



Covenant & Conversation



Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

NITZAVIM-VAYELECH • נצבים-וילך

STUDIES IN SPIRITUALITY

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

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

"I have loved the Torah of R' Chaim Schimmel ever since I first encountered it. It strives to be not just about truth on the surface but also its connection to a deeper truth beneath. Together with Anna, his remarkable wife of 60 years, they built a life dedicated to love of family, community, and Torah.

An extraordinary couple who have moved me beyond measure by the example of their lives." — Rabbi Sacks

Not in Heaven

● This summary is adapted from the C&C essay of the week, available at www.RabbiSacks.org/covenant-conversation/nitzavim/not-in-heaven/

The moment had come. Moshe was about to die. What did he do on these final days of his life? He issued two instructions, the last of the 613 mitzvot, that were to have significant consequences for the future of Judaism and the Jewish people. The first is known as *hakhel*, the command that the king summon the people to gather during Succot following the seventh, *Shemittah*, year.

The second command – the last Moshe ever gave to the people – was contained in the words: "*Now write down this song and teach it to the Israelites*" (Devarim 31:19), understood by rabbinic tradition to be the command to write, or at least take part in writing, a Sefer Torah. Why specifically these two mitzvot, at this time?

In these last two commands God was teaching Moshe, and through him Jews throughout the ages, what immortality is – on earth, not just in heaven. We are mortal because we are physical, and no physical organism lives forever. We grow up, we grow old, we grow frail, we die. But we are not only physical. We are also spiritual. *In these last two commands, we are taught what it is to be part of a spirit that has not died in four thousand years, and will not die so long as there is a sun, moon, and stars.*

God showed Moshe, and through him us, how to become part of a civilisation that never grows old. It stays young because it repeatedly renews itself. The last two commands of the Torah are about renewal, first collective, then individual.

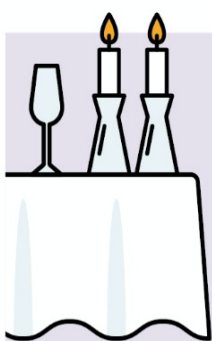
Hakhel, the covenant renewal ceremony every seven years, ensured that the nation would regularly rededicate itself to its mission. If *hakhel* is national renewal, the

command that we should each take part in the writing of a new Sefer Torah is personal renewal. It was Moshe's way of saying to all future generations: It is not enough for you to say, I received the Torah from my parents (or grandparents, or great-grandparents). *You have to take it and make it new in every generation.*

One of the most striking features of Jewish life is that from Israel to Palo Alto, Jews are among the world's most enthusiastic users of information technology and have contributed disproportionately to its development (Google, Facebook, WhatsApp, Waze). But we still write the Torah exactly as it was done thousands of years ago – by hand, with a quill, on a parchment scroll. This is not a paradox; it is a profound truth. *People who carry their past with them can build the future without fear.*

The only way to stay young and driven is through periodic renewal, reminding ourselves of where we came from, where we are going, and why. To what ideals are we committed? What journey are we called on to continue? Of what story are we a part?

How precisely timed, therefore, and how beautiful, that at the very moment when the greatest of prophets faced his own mortality, God should give him, and us, the secret of immortality – not just in heaven but down here on earth. *For when we keep to the terms of the covenant, and making it new again in our lives, we live on in those who come after us, whether through our children or our disciples, or those we have helped or influenced.* We "renew our days as of old" (Eichah 5:21). *Moshe died, but what he taught and what he sought lives on.*



Around the Shabbat Table

1. Why do you think these two mitzvot were the last to be given to the Jewish people?
2. Which more mitzvot that are performed more regularly achieve the same outcome as *hakhel*?
3. Have you ever been involved in the writing of a Sefer Torah? How did it feel (or how do you imagine it must feel)?



Jewish Memory

by Rabbanit Shani Taragin



In 2017, I attended World Mizrahi's celebration of Jerusalem Day in Binyanei Hauma (ICC) along with thousands of others, in honour of fifty years of a reunified Jerusalem. I was sitting just seats away from Rabbi Sacks – the keynote speaker. I recall not only his passion and fervour but his powerful message that resonates as I read his words on this week's Torah portion, for it was the last time I would hear Rabbi Sacks speaking just a few feet away from me.

He spoke about Yerushalayim representing our legacy of the past and dreams for the future. "No other people in all of history has had a relationship with a city to compare with ours – with *Yerushalayim ir HaKodesh*..."

It is said that in the early 1800s, Napoleon was passing a shul on Tisha b'Av, and he heard crying and tears and wailing and lamentations, so he asked one of his officials, "What are the Jews crying about?" His official said to him, "They're crying because they've lost Jerusalem." Napoleon said, "When did they lose Jerusalem?" The official replied, "1700 years ago." Napoleon replied, "A people who have mourned Jerusalem so long will one day have it restored to them." And so it was.

Rabbi Sacks would often speak of the importance of not just history, but Jewish memory, which reinforces our national and personal story, values, and mission for the future. As he explains based on this week's *parsha*, "People who carry their past with them can build the future without fear."

● Rabbanit Shani Taragin is Educational Director of Matan-Bellows Eshkolot Tanakh-Teachers Training Institute, World Mizrahi Lapidot for Halachah Teachers, and United Synagogue Ma'aleh – Women's Advanced Torah Programme.



A CLOSER LOOK

● Rabbanit Taragin now shares some of the deeper ideas she learnt from Rabbi Sacks.

Did anything puzzle you in this week's sedra? How did you make sense of it?

Rashi explains that when Moshe Rabbeinu addresses the nation at the beginning of *parshat Nitzavim* with the covenantal oath "not only with you who are standing here with us today...but **also with those who are not here with us today**" (Devarim 29:14), he's referring to the future generations yet to come! How can Moshe Rabbeinu ask Bnei Yisrael to bind their unborn descendants to uphold the covenant, to impose obligations on them in their absence, without their consent?!

Rabbi Sacks helped me make sense of this by explaining that Hashem calls on us in every generation to continue the story of our ancestors. We are free to decline, but doing so means that we are denying part of who we are, heirs to our history, our personal and national identity.

As he wrote in *A Letter in the Scroll*, "We cannot order our children to be Jews. We cannot deprive them of their choice nor turn them into our clones... I can tell them where we came from, where our ancestors were traveling to, and why it was important to them that their children should carry on the journey. This is our story, unfinished yet. And there is a chapter only they can write."

That is why we must write our own Sefer Torah – to underscore this message.

What influence did Rabbi Sacks have on your approach to education?

Rabbi Sacks lived the message of this week's *parsha*, which has impacted how I learn and teach Tanach, weaving his experiences and insights into the Torah text as a personal and national conversation. Moreover, as we find in this week's *parsha*, Torah is called a "Song" to be written and taught. Rabbi Sacks always has – and continues to – inspire me to sing its magnificent melodies and harmonies as Hashem's "choral symphony."



TORAH TRIVIA

Q: Which parsha is the shortest in the Torah?

- a) Nitzavim
- b) Vayelech
- c) Vezot Habrachah?

Vezot Habrachah has the fewest number of words (512), number of letters (1969), number of lines (70), and the lowest value of gematria (134008). But Nitzavim and Vayelech are both shorter if you count how many *pesukim* they each contain. Vezot Habrachah has 41 *pesukim*, Nitzavim has 30, and Vayelech has 40.

▲: It depends how you count! Vezot Habrachah is the shortest in four aspects, but in one aspect, Nitzavim and Vayelech are both even shorter than Vezot Habrachah.

● Adapted from Torah IQ by David Woolf, a collection of 1500 Torah riddles, available worldwide on Amazon.