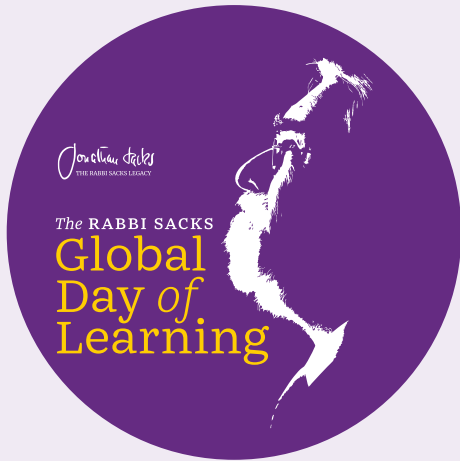




What Does It Mean to Be a Jew?

Through sources, questions and discussion, students will explore Rabbi Sacks' teachings on Jewish identity: the story we inherit, the values we live by, and our responsibility for the future.

The first two sections, on this page, are for those new to Rabbi Sacks and the Global Day of Learning.

Find more resources at rabbisacks.org/gdol



Who Was Rabbi Sacks?



WATCH

this short video about Rabbi Sacks' life:

WWW.RABBISACKS.ORG/VIDEOS/

A-TEACHER-A-LEADER-AND-A-MORAL-VOICE



DISCUSS

the video:

- What impression of Rabbi Sacks did the video give you?
- What did you learn?
- What interested or surprised you?



CHOOSE

some questions to explore:

- What does it mean to describe Rabbi Sacks as a teacher, leader, and moral voice? Who did he influence in each role?
- Which places and famous people did you notice? What do they reveal about his impact?
- What titles did Rabbi Sacks hold, and what do they mean?
- What did you notice about the number of books he wrote?

Why Are We Learning in Rabbi Sacks' Memory?

Learning Torah in memory of someone who has passed away is a special mitzvah. It honours their memory and brings merit to their soul. It is especially meaningful when we learn their own Torah.

Today, we will explore one of Rabbi Sacks' teachings through conversation, learning with and from one another.

Pirkei Avot (4:1) teaches that a wise person learns from everyone:

- Can we learn something from every person?
- What might you learn from your classmates today?
- Why is conversation a good way to learn from others?

What Does It Mean to Be a Jew?

ARE WE A RELIGION OR A NATION?

1 | ARGUMENTS FOR THE SAKE OF HEAVEN, 19–20

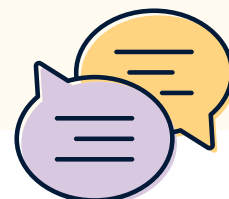
More than two hundred years ago, in 1789, the Count of Clermont-Tonnerre rose to make a speech in the French National Assembly. It was a fateful moment in the history of Western Europe and it was to have repercussions for Jewish identity that have lasted to this day.

The French Revolution had ushered in, earlier that summer, the modern democratic state. The National Assembly had made its momentous declaration of the rights of man... The question was: Did these rights apply to Jews?

... The law, he reaffirmed, has no concern with a person's beliefs. It is interested only in his actions. Jews therefore were entitled to equal rights within the state. But he made one proviso: if Jews were to be part of the French nation, they could not at the same time be members of the Jewish nation. "The Jews should be denied everything as a nation, but granted everything as individuals... It is intolerable that the Jews should become a separate political formation or class in the country" ... **Were Jews adherents of a religion or were they members of a people with its own distinctive laws, governance, and homeland?**

POINTS TO PONDER

- What makes a group a religion? What makes it a nation?
- Do the Jewish people fit either category?
- Can someone belong both to the Jewish people and to another nation?



OR ARE WE ONE BIG FAMILY?

2 | ARGUMENTS FOR THE SAKE OF HEAVEN, 231–232

[T]hat, above all, is what it means to be a Jew. Jewish history begins in choice of a family, the Divine election of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and their children. "I have known him," says God about Abraham, "so that he will command his children and his household after him, and they will keep the way of God, doing charity and justice." The choice of Abraham was the election of a family. Judaism is difficult to define in conventional categories. It is not simply a religious faith, for a secular Jew is still a Jew. It is not simply a nationality, a state, a country, or a land, for the Jew who lives outside Israel is still a Jew. It is not a race or a mode of ethnicity, for there are Jews of many races and colours and backgrounds and cultures. Judaism embraces these things, but it is something other than and prior to them all. **To be a Jew is to be a member of a family...**

Historically and theologically, though, it is not that simple. What kept the Jewish people as a family in the long centuries between the destruction of the Second Temple and the threshold of modernity was a series of **shared beliefs and the unifying bond of Jewish law**. Islam called Jews "the people of the book." George Steiner has spoken of "our homeland, the text." How far a family extends is a matter of convention rather than biology. **The conventions of the Jewish family were defined by Torah**. They were clarified in the rabbinic literature in the sages' famous statement that "all Israel is responsible for one another." Jews were a family because a book – the Torah – said so.

POINTS TO PONDER

- Is “family” a good description of the Jewish people? Why?
- Why might Rabbi Sacks prefer it to “nation” or “religion”?
- If the Torah defines the Jewish family, are Jews who do not observe its mitzvot still part of that family?



A TALE OF TWO COVENANTS



You can explore this section through Rabbi Sacks' video on peoplehood, alongside or instead of the texts:

WWW.RABBISACKS.ORG/VIDEOS/RABBI-SACKS-ON-PEOPLEHOOD-JINSIDER/

3 | BEMIDBAR 10:1–2

וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר. עֲשֵׂה לָךְ שְׁנֵי חֲצוצְרוֹת כֶּסֶף מִקָּשָׁה תַעֲשֶׂה אֹתָם וְהָיוּ לָךְ לְמִקְרָא הַעֲדָה וּלְמִסְעָ אֶת־הַמַּחֲנֶה.

The Lord spoke to Moshe: “Make two silver trumpets; make them of hammered metal. Use them for summoning **the community** and for having **the camps** set out.”

4 | RABBI SACKS' COMMENTARY ON BEMIDBAR 10:1–2 (KOREN SACKS HUMASH)

[T]here are two ways in which people become a group – a community, society, or nation. The first is when they face a common enemy. They band together for mutual protection, knowing that only by so doing can they survive. Such a group is a ***machaneh*** – a **camp**, a defensive formation. Alternatively, people can come together because they share a vision, a set of ideals. This is what it means to be an ***edah***, **congregation**. (*Edah* is related to the word *ed*, “witness.”) A society built around a shared project is not a *machaneh* but an *edah* – not a camp but a congregation. A **camp** is brought into being by what happens to it from the outside. A **congregation** comes into existence by internal decision. The first is a response to what has happened to the group in the past. The second represents what the group seeks to achieve in the future...

The two types of groups represent, in the most profound sense, two different ways of existing and relating to the world. Our ancestors became a *machaneh* in Egypt, forged together by a crucible of slavery and suffering. Ever since, Jews have known that we are thrown together by circumstance. We share a history all too often written in tears. Rabbi Soloveitchik calls this the **covenant of fate (*brit goral*)**. This is not a purely negative phenomenon. It gives rise to a powerful sense that we are part of a single story – that what we have in common is stronger than the things that separate us. The covenant of fate was born in the experience of slavery in Egypt.

But there is an additional element of Jewish identity. Rabbi Soloveitchik calls this the **covenant of destiny (*brit ye'ud*)**, entered into at Mount Sinai. This defines the people of Israel not as the object of persecution but the subject of a unique vocation, to become “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Shemot 19:6). Our task as a people of destiny is to bear witness to the presence of God through the way we lead our lives (Torah) and the path we chart as a people across the centuries (history) – a camp and a congregation. Sometimes the clarion call speaks to our sense of faith. We are God's people, His emissaries and ambassadors, charged with making His presence real in the world through healing deeds and leading holy lives. At other times the trumpet that sounds and summons us is the call of fate: Jewish lives endangered in Israel or the Diaspora. Whichever sound the silver instruments make, they call on that duality that makes Jews and Judaism inseparable. However deep the divisions between us, we remain one family in fate and faith.

5 | MEGILLAT RUT 1:16

וּתְאִמָּר רוּת אֶל תַּפְגְּעִי בִי לְעִזְבֹנִי לָשׁוּב מֵאַחֲרָיִךְ כִּי אֵל אֲשֶׁר תִּלְכִּי אֵלָּךְ וּבְאִשֶּׁר תִּלְיִנִי אֶלֶּיךָ עַמּוּךָ עַמִּי וְאֵלֶיךָ אֶלֶּהִי.

But Ruth replied, “Do not entreat me to leave you, to turn back, not to walk after you. For wherever you walk, I shall walk, and wherever you stay, there I stay. **Your people is my people; your God is my God.**”

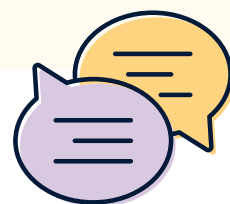
6 | FUTURE TENSE, 47–48

The Jewish people exists in all its bewildering complexity because it is both a **religion** and a **nation**, a **faith** and a **fate**. Remove either element and it will fall apart. That is what is wrong in focusing exclusively on fate – antisemitism, the Holocaust, the people that dwells alone. For it is faith that keeps bringing us back to the idea that Jews are a people: it was as a people that our ancestors left Egypt, as a people that they made a covenant with God in the desert, as a people that they took up the challenge of life in the Holy Land, and as a people that they understood their destiny. Jewish life is quintessentially communal, a matter of believing *and* belonging...

There were times – between the first and nineteenth centuries – when the primary bond between Jews was faith. There were others – during the Holocaust – when it was fate. It is that double bond that has held Jews together. When one failed, the other came to the fore. Call it chance, or the cunning of history, or an invisible hand, or Divine providence, but the old polarities – fate and faith, **goral** and **ye’ud** – remain, dividing Jews and uniting them in a way that is sometimes exasperating, but often inspiring. **A people Jews were. A people they still are.**

POINTS TO PONDER

- How do the covenant of fate (*brit goral*) and covenant of destiny (*brit ye’ud*) help answer whether Jews are a religion or a nation?
- How does Ruth express both elements of Jewish identity?
- When have you experienced the Jewish people as a “camp” united by fate, or a “congregation” united by destiny?
- Which speaks to you most right now?



WHY I AM A JEW



Watch Rabbi Sacks explain what made him proud to be a Jew:

WWW.RABBISACKS.ORG/VIDEOS/WHY-I-AM-A-JEW/

The words come from the final chapter of *A Letter in the Scroll* (also published as *Radical Then, Radical Now*).

- Where do you hear the covenant of fate (*brit goral*) and the covenant of destiny (*brit ye’ud*) in his words?



**The deepest question any of us can ask is:
Who am I?**

**To answer it we have to go deeper than,
Where do I live? or What do I do?**

**The most fateful moment in my life came
when I asked myself that question and knew
the answer had to be: I am a Jew.**

This is why...

Additional Classroom Activities

CREATE A CLASS POSTER

SOURCES OF STRENGTH IN JEWISH IDENTITY

As a class, create a poster showing where students draw strength from their Jewish identity.

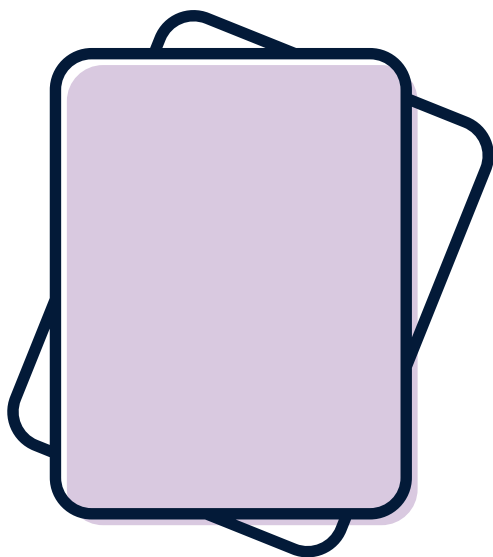
Each student contributes an idea, phrase, quote, symbol or image.

Group the contributions under headings such as **Values**, **History**, and **Culture and Community**.

Examples might include:

- Shabbat as a communal day of rest.
- The Exodus from Egypt: becoming a free people.
- The resilience and continuity of the Jewish people.
- Jewish learning and wisdom.
- Family and solidarity.

Display the finished poster as a reminder of the many sources of strength in Jewish identity.



CARDS AND CONVERSATION

LETTERS TO THE NEXT GENERATION EDITION

Download **Cards and Conversation: Letters to the Next Generation Edition** and choose a selection of cards.

[WWW.RABBISACKS.ORG/
CARDS-AND-CONVERSATION/](http://WWW.RABBISACKS.ORG/CARDS-AND-CONVERSATION/)

Divide students into groups of four to six.

For each card:

- One student reads the question aloud.
- Allow time to think, then invite several responses.
- Encourage follow-up questions and explanations.
- Where relevant, ask: What Jewish value or idea emerges?

Encourage respectful disagreement. The goal is thoughtful exploration, not consensus.

After the discussion, ask each group:

If you could pass one message to the next generation of Jews, what would you want them to know, value, remember or do?

Each group creates a card containing:

- a message to the next generation;
- the Jewish value or idea behind it;
- why it matters for the Jewish future.

Each group presents its card and explains its choice. Display the cards under the heading **Our Messages to the Next Generation**.



The Rabbi Sacks Legacy preserves and perpetuates the ideas of **Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks**, ensuring their reach and relevance endure for generations to come

Find more resources at rabbisacks.org and follow us on social media @rabbisacks