



Covenant & Conversation



Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

HA'AZINU · האזינו

BASED ON THE TEACHINGS OF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ל"א ז"ל

Let My Teaching Drop as Rain

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

In the glorious song with which Moshe addresses the congregation, he invites the people to think of the Torah – their covenant with God – as if it were like the rain that waters the ground so that it brings forth its produce:

*Let my teaching drop as rain, let my words fall like dew,
Like gentle rain on tender plants, like showers upon the grass.*

God's word is like rain in a dry land. It brings life. It makes things grow. There is much we can do of our own accord: we can plough the earth and plant the seeds. But in the end our success depends on something beyond our control. If no rain falls, there will be no harvest, whatever preparations we make. So it is with Israel. It must never be tempted into the hubris of saying: *"My power, the strength of my own hand, has brought me this great wealth."*

The Sages sensed something more in the analogy. There is only one Torah, yet it has multiple effects. The Torah is compared to rain precisely to emphasise that its most important effect is to make each of us grow into what we could become. As Rashi comments, God knows each person's character, and that no two people are alike. We are not all the same, nor does Torah seek uniformity.

A famous Mishnah notes that if a human makes a mould to create coins, every newly-minted coin will be identical. But God, who makes every person in the same image (His image) creates us so that every person is individual. This emphasis on difference is a recurring theme in Judaism. One of the fundamental requirements of a leader in Judaism is that he or she is able to respect the differences between human beings. This is a point emphasised by Rambam who writes that *"a leader must be able to bear with each person according to his or*

her disposition."

A similar point emerges from a surprising rabbinic teaching: *"Our Rabbis taught: If one sees a crowd of Israelites, one says: Blessed be He who discerns secrets – because the mind of each is different from that of another, just as the face of each is different from another."*

We might expect a blessing over a crowd to emphasise its size. Yet the blessing stresses the opposite – that each member of a crowd is still an individual with distinctive thoughts, hopes, fears, and aspirations.

The same was true for the relationship between the Sages. There was no single template of the Sage. Each had his own distinctive merits, his unique contribution to the collective heritage. The same applies to the Revelation at Sinai itself. Each individual heard, in the same words, a different inflection: *The voice of the Lord is with power* (Ps. 29:4): that is, according to the power of each individual, the young, the old, and the very small ones, each according to their power [of understanding]. God said to Israel, *"Do not believe that there are many gods in heaven because you heard many voices. Know that I alone am the Lord your God."*

According to Maharsha, there are 600,000 interpretations of Torah. Each individual is theoretically capable of a unique insight into its meaning.

Judaism, in short, emphasises the other side of the maxim *E pluribus unum* ("Out of the many, one"). For Judaism says: "Out of the One, many." **The miracle of creation is that unity in heaven produces diversity on earth. Torah is the rain that feeds this diversity, allowing each of us to become what only we can be.**

Around the Shabbat Table



1. How might our Torah help different people develop in different ways rather than making everyone the same, although we follow the same laws?
2. "Out of the One, many." What does this teach us about individuality?
3. How can a community remain united while allowing people to be very different from one another?

A Takeaway Thought

The Torah is one, yet it enables each person to grow differently, contributing their unique gifts and insights to the collective Jewish heritage.



Exploring the Parsha

WITH SARA LAMM

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



The Parsha in a Nutshell

Moshe addresses the people in a great, poetic song. He teaches them to think of the Torah, their covenant with God, as rain falling on dry ground. Rain brings life and growth, yet a harvest still depends on something beyond human control. The song reminds the people not to imagine that their success comes from their own strength alone.

The Sages add another meaning to the image. Rain is one thing, but it falls on vines, olive trees, date palms,

and grass, each producing something different. So too, Torah is one, but it gives rise to Scripture, Mishnah, laws, lore, teachers, Sages, and people of many virtues. No two people are alike, and Torah does not seek to make them alike. Instead, it helps each person grow towards what only they can become.

The challenge for a community is to respect those differences while still sharing a common covenant and way of life.



Parsha Activity

Rainstorm Garden

Everyone secretly chooses to be a vine, olive tree, date palm, or patch of grass except one person, assigned to be a rain cloud, who walks around the table and points to each plant. When chosen, that player must make a sound or movement that shows how their plant enjoys the rain. Keep going until every plant has been activated. Can anyone correctly guess who was which plant? Now discuss: the rain was the same, so why did every plant respond differently?



Mary's Discoveries

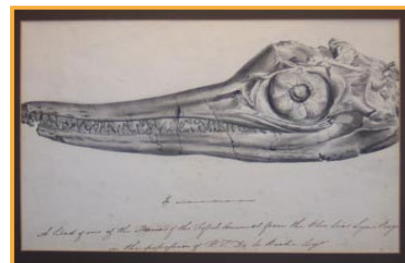
Mary Anning was born in 1799 in the seaside town of Lyme Regis in Dorset, England. Her family was very poor, but their home was near the coastline, and it was full of ancient remains. When Mary was five or six, her father Richard, who was interested in fossils, taught her how to search for them, and how to clean the fossils they found on the beach. Then they would polish them up and sell them in the family carpentry shop.

Although Mary had little formal education, she read as much as she possibly could and paid close attention to the stones and cliffs around her. While other people walked along the shore, she learned to notice marks and shapes that told a much older story.

After her father's sudden death in 1810, Mary and her family were destitute and were under constant

threat of the workhouse. It was during this time that selling fossils became the family's only source of income. In the autumn of 1811, when Mary was twelve, her brother Joseph found a strange, fossilised skull. By far the largest fossil they had ever seen, it was over a metre long. Curious to know more, Mary began searching for the rest of it.

In November 1812, after months of careful work, she uncovered the outline of a skeleton five metres long. The town had never seen anything like it before. People simply did not know what to make of it. Scientists thought it might be a crocodile. The bones were studied and debated for years. In fact, by 1820 the creature had been recognised as an extinct marine reptile, an ichthyosaur. Mary's find was the first ichthyosaur to be scientifically studied and described



in writing. She became a national sensation.

Mary continued to search the shore, uncovering other remarkable dinosaur fossils and teaching herself more about the world beneath her feet.

Mary did not become important by copying somebody else's way of seeing. Her patience, curiosity, and careful eye were her own. The same coastline that others passed each day became, for her, a place full of questions. She made discoveries and contributed something to the world no one else even dreamed of discovering.



Cards & Conversation

"You will see the land from afar, but you shall not enter it." - Devarim 32:52

Moshe is told that he may view the Promised Land, but he will never get there. **QUESTION:** How do we keep going when we know we might never reach our goals?

Rabbi Sacks' commentary on Devarim 32:51 explains: Even the greatest human beings make mistakes ...have moments of black despair. What makes them great is not that they are perfect but that they keep going. They learn from every error, refuse to give up hope, and eventually acquire the great gift that only failure can grant, namely humility. They understand that life ...is about never losing your ideals even when you know how hard it is to change the world. It is about getting up every morning and walking one more day towards the Promised Land even though you know you may never get there, but knowing also that you helped others get there."

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

Value of the Week

Torah as Rain (Devarim 32:2)

The Torah is compared to rain because it gives life in a multitude of ways. A vine, an olive tree, and a date palm receive the same rain, but each grows in its own way. People are like that too. We all learn the same Torah and belong to the same community, but we do not have the same strengths, questions, or ways of serving God. This week, notice one quality in someone else that is different from your own. Rather than wishing they were more like you, consider what they bring that you cannot.

Practically Speaking

How to value others

Comparing ourselves to others can make our own gifts hard to see. Someone else may seem more

confident, organised, creative, or outgoing. But a community thrives on variety, where everyone has unique strengths. Think about a talent or quality you have, even a quiet one. Where does it help others? Then think of someone whose strength is different from yours. What would be missing if they were not there?

We're not all meant to be the same. Yes, we have one Torah with one set of commands, but like rain it produces many kinds of teaching, virtue, and insight. However, this raises a difficulty. If each person has a distinctive way of understanding and serving Hashem, how can a community still have shared rules and a common life?

"The miracle of creation is that unity in heaven creates diversity on earth."

- Rabbi Sacks



Try it out

YOUNG STUDENTS:

All living things need water to thrive, and all vegetation needs rain to grow. But after the rain, they do not all look alike. You do not have to be good at exactly the same things as your friends. One person may be good at sport, another at listening, and another at making people laugh. What is one thing that you are great at doing?

ADVANCING STUDENTS:

The Rambam describes the task of leadership as respecting human variety while using law to prevent chaos. Choose one group you belong to, such as a family, class, team, or youth group. What rule helps that group work together? What is one way it could make more room for different personalities and needs?



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.

The Portable Homeland

LAYER 1: FIND THE TORAH TEXT: DEVARIM 32:47

"כִּי לֹא דְבַר רֶגֶק הוּא מִכֶּם כִּי הוּא חַיִּיכֶם."

LAYER 2: READ RABBI SACKS' TRANSLATION

"For these are not idle words for you; **They are your very life.**"

LAYER 3: THINK ABOUT WHAT IT MEANS

Moshe tells the people that the Torah is not an empty thing. It is their very life. What does this really mean? Why should words on a scroll matter so much? What does it mean to find a home in words?

LAYER 4: LEARN FROM RABBI SACKS' COMMENTARY

"The holiest object in Judaism is a Sefer Torah, a scroll of the law. Still written today as it was thousands of years ago, by hand with a quill on parchment, it symbolizes some of Judaism's deepest beliefs: that God is to be found in words, that these words are to be found in the Torah, and that they form the basis of the covenant – the bond of love – between God and the Jewish people. I wonder if any people have ever loved a book as we love the Torah. We stand when it passes as if it were a king. We dance with it as if it were a bride. If it is desecrated or destroyed, we bury it as if it were a relative or friend. We study it endlessly as if in it were hidden all the secrets of our being. Heinrich Heine once called the Torah the "portable homeland" of the Jewish people. When we lacked a land, we found our home in words."

LAYER 5: REFLECT AND RESPOND

Calling Torah "our very life" means that it is more than a scroll we honour. It carries the words of the covenant between God and the Jewish people. Rabbi Sacks describes the Sefer Torah as the Jewish People's most precious object. We study it and treat it with the care we would show a person we love. For generations, Jews have stood for it, danced with it, and studied it because it gave them a home in words, wherever they lived.

1. Why might the Torah be called a portable homeland?
2. How can one Torah lead to many different strengths and insights?
3. What do you think Moshe meant when he said that Torah is our very life?
4. How can we value other people's differences while remaining part of one community?

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



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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.

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