain of the generations"? What responsibilities might that create?

A Takeaway Thought

We are shaped by the history we inherit, linking past generations to the present and carrying their hopes forward into the future.



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 Tavo begins with the mitzva of *bikkurim*. When Bnai Yisrael will - in the future - bring their first fruits to the Beit Hamikdash, they must recite the story of their ancestors, starting with Yaakov's story that led to his travel to Egypt, and then onto the nation-wide slavery and redemption. This mitzva reminds the people to be grateful for the land they will dwell in (Israel) and its produce.

The parsha then sets out the laws of *ma'aser* and the declaration made after it has been given properly. Moshe

instructs the people to write the Torah's words on great stones when they enter the land, and to build an altar on Mount Eival. Six tribes stand on Mount Gerizim and six on Mount Eival as the Leviim proclaim blessings for those who keep the Torah and curses for those who break it.

Moshe then describes the blessings that will follow if the people listen to God, and the painful consequences if they turn away. He ends by reminding them of the miracles God performed in Egypt and the wilderness.



Parsha Activity

A Chain of Storytellers

Without discussing it in advance, try to tell a story as a group, something from your shared past together, by going around the table each taking turns to add to the story. There's just one catch: you can only say two words per person, per turn. If the person who started off the story thinks it has gotten too far off track and wants to direct, they can help with one word per person, correcting them if they need steering, but the group must keep trying to get the story right until the full tale is told.



The Story Box

When Ari was young, her Bubba gave her a box, made of fine mahogany wood. The brass catch was almost black with age. Ari lifted the lid and peeked inside. Nestled there were three objects: A tiny brown seed in a satin pouch, a length of fine blue rope, wound into a little circle, and a small leather book.

Ari was puzzled. "I have no idea what to do with these," she said aloud. Bubba's smile deepened every line in her wise face. "Your great-grandma gave me the box when I was your age," she said. "She told me that one day I would understand it."

"And did you?"

Bubba laughed. "It took some time, but yes." She pointed to the seed. "She told me this was the first thing I had to understand."

"What does it mean?"

"You can plant it, and then when it grows seeds of its own, you can add a

new seed from the plant, back into the box."

"You planted a seed... that sprouted, and grew this new seed? Where did you...?"

"In the garden."

Ari ran outside. At the bottom of the garden stood two large, old fig trees.

"Is that it?"

Bubba nodded. "Your great-grandma planted the seed. I planted another one from its fruit. And now you have the trees, and a seed." Ari looked at the enormous branches.

"So the seed is from here?"

"Yes."

"But the trees are yours."

Bubba smiled. "Exactly. And yours too."

Ari picked up the blue rope.

"And this?"

Bubba held it between her fingers.

"Your great-grandma used to say, 'One strand breaks easily. A chain of threads is strong.' She added a strand every time

someone in the family was born."

Ari looked closely. The rope was actually made from many tiny threads, twisted together.

"And the book?"

Bubba handed it to Ari. "It's yours. Every generation must write a page."

"Write what?"

Bubba smiled. "That's up to you."

That night, Ari read the book. One year later, she carefully added her message to one page. Time passed, and when Ari had children of her own, the box was given to the next generation. It contained a new seed, the thread, and the book. But now there was a fourth object - a golden key added by Ari. Because the box had never been about keeping the past exactly as it was. It was about receiving something, understanding it, adding something of your own, and passing it on. And so the story continued. From one generation to the next. The box was old. But its story was still being written.



Cards & Conversation

“Rejoice in all the good that the Lord your God has bestowed on you and on your household.” - Dev. 26:11

Moshe warns the Israelites not to forget God once they settle in the Land and prosper. **QUESTION:** Why do you think comfort and success can sometimes be more dangerous than hardship and struggle?

Rabbi Sacks' commentary on Devarim 26 explains: “The sun and the wind once argued over which was stronger. The wind said, ‘Nothing can stand in my way.’ So the sun said to the wind, ‘Let us see which of us can get the jacket off the farmer over there. That will settle the matter.’ The wind accepted the challenge and began to blow. But the harder it blew, the more tightly the farmer clung to his jacket, until the wind gave up. Then the sun began to gently shine. As the farmer felt the sun’s warmth, he took off his jacket willingly, without resistance. Warmth is more powerful than wind... Throughout Jewish history, the more Jews suffered, the more they prayed, studied, and kept the commands. Paradoxically, the danger to Jewish continuity has been not slavery and suffering, but affluence and freedom.”

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Parsha in Practice

Mitzva of the Week

“Walking in God’s Ways”
(Devarim 27:17)

Parshat Ki Tavo commands us to walk in God’s ways. This does not mean that we can be God. It means that we should try to learn from and take on the qualities the Torah teaches us about God: graciousness, mercy, patience, and care for others.

This mitzva is not limited to a particular act. It asks us to notice the sort of person we are becoming. The next time someone makes a mistake or needs help, pause before reacting. What would it look like to respond with patience rather than irritation, or generously rather than impatiently, in that moment?

Practically Speaking

How will you respond?

There is an idea that we should act with *imitatio dei* - by imitating God, who created us “in His image”, giving us breath - a soul - by breathing His own Divine breath into the first man. Although there is much we can never do that God can do, there are ways to create, treat others, and respond with care, that come from taking on the qualities that we learn from God. Can you think of examples in the Torah? How can you apply these examples to your own life, your own behaviour?

“God has patience. God has forgiveness. God has compassion. God has love.”
- Rabbi Sacks



Try it out

YOUNG STUDENTS:

It is taught that Hashem created the world, because He wanted to be able to do chessed, and you cannot do chessed if there is no-one around to help, or to give to.

Are you blessed to be able to do chessed? What’s the next act of kindness you’d like to do?

ADVANCING STUDENTS:

With so many Godly qualities to choose from, it may feel overwhelming, but just choose one quality you wish you had more of, and start there.

How can you respond to a need in others, with a higher level of kindness, compassion, patience, forgiveness, and action. How can you emulate God’s qualities in the more challenging moments, or when you are most needed?



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.

Godly qualities

LAYER 1: FIND THE TORAH TEXT: DEVARIM 28:9

"כִּי תִשָּׁמֶר, אֶת-מִצְוֹת ה' אֱלֹקֶיךָ, וְהִלַּכְתָּ, בְּדַרְכָּיו."

LAYER 2: READ RABBI SACKS' TRANSLATION

"Walk in His ways."

LAYER 3: THINK ABOUT WHAT IT MEANS

We know how to copy what another person does. But what would it mean to walk in God's ways? We cannot create worlds or perform miracles. The rabbis understood this passuk in another way: we should try to copy God's character. If God is merciful, we should act with mercy. If God is gracious, we should try to be gracious. This is not one more rule on a list. It is a way of thinking about the person we are becoming.

LAYER 4: LEARN FROM RABBI SACKS' COMMENTARY

"From this... Rambam infers that we are commanded to develop certain traits of character – to be gracious, merciful, and holy, as God is gracious, merciful, and holy. He holds that in addition to prescribing or forbidding specific actions, Judaism requires us to develop certain virtues. The Torah is concerned not only with behaviour but also with character, not just with what we do but also the kind of person we become. Ramban (on Vayikra 19:2) locates this idea in the command "Be holy," which, he says, requires us to go beyond the letter of what the law mandates. [There are qualities that we cannot force through mitzvot] ...self-restraint, moderation, gentleness, alertness to the suffering of others, and the many other forms of moral literacy which you cannot learn from a book of rules, but only from experience and example."

LAYER 5: REFLECT AND RESPOND

A rule can tell us not to hurt someone, but it cannot list every moment when another person needs our patience. A rule can tell us to give tzedakah, but it cannot prescribe exactly how to notice someone who feels left out. That is why the Torah asks more of us than correct behaviour. It asks us to practise mercy, gentleness, and self-restraint until they become part of our character.

1. What is the difference between following a rule and developing a good character trait?
2. Who has taught you an important character trait by their example?
3. Which of God's qualities would you most like to practise this week?

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



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