



Covenant & Conversation



Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

נצבים-וילך • NITZAVIM-VAYELECH

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

To Renew Our Days

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

The moment had come. Moshe was about to die. Hashem would not allow him to cross over to see the Land, no matter how he asked. So what did Moshe do on these last days of his life? He told the people: *"At the end of every seventh year, the year of remission, of cancelling debts, during Succot, when all Israel comes to appear before the Lord... you shall read out this law in the presence of all Israel, for them to hear. Assemble the people - men, women, and children, including migrants living in your towns - so that they may listen and learn to fear the Lord your God and carefully keep all the words of this Law, and so that their children, who do not know it, may listen and learn to be in awe of the Lord your God."* (Devarim 31:10-13)

This command is known as Hakhel: every seven years, the entire nation would gather to hear the Torah and renew its covenant with God. Similar gatherings took place throughout Jewish history. Devarim itself is a restatement of the covenant, almost forty years and one generation after Sinai. Later, King Josiah renewed the covenant after a Torah scroll was discovered in the Temple, and Ezra and Nechemiah led another national gathering after the return from Bavel.

The other command from our parsha was: "Now write down this song and teach it to the Israelites," understood by rabbinic tradition as the command to write, or take part in writing, a Sefer Torah. Why these two commands at this time?

Something profound was being transacted here. 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. But we are also spiritual, able to become part of a spirit that has not died in four thousand years.

God showed Moshe, and 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 ensured that the nation would regularly rededicate itself to its mission. If Hakhel is national renewal, writing a Sefer Torah is personal renewal. Moshe was saying to future generations: It is not enough to say, "My parents gave me the Torah." You have to take and make it new in every generation.

This is why Jews can embrace modern technology while still writing the Torah exactly as it was done thousands of years ago – by hand, with a quill, on parchment. People who carry their past with them, can build the future without fear.

Things happen. We are blown by passing winds, caught up in problems not of our making, and we drift. When that happens, whether to individuals, institutions, or nations, we grow old. We forget who we are and why.

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, that 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". Moshe died, but what he taught, and what he sought, lives on.

Around the Shabbat Table



1. Why is renewal important?
2. Is preserving tradition enough, or does every generation have a responsibility to renew and reinterpret it?
3. How can remembering where we came from help us avoid losing sight of where we are going?

A Takeaway Thought

Tradition stays alive when each generation renews its covenant, carrying the past forward while making it meaningful for 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

Nitzavim opens with Moshe gathering every member of Bnai Yisrael, from leaders to children and converts, to renew the covenant with God before entering the land. He promises that even if the people are scattered, they can return to God and be gathered again.

Moshe tells them that the Torah is not distant or beyond reach. It is very close, in their mouths and hearts, so that they can do it. He places before them life and good, death and evil, and urges them to choose life.

In **Vayelech**, Moshe tells the people that he will no longer lead them into the land. He gives strength to Yehoshua, who will take over, and writes down the Torah. Moshe commands the Hak'el gathering: every seven years, men, women, children, and converts must assemble to hear the Torah read. Finally, God tells Moshe and Yehoshua to write down the song that will be taught to the people, preparing for the next chapter in Israel's history.



Parsha Activity

Once upon a... suddenly!

One person is asked to retell a simple story. Perhaps something simple that happened earlier that day, or week, or from childhood. Next, each other player has a turn retelling the same story, but each person must get more and more dramatic and enthusiastic as they tell the story, than the person before. Once everyone has taken a turn, discuss: do you now feel like it's everyone's story, or does it still only belong to the first storyteller?



A Stitch in Time

Long ago, in a small Jewish village, there lived a weaver named Rina. Above her loom hung a strange tapestry. It showed a land of mountains, forests, and towns, but partway across the cloth, the picture simply stopped.

"Who made that?" her grandson, Eli, asked her one day.

"My great-great-grandparents," Rina replied. "They began it many years ago."

"And why didn't they finish it?"

"They had a plan."

Eli scrunched up his nose, puzzled.

"They left the rest for us." As they sat together by the fireside, and Rina told Eli the story of the tapestry.

Generations earlier, a young couple had travelled from a distant land to a new home. They brought very little with them. But they wanted both to remember where they came from, and build something of their own. So they began the tapestry of their old land, and left it unfinished, ready for the next stitchers. Every seven years, the family

gathered around the tapestry. The oldest person told the story of those who had come before. Then the youngest person was given the needle. "You must look at what has already been woven," they were told. "But then you must add something that only your generation could add." So one child added a silver river after surviving a terrible drought. Another added a field of flowers after finding a new home. Another added a tree whose branches stretched beyond the edge of the cloth. And always, they left a loose thread waiting. Years passed. The tapestry grew.

Now Eli's turn had come. He stared at the enormous cloth. It seemed impossible to know what to add. But Rina handed him the needle. "It's yours to continue."

"But what do I do?"

"Simply look, think, and begin. The next generation will add something after you." Eli thought for a long time.

Then he noticed something: every part



of the tapestry was connected. The mountains joined the rivers. The rivers reached the fields. The tree's roots stretched out underneath everything. So Eli stitched a small golden pathway into the cloth.

"What does it mean?" Rina asked.

"A route for whoever comes next," he said. Rina smiled.

Many years later, when Eli became an old man, his granddaughter sat beside him, studying the tapestry.

"Why does it never end?" she asked.

"Because it was never meant to," Eli said.

"We don't inherit a finished story. We inherit a story that is still being written." He pointed to the loose golden thread. "Now it is your turn." And the tapestry continued to grow.



Cards & Conversation

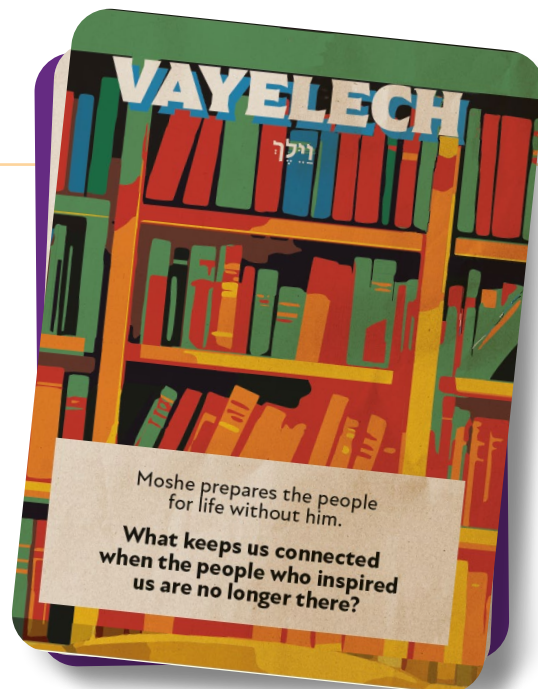
“And the Lord has told me, ‘You shall not cross this Jordan...” - Devarim 31:2

After forty years as their leader, Moshe prepares the people for life without him.

QUESTION: What keeps us connected when the people who inspired us are no longer there?

Rabbi Sacks' commentary on Devarim 31:11 explains: “It is hard for individuals, let alone nations, to stay perennially young. We drift, lose our way, become distracted, lose our sense of purpose and with it our energy and drive. The best way to stay young is never to forget ‘the devotion of our youth,’ the defining experiences that made us who we are, the dreams we had long ago of how we might change the world to make it a better, fairer, more spiritually beautiful place. Hakhel was Moshe’s parting gift to us, showing us how this might be done.”

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

Writing the Torah

(Devarim 31:10-13)

The final mitzva in the Torah is to write a Sefer Torah. The *passuk* says, “Now write down this song for yourselves, and teach it to the people of Israel.” The Sages took this to mean we each have a duty to take part in making the Torah our own. We cannot simply inherit it from an earlier generation without effort.

It is therefore a mitzva to write at least one letter in a new Torah scroll, or to help a Torah scroll writer (a Sofer) do the work but contributing financially towards this mitzva.

“If you write it, it will write you. The eternal word of the eternal God is your share in eternity.” - Rabbi Sacks

Practically Speaking

How will you renew the Torah and write your letter?

It is easy to receive a gift. It’s also possible to view Jewish life like this - as something we receive, and are born into. Something already prepared: the words in the siddur, stories from school, customs at home. But each generation has to find its own way into them. Think about a Jewish song, prayer, or idea that means something to you. What memory or feeling does it bring back? Does it mean the same thing to you now as it did a few years ago?

A Sefer Torah is written by hand, letter by letter, with extraordinary care. This week, choose one *passuk*, idea, or Jewish melody that matters to you. Learn it well enough to share with someone else, and explain why you chose it.



Try it out

YOUNG STUDENTS:

Think about a song you know by heart. You may have learnt it long ago, but every time you sing it, you bring it back to life. The Torah is a little like that. It is very old, but when you learn a *passuk*, ask a question, or sing its words, it becomes yours too. What is one Jewish song you would like to teach someone else?

ADVANCING STUDENTS:

The Torah has always contained arguments and different interpretations, yet the Sages could say, “These and those are the words of the living God.” Choose a Torah question on which two people might disagree. Can you explain both views fairly before deciding which one you prefer? That is one way to add your own voice without drowning out anyone else’s.



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.

All who Gather

LAYER 1: FIND THE TORAH TEXT: DEVARIM 31:12

"הַקְהֵל אֶת-הָעָם הָאֲנָשִׁים וְהַנָּשִׁים וְהַטָּף וְגֵרְךָ אֲשֶׁר בְּשַׁעְרֶיךָ."

LAYER 2: READ RABBI SACKS' TRANSLATION

"... men, women, children, and migrants."

LAYER 3: THINK ABOUT WHAT IT MEANS

Every seven years, during Succot after the Shemittah year, the whole people were commanded to gather together to hear the Torah read aloud. The list of who should be there is striking: men, women, children, and migrants. Not a single person was left out. Hakhel was not only for scholars or leaders. This law indicates that every member of the community deserves access to the Torah's words. Why include children who are too young to understand everything? And why does learning belong to everyone, not only to an elite group?

LAYER 4: LEARN FROM RABBI SACKS' COMMENTARY

"Judaism sees universal access to knowledge as fundamental to human dignity and equality. Every other form of equality has been based on either equality of power or of wealth. The more we teach our knowledge to others, the more we learn..."

"That is why the Jewish version of an egalitarian society, a society in which everyone reaches his or her own full dignity by having access to education and to knowledge, is the only form of egalitarianism that really has worked. Hakhel establishes a culture that enables and encourages learning, not just for an elite, but for everyone."

LAYER 5: REFLECT AND RESPOND

Knowledge is unlike money or power. When we give knowledge away, we do not lose it. We often understand it more deeply because we have had to explain it. Hakhel created a community in which Torah learning was not reserved for a small group. It belonged to everyone, including children and newcomers. A community becomes stronger when learning is shared freely and every person is invited into the conversation.

1. What might children gain from being present at Hakhel, even if they cannot understand every word?
2. Who has taught you something that they were excited to share?
3. How can a family make Torah learning feel open to everyone?

- 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**