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Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

**STUDIES IN  
SPIRITUALITY**

*A Weekly Reading of the Jewish Bible*

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*A Weekly Reading of the Jewish Bible*  
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*In memory of*

**Irving and Toni Rosen**

*Our parents, grandparents and great-grandparents*

*The Rosen Family*



*Dedicated*

*In memory...  
tribute and gratitude to*

*Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks zt"l*

*who taught us by written and spoken word,  
Jewish values and deeds, what it means  
to be a Torah Jew immersed in the highest form of spirituality.  
May this work continue his teachings for many, many years to come.*

*And in honor of..*

*our parents:*

*Peggy z"l and Philip Zimmerman,  
Howard Lasher  
and Doreen Casella*

*and our children:*

*Jake, David and Gabrielle and Jake Moskovitz,  
and our grandson Noah Lev.*

*These words from Rabbi Sacks zt"l can guide you well  
to a fulfilling and successful life:*

*"Don't wait to be praised: praise others.*

*Don't wait to be respected: respect others.*

*Don't stand on the sidelines, criticizing others.*

*Do something yourself to make things better.*

*Don't wait for the world to change: begin the process yourself,  
and then win others to the cause...*

*'Be the change you seek in the world.' Take the initiative."*

*Cheryl & Lee Lasher  
Englewood, NJ, USA*





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*Foreword*

# Writing Our Own Chapter

Sivan Rahav Meir\*

**D**o not read this book. If this book has made its way into your hands, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks' first to be published in English since his passing, I beg of you: Do not read it. What should be done with it? Two things.

First, learn it. It's a good idea to do this together with someone else, and best if it is someone from the next generation, one of your children or grandchildren, or other young people in your community. Rabbi Sacks did not just write "another book" to be read between a thriller, a cookbook, and political non-fiction. He wanted us to read his words actively, not passively. This is the only way that we can pass on

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our heritage to the next generation: with passion, through discussions, questions and answers, with curiosity, with a spark in our eyes (and who can forget the spark in Rabbi Sacks' eyes when he learned and taught?). Judaism is not something to be learned by rote, and its students are not meant to be robots, he would constantly remind us. This is history's most captivating story, and we are called upon to write our own chapter in it.

Rabbi Sacks' legacy is not reading material. It is life-changing, reality-altering content. So take this book and try to internalize its message. Agree or disagree with it. Try to ensure that your objective is not reading but application. Ask yourself: How are these nice ideas relevant to my life? Read it to others and discuss it, or at least stop every few paragraphs to consider your own opinions.

Second, don't think that by buying this book, you have done something to ensure Rabbi Sacks' legacy. We all loved him very much. We were all deeply pained when he was suddenly taken from us. Although he was not a victim of COVID-19, his passing occurred at the height of the pandemic, meaning that only a small group of people could escort him to his resting place, with thousands joining online. So perhaps we feel that if we have his new book on our bookshelf, we have done something to honor his memory. But the great vacuum that has been created in the Jewish world by his parting will not be filled if we love Rabbi Sacks. It will only be filled if we strive to *be* Rabbi Sacks. The task that he left us is not to purchase his books, but to adopt his path. Exactly as he said about the Lubavitcher Rebbe: "This man did not want to create followers, he wanted to create leaders." Rabbi Sacks did not want people only to know how to quote his ideas by copying and pasting. He desired that people take responsibility, that they transcend themselves in order to change the Jewish world and bring the Torah to every Jew. After all, he too could have remained a student who was satisfied to buy nice Jewish books. But he understood that the most pressing problem of our times is the Jewish people's ignorance and their disappearance, and therefore he changed his life course to dedicate himself to this cause. Although he was a Lord, a professor, a scholar, and a commentator, he was first and foremost a Rabbi. Above his studies of the works of Shakespeare, Goethe, and Nietzsche, he placed Jewish continuity.

That is why it moved me so deeply to hear the way in which his wife, Lady Elaine, began the memorial ceremony marking one month since his passing. Participating in the worldwide virtual ceremony were Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, Prince Charles and the Archbishop of Canterbury, and yet, Lady Elaine's opening words were these: "We received so many letters and stories this past month. People told us that they sent their children to get a Jewish education because of my husband." This was her message, before all of the eulogies delivered by honored guests, because this truly was Rabbi Sacks' core idea. Not to sit in lavish mansions with kings and princes, but to make sure that one more Jewish child will continue on the path of his or her ancestors.

\* \* \*

After having shared those two preliminary "warnings," you are invited to enjoy this wonderful book, which follows our eternal Jewish heartbeat, the weekly Torah reading. And, lo and behold, when I studied two readings that were significant to me, I discovered precisely the two messages that I presented above.

Rabbi Sacks passed away on Shabbat morning, just as, throughout the Jewish world, the portion of *Vayera* was being read. What did Rabbi Sacks teach us about this portion? That the most fundamental principle is education. "Who was Abraham, and why was he chosen?" he asks, and answers: Abraham is not described as a righteous man, as Noah is, or as one who protests injustice, like Moses, or as a warrior, like David, or a prophet, like Isaiah. There is only one place, in *Parashat Vayera*, where the Torah mentions why God chose Abraham: "For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him, to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just." To translate this into our vernacular, it is as if God is saying: I know this guy. I know what he's all about. And do you know what he is? He is a good teacher. A good parent. A good educator. And I know that I can trust him in the area that is most important to Me. Not the army, not money, not territory, not charisma – but education. He will know how best to pass the flame on to the next generation, and to ignite the same spark in their eyes. The point is not to amass knowledge. Abraham is not meant to compel his

## Foreword

children to read many books, but to live their lives in accordance with these books. Abraham succeeds in his task, and for this reason, to this day, we all call him “our father.” Rabbi Sacks passed away on the Shabbat that reminds us all to continue the path of our father Abraham, to direct our sons and daughters to safeguard God’s path.

I then skimmed to the end of the book, toward the portion *Vezot Haberaakha*. On the way, I passed the foundational portions of the book of Genesis, the redemption story of the book of Exodus, the topics of sanctity and the Temple in the book of Leviticus, and the stories of the Jewish people’s wanderings in the desert in the book of Numbers. Rabbi Sacks shines an original and inspiring light on all these stories. When I reached the final portion of the final book of the Torah, I discovered that it was missing. Rabbi Sacks did not finish formulating his insights on the portion before he passed away. Let us try, humbly, to look at it for a moment through his lenses. Undoubtedly, he would have focused on one of the first verses: *Torah tziva lanu Moshe, morasha kehillat Yaakov*, “Moses charged us with the Torah, heritage of the community of Jacob.” This was his life’s motto. The best inheritance that we pass on to subsequent generations is the Torah, our identity, our heritage.

But at the very end of the portion, after Moses blesses all of the tribes, his passing from the world is described. According to some of the commentators, Moses, who wrote all of the Torah, did not write the description of his own death. Rather, his student Joshua wrote the end of the Torah after his teacher passed away. This, perhaps, is the most powerful message that Rabbi Sacks could have left us. The fact that this book lacks a commentary on the final portion says to us: Do not be followers. Be leaders. Do not be fans or spectators, be players. The Torah awaits our commentary as well.



## *Introduction*

# A Sense of Eternity in the Midst of Time

**T**his volume on the weekly *parashot* is about spirituality, about the search for God and His place in our lives. Where and how do we find God? What difference does it make? How does Judaism help us become better, more sensitive and generous as individuals? How does it affect our emotional life? Does it help us order our priorities so that we care for the things that are important, not just urgent? Does it give us the strength to survive hard times, to keep going despite the falls, the failures, and the losses? Does it help us to endure without loss of hope, and persist without loss of energy? Does it teach us to love and forgive? Does it bring us joy?

Spirituality is not the same as “religion,” though the two are related. In essence spirituality is what happens when we open ourselves to something greater than ourselves. Some find it in the beauty of nature, or art, or music. Others find it in prayer, or performing a mitzva, or learning a sacred text. Yet others find it in helping other people, or in friendship, or love.

## Introduction

Spirituality is what tells us that “man does not live by bread alone but by everything that comes from the mouth of God” (Deut. 8:3). We are not just physical beings with biological drives. We have hopes, dreams, fears, loves. We strive for connection. We make sacrifices for the sake of others. We search for meaning. We experience transcendence.

I, like many others, have found God in the depths of despair and the heights of joy. I found Him in a Jerusalem sunset, standing on Mount Scopus looking out toward the Judean hills, as the whole landscape turned red-gold and the world seemed ablaze with a divine radiance. I felt Him lifting me in some of the most difficult moments of my life, helping me to stand up and carry on. I sensed Him when our children and grandchildren were born, as the love that brings new life into being. I feel Him each Friday evening as He surrounds our Shabbat table with clouds of glory. I turn to Him for strength whenever I begin a new stage of life’s journey. I try to express my thanks to Him every time I feel I have done something He would have wanted me to do.

I decided to write about spirituality because so many people I meet are searching for it, and because they say they do not always find it in Judaism today. Those who are engaged in a spiritual search are not always religious in the conventional sense. Some describe themselves as secular, or cultural, or ethnic Jews. I find this very beautiful because it confirms what the Sages said, describing the moment when Moses said to God about the Israelites, “They won’t believe in me” (Ex. 4:1). God, according to the Talmud (Shabbat 97a), replied, “They are believers, the children of believers, but in the end, you will not believe.” Sometimes ordinary people who don’t see themselves as religious can have more faith than religious leaders. Not everyone is a master of Jewish law, but spirituality is engraved in all our souls. God enters, said the Rebbe of Kotzk, wherever we let Him in.

There is, undeniably, something of a crisis in Jewish spirituality today. This is sad, because for many centuries Jews were the God-intoxicated people. If there is a single sentence that sums up Jewish history, it is surely the statement of the prophet Zechariah: “Not by power and not by might but by My spirit, says the Lord of hosts” (Zech. 4:6). Jews never had much power despite what the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* might say. That always was a fantasy. Nor did

they have might. Christianity and Islam built massive, monumental empires. Jews never did.

What our ancestors had in full measure was God's spirit. They felt God close. There is something moving about the word Jews used to describe this. They called it the *Shekhina*, usually translated as the Divine Presence, but which actually means something more striking. A *shakhen* is a neighbour, the person who lives next door. That is how close Jews felt God to be. Yes, He is more distant than the furthest galaxy, but He is also closer to us than we are to ourselves. The God of Abraham is not a distant God. He is enthroned in majesty in heaven. But He is also parent, partner, neighbour, mentor, friend.

So it was for many centuries. Then something changed, something too complex to be analysed here. But at a certain point in the modern age, many Jews became ultra-rationalists. They pioneered in physics, medicine, sociology, anthropology, mathematics, and philosophy. They became shapers of the modern mind. But in the process, many lost that sense of intimacy with God that resonated so powerfully with our ancestors, giving them their sense of hope and courage and singularity.

No faith ever held God so close. Yes, we wrestled with Him, and He with us. Jews questioned, argued, challenged. We were not passive accepters of our fate. It was always a tempestuous relationship. But it was never less than a relationship. For us, as Martin Buber said, God was always a Thou, not an It, a person not a concept, a source of love not a metaphysical abstraction.

In these essays, I will be a little more personal than usual. The reason is that in Judaism there is no one form of spirituality. There are many. The Torah signals this in a subtle way. Three times in the book of Exodus we read of how the Israelites agreed to the covenant with God at Mount Sinai, but there is a subtle difference between the first two and the third:

The people all *responded together*, "We will do [*naaseh*] everything the Lord has said." (Ex. 19:8)

When Moses went and told the people all the Lord's words and laws, they *responded with one voice*, "Everything the Lord has said we will do [*naaseh*]." (24:3)

## Introduction

Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it to the people. They responded, “We will do and hear [*naaseh venishma*] everything the Lord has said.” (24:7)

Note how, in the first two verses, which refer only to action (*naaseh*), there is unanimity. The people respond “together.” They do so “with one voice.” In the third case, which refers not only to doing but also to hearing (*nishma*), there is no unanimity. “Hearing” here means many things: listening, paying attention, understanding, and responding. It means, in other words, the spiritual dimension of Judaism. Hence the special and distinctive feature of Judaism, that we are a community of doing rather than of thinking, understanding, and feeling. There is an authoritative code of Jewish law. When it comes to halakha, the way of Jewish doing, we seek consensus. However, as Maimonides writes several times in his *Commentary to the Mishna*,<sup>1</sup> there is no *psak*, no authoritative ruling, when it comes to non-halakhic aspects of Judaism. We each have our own way of understanding Judaism, our own path to God.

So there is the way of the priest and the way of the prophet. Judaism has its poets, its philosophers, its rationalists, and its mystics. Hasidim found God in joy. Others found God in study. Some found Him in visions, others in prayer, yet others in a sensed presence that had and needed no words. For many the supreme book of spirituality is the book of Psalms – the lexicon of the Jewish soul.

We all need times when we silence the clamorous demands of the self and open ourselves to the majestic beauty of the created world, the inner voice of the divine command, and God’s call to mend some of the fractures of our deeply injured world. What is beautiful about the Torah is that it shows the heroes and heroines of our people’s past not as epitomes of perfection but as human beings – great, to be sure, but always human – wrestling with God and finding Him wrestling with us.

We are spiritual beings. We are not just random mutations of genes, blindly replicating themselves into the future. Nor are we merely profit-maximisers or pleasure-seekers. We seek meaning in our lives, and we are lifted when we are able to endow ordinary acts with the

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1. See, e.g., *Commentary to Mishna*, Sanhedrin 10:3.

charisma of holiness. In this, we have the precedent of the great lives of those who came before us, whose stories, recorded in our sacred texts, still speak to us, showing how ordinary people can be raised to extraordinary heights when they open their minds and moods to the One who is beyond us yet within us.

“Not by power and not by might but by My spirit, says the Lord of hosts.” That was the voice of faith twenty-five centuries ago, and it still holds true. We will need spiritual strength even more than military, economic, or technological strength in the years ahead. For it is spirituality that teaches us that life is sacred, that there is more to happiness than the pursuit of wealth, power, success, or fame, and that though life is short we can, at blessed moments, experience the transformative power of joy giving us a sense of eternity in the midst of time.

I hope the very personal nature of these essays helps you to find your own way to the Divine Presence, which is always there: the music beneath the noise, the call beneath the clamour, the voice of God within the human soul.



# Genesis

## בראשית





*Bereshit*

## The Art of Listening

**W**hat exactly was the first sin? What was the Tree of Knowledge of good and evil? Is this kind of knowledge a bad thing such that it had to be forbidden, and was only acquired through sin? Isn't knowing the difference between good and evil essential to being human? Isn't it one of the highest forms of knowledge? Surely God would want humans to have it? Why then did He forbid the fruit that produced it?

In any case, did not Adam and Eve already have this knowledge before eating the fruit, precisely in virtue of being "in the image and likeness of God"? Surely this was implied in the very fact that they were commanded by God: Be fruitful and multiply. Have dominion over nature. Do not eat from the tree. For someone to understand a command, they must know it is good to obey and bad to disobey. So they already had, at least potentially, the knowledge of good and evil. What then changed when they ate the fruit? These questions go so deep that they threaten to make the entire narrative incomprehensible.

Maimonides understood this. That is why he turned to this episode at almost the very beginning of *Guide for the Perplexed*. His answer, though, is perplexing. Before eating the fruit, he says, the first humans knew the difference between truth and falsehood. What they acquired

by eating the fruit was knowledge of “things generally accepted.”<sup>1</sup> But what does Maimonides mean by “things generally accepted”? It is generally accepted that murder is evil, and honesty good. Does Maimonides mean that morality is mere convention? Surely not. What he means is that after eating the fruit, the man and woman were embarrassed that they were naked, and that is a mere matter of social convention because not everyone is embarrassed by nudity. But how can we equate being embarrassed that you are naked with “knowledge of good and evil”? It does not seem to be that sort of thing at all. Conventions of dress have more to do with aesthetics than ethics.

It is all very unclear, or at least it was to me until I came across one of the more fascinating moments in the history of the Second World War.

After the attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, Americans knew they were about to enter a war against a nation, Japan, whose culture they did not understand. So they commissioned one of the great anthropologists of the twentieth century, Ruth Benedict, to explain the Japanese to them, which she did. After the war, she published her ideas in a book, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*.<sup>2</sup> One of her central insights was the difference between shame cultures and guilt cultures. In shame cultures the highest value is honour. In guilt cultures it is righteousness. Shame is feeling bad that we have failed to live up to the expectations others have of us. Guilt is what we feel when we fail to live up to what our own conscience demands of us. Shame is other-directed. Guilt is inner-directed.

Philosophers, among them Bernard Williams, have pointed out that shame cultures are usually visual. Shame itself has to do with how you appear (or imagine you appear) in other people’s eyes. The instinctive reaction to shame is to wish you were invisible, or somewhere else. Guilt, by contrast, is much more internal. You cannot escape it by becoming invisible or being elsewhere. Your conscience accompanies you wherever you go, regardless of whether you are seen by others. Guilt cultures are cultures of the ear, not the eye.

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1. Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed*, I:2.

2. Ruth Benedict, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1946).

With this contrast in mind, we can now understand the story of the first sin. It is all about appearances, shame, vision, and the eye. The serpent says to the woman, “God knows that on the day you eat from it, your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (Gen. 3:5). That is, in fact, what happens: “The eyes of both of them were opened, and they realised that they were naked” (v. 7). It was the appearance of the tree that the Torah emphasises: “The woman saw that the tree was good to eat and desirable to the eyes, and that the tree was attractive as a means to gain intelligence” (v. 6). The key emotion in the story is shame. Before eating the fruit, the couple were “naked... but unashamed” (2:25). After eating it they feel shame and seek to hide. Every element of the story – the fruit, the tree, the nakedness, the shame – has the visual element typical of a shame culture.

But in Judaism we believe that God is heard not seen. The first humans “heard God’s voice moving about in the garden with the wind of the day” (3:8). Replying to God, the man says, “I heard Your voice in the garden and I was afraid because I was naked, so I hid” (v. 10). Note the deliberate, even humorous irony of what the couple did. They heard God’s voice in the garden, and they “hid themselves from God among the trees of the garden” (v. 8). But you can’t hide from a voice. Hiding means trying not to be seen. It is an immediate, intuitive response to shame. But the Torah is the supreme example of a culture of guilt, not shame, and you cannot escape guilt by hiding. Guilt has nothing to do with appearances and everything to do with conscience, the voice of God in the human heart.

The sin of the first humans in the Garden of Eden was that they followed their eyes, not their ears. Their actions were determined by what they saw, the beauty of the tree, not by what they heard, namely the word of God commanding them not to eat from it. The result was that they did indeed acquire a knowledge of good and evil, but it was the wrong kind. They acquired an ethic of shame, not guilt; of appearances not conscience. That, I believe, is what Maimonides meant by his distinction between true and false and “things generally accepted.” A guilt ethic is about the inner voice that tells you, “This is right, that is wrong,” as clearly as “This is true, that is false.” But a shame ethic is about social convention. It is a matter of meeting or not meeting the expectations others have of you.

Shame cultures are essentially codes of social conformity. They belong to groups where socialisation takes the form of internalising the values of the group such that you feel shame – an acute form of embarrassment – when you break them, knowing that if people discover what you have done you will lose honour and face.

Judaism is precisely not that kind of morality, because Jews do not conform to what everyone else does. Abraham was willing, say the Sages, to be on one side while all the rest of the world was on the other. Haman says about Jews, “Their customs are different from those of all other people” (Est. 3:8). Jews have often been iconoclasts, challenging the idols of the age, the received wisdom, the “spirit of the age,” the politically correct.

If Jews had followed the majority, they would have disappeared long ago. In the biblical age they were the only monotheists in a pagan world. For most of the post-biblical age they lived in societies in which they and their faith were shared by only a tiny minority of the population. Judaism is a living protest against the herd instinct. Ours is the dissenting voice in the conversation of humankind. Hence the ethic of Judaism is not a matter of appearances, of honour and shame. It is a matter of hearing and heeding the voice of God in the depths of the soul.

The drama of Adam and Eve is not about apples, or sex, or original sin, or “the Fall” – interpretations the non-Jewish West has given it. It is about something deeper. It is about the kind of morality we are called on to live. Are we to be governed by what everyone else does, as if morality were like politics: the will of the majority? Will our emotional horizon be bounded by honour and shame, two profoundly social feelings? Is our key value appearance? How we seem to others? Or is it something else altogether, a willingness to heed the word and will of God? Adam and Eve in Eden faced the archetypal human choice between what their eyes saw (the tree and its fruit) and what their ears heard (God’s command). Because they chose the first, they felt shame, not guilt. That is one form of “knowledge of good and evil,” but from a Jewish perspective, it is the wrong form.

Judaism is a religion of listening, not seeing. That is not to say there are no visual elements in Judaism. There are, but they are not primary. Listening is the sacred task. The most famous command in Judaism

is *Shema Yisrael*, “Listen, Israel.” What made Abraham, Moses, and the prophets different from their contemporaries was that they heard the voice that to others was inaudible. In one of the great dramatic scenes of the Bible God teaches Elijah that He is not in the whirlwind, the earthquake, or the fire, but in the “still, small voice” (I Kings 19:12).

It takes training, focus, and the ability to create silence in the soul to learn how to listen, whether to God or to a fellow human being. Seeing shows us the beauty of the created world, but listening connects us to the soul of another, and sometimes to the soul of the Other, God as He speaks to us, calls to us, summoning us to our task in the world.

If I were asked how to find God, I would say: Learn to listen. Listen to the song of the universe in the call of birds, the rustle of trees, the crash and heave of the waves. Listen to the poetry of prayer, the music of the Psalms. Listen deeply to those you love and who love you. Listen to the words of God in the Torah and hear them speak to you. Listen to the debates of the sages through the centuries as they tried to hear the texts’ intimations and inflections.

Don’t worry about how you or others look. The world of appearances is a false world of masks, disguises, and concealments. Listening is not easy. I confess I find it formidably hard. But listening alone bridges the abyss between soul and soul, self and other, I and the Divine.

Jewish spirituality is the art of listening.<sup>3</sup>

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3. For more on the theme of listening in Judaism, see *Parashat Bemidbar*, “The Sound of Silence,” and *Parashat Ekev*, “The Spirituality of Listening.”