

MAKING REVELATION PERSONALLY RELEVANT

Moving from “The Torah was given to Bnei Yisrael”
to “The Torah was given to US!”

STUDY GUIDE FOR TEENS • TIKKUN LEIL SHAVUOT 2025/5785
INSPIRED BY THE TEACHINGS OF **RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT”L**
PREPARED BY RABBI JONATHAN KNAPP, HEAD OF SCHOOL, YAVNEH ACADEMY, PARAMUS, NJ

These sources were designed for the thinking Jewish teen to navigate (with a chavruta/friend, in groups, or solo) on Shavuot when we commemorate the receiving of the Torah over 3,300 years ago.

We deeply cherish our tradition and heritage. At some point, for the Torah to be fully meaningful and relevant to us as individuals, we need to find a way to make it our own, to develop our own personal relationship with Torah. This is more important now than ever. In a world of so many competing ideas, we strive to find our place in the rich world of Torah study. By doing so, the Torah can become our anchor and compass as we navigate the beautiful and often nuanced journey called life.

If you don’t have time to complete this in one night, you may choose to focus on just parts 1 and 3. Or you might want to get as far as you can in one session, and then pick it up again later to complete the resources.

— Rabbi Jonathan Knapp, Sacks Scholar

1

INTRODUCTION WHY WE ARE JEWS

RABBI SACKS, A LETTER IN THE SCROLL*, CHAPTER 4

I am a Jew because, knowing the story of my people, I hear their call to write the next chapter. I did not come from nowhere; I have a past, and if any past commands anyone this past commands me. I am a Jew because only if I remain a Jew will the story of a hundred generations live on in me. I continue their journey because, having come this far, I may not let it and them fail. I cannot be the missing letter in the scroll.

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POINTS TO PONDER

How does this awareness of where we come from impact the way we think and feel about our own religious connection?

How can knowing about our past help us feel religiously motivated?

Many of us are born into religion: how do we make it “our own” so we can write our next chapter?

2

THE PRIMARY ROLE OF TRANSMITTING MESORAH: WHY WAS AVRAHAM SELECTED?

In several places, Rabbi Sacks reflects upon the reason that Avraham was chosen as the first Jew. Let's examine the texts:

BEREISHIT 18:19

For I have chosen him so that he may direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just...

כִּי יִדְעֹתִיו לַמַּעַן אֲשֶׁר יִצְוֶה אֶת בָּנָיו וְאֶת בֵּיתוֹ אַחֲרָיו וְשָׁמְרוּ דֶּרֶךְ ה' לַעֲשׂוֹת צְדָקָה וּמִשְׁפָּט...

Rabbi Sacks often explained that Avraham was selected by God not because he was powerful, wealthy, or a great warrior, but because of his role as a teacher who would pass on ethical monotheism to future generations.

RABBI SACKS, WILL WE HAVE JEWISH GRANDCHILDREN?, CHAPTER 9

To be a Jew is to be a member of the people of the covenant, an heir to one of the world's most ancient, enduring and awe-inspiring faiths. It is to inherit a way of life which has earned the admiration of the world for its love of family, its devotion to education, its philanthropy, its social justice and its infinitely loyal dedication to a unique destiny. It is to know that this way of life, passed on from parents to children since the days of Abraham and Sarah, can only be sustained through the Jewish family; and knowing this, it is to choose to continue it by creating a Jewish home and having Jewish children.

CONTEXT

Judaism has always placed a premium on educating the next generation. Ever since the early days of Yehoshua ben Gamla, Jewish communities everywhere have established schools to ensure that our *Mesorah* is passed onto the next generation.

CHALLENGE

Imagine you are a camp madrich/a. What might you tell your campers about your Jewish heritage? Why would you choose that particular story or event?

POINTS TO PONDER

Can you recall an event or programme from your early days that helped you feel connected to the generations that came before you?

What is your earliest memory (school, camp, home or shul) of connecting with prior generations around our shared heritage? Was it at a school event? A Yom Tov meal?

3

THE REVELATION AT SINAI: MAKING IT PERSONAL

RABBI SACKS, COVENANT & CONVERSATION: YITRO – A KINGDOM OF PRIESTS

At Mount Sinai, all Israel became partners to the covenant. God spoke to everyone – the only recorded revelation not to a prophet or a group of initiates but to an **entire people**. Everyone was party to the law,

because, potentially, everyone could read it and know it. All were equal citizens in the nation of faith under the sovereignty of God. That is what happened at Sinai.

DEVARIM 33:4

Moshe charged us with the Law, heritage (*Morashah*) of Yaakov's assembly.

תּוֹרַה צִוְּיָה לָנוּ מִיְּמֵה מוֹרְשָׁה קְהֵלֶת יַעֲקֹב.

COMMENTARY ON DEVARIM 33:4

- Rabbeinu Bechaye explains that *Morashah* differs from *Yerushah* (inheritance) because it signifies something that requires effort to acquire fully. Unlike a standard inheritance that automatically transfers to heirs, Torah is a *Morashah*, meaning it must be actively claimed and internalised.
- The Lubavitcher Rebbe expands on this idea, contrasting *Yerushah* (something passively received) with *Morashah*, which necessitates effort and personal investment (*Likutei Sichot*, Vol. 19, Parshat V'Zot HaBracha).

CHALLENGE

What would be a special moment to share a religious connection with someone from a previous generation?

POINTS TO PONDER

How does investing our own personal effort deepen our connection to whatever we are doing?

Is there a component of Judaism (Torah study, *tefillah*, *chessed*, *chassidut*) that you feel a special connection with?

Share a time when you personally worked on some aspect of learning Torah, perhaps a shiur, a project, or a Dvar Torah. Do you recall it? Where and when did it take place?

PIRKEI AVOT 2:12

Rabbi Yose said... Prepare yourself to study Torah, for it does not come to you as an inheritance. רַבִּי יוֹסִי אָמַר... וְהִתְקַן עֲצֻמָּךְ לְלַמֵּד תּוֹרָה, שְׂאִינָה יִרְשָׁה לָּךְ.

RABBI SACKS, COVENANT & CONVERSATION: VAYELECH – THE TORAH AS SONG

There are two Hebrew words for an inheritance: *Nachalah* and *Morashah*. They convey different ideas. *Nachalah* is related to the word *nachal*, meaning a river, a stream. As water flows downhill, so an inheritance flows down the generations. It happens naturally. It needs no effort on our part.

Morashah is different. Here the verb is active. It means to take possession of something by a positive deed or effort. Bnei Yisrael received the land as a result of God's promise to Abraham. It was their legacy, their *Nachalah*, but we nonetheless had to fight battles and win wars. *Lehavidil*, Mozart and Beethoven were both born to musical fathers. Music was in their genes, but their art was the result of almost endless hard work.

Torah is a *Morashah*, not a *Nachalah*. We need to write it for ourselves, not merely inherit it from our ancestors.

POINTS TO PONDER

When and how is the Torah compared to a song?

How can we earn our inheritance of the Torah?

RABBI SACKS, COVENANT & CONVERSATION: PINCHAS – LEADERSHIP AND THE ART OF PACING

There are three kinds of Torah: The Torah we learn from books, the Torah we learn from teachers, and the Torah we learn from life. The first two are straightforward. That is how most of us learn. But the third can

sometimes be the deepest and most personal. We learn because something happens to us or through us that gives us a new insight into what the Torah is trying to teach us to see.

TAKEAWAY THOUGHT

Making our Torah study more personal will have a deeper impact on us. And thereby we will be more likely to pass it on and share it with others.

CHALLENGE

Do you recall the first time you completed an adult task independently (e.g., making your own lunch)? In what ways did it feel different from having a parent complete that task on your behalf? How can this inform finding our connection to Torah study?

POINTS TO PONDER

Imagine holding an envelope in your hands that was written by your great-grandparent. What would you be feeling? How excited would you be to read the contents of such a letter?

In what ways does the Torah that has been learned by our grandparents, their grandparents, their grandparents back for 100 generations, create a similar feeling?

ANALOGY TIME

In her podcast *Books & Beyond: The Rabbi Sacks Podcast*, Dr. Tanya White offers an image of an envelope that is passed on from one generation to the next. You have two choices: to either pass the envelope on without opening the envelope, or to open the envelope. By opening the envelope, you make the contents inside more vulnerable to being lost or damaged. Yet, if one never opens the letter, it does not have potential for deep relevance or meaning.



4

FINDING MEANING: MAKING IT OURS!

There are two distinct types of brachot we recite daily before learning Torah.

Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the Universe, who has chosen us from all the peoples and given us His Torah. Blessed are You, Lord, Giver of the Torah.

ברוך אתה ה' אלהינו מלך העולם, אשר בחר בנו מכל העמים ונתן לנו את תורתו. ברוך אתה ה' נותן התורה.

Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the Universe, who has made us holy through His commandments, and has commanded us to engage in study of the words of Torah.

ברוך אתה ה' אלהינו מלך העולם אשר קדשנו במצותיו וצונו לעסוק בדברי תורה.

Please, Lord our God, make the words of Your Torah sweet in our mouths and in the mouths of Your people, the house of Israel, so that we, our descendants and the descendants of Your people, the house of Israel, may all know Your name and study Your Torah for its own sake. Blessed are You, Lord, who teaches Torah to His people Israel.

והערב נא, ה' אלהינו את דברי תורתך בפינו ובפי עמך בית ישראל ונהיה אנחנו וצאצאינו וצאצאי עמך בית ישראל, כלנו יודעי שמך, ולומדי תורתך. ברוך אתה ה', המלמד תורה לעמו ישראל.

RABBI SACKS, A LETTER IN THE SCROLL, CHAPTER 16

This, then, is our story, our gift to the next generation. I received it from my parents and they from theirs across great expanses of space and time. There is nothing quite like it. It changed and today it still challenges the moral imagination of mankind. I want to say to my children: Take it, cherish it, learn to understand and to love it. Carry it and it will carry you. And may you in turn pass it on to your children. For you are a member of an eternal people, a letter in their scroll. Let their eternity live on in you.

RABBI SACKS, A LETTER IN THE SCROLL, CHAPTER 4

Imagine that we are in a vast library. In every direction we look there are bookcases. Each has shelves stretching from the floor to the ceiling, and every shelf is full of books. We are surrounded by the recorded thoughts of many people, some great, some less so, and we can reach out and take any book we wish. All we have to do is choose. We begin to read, and for a while we are immersed in the world, real or imaginary, of the writer... Once the book no longer interests us, we can put it back on the shelf, where it will wait for the next reader to pick it up. It makes no claim on us. It is just a book.

Imagine that while browsing in the library, you come across one book unlike the rest, which catches your eye because on its spine is written the name of your family. Intrigued, you open it and see many pages written by different hands in many languages. You start reading it, and gradually you begin to understand what it is. It is the story each generation of your ancestors has told for the sake of the next, so that everyone born into this family can learn where they came from, what happened to them, what they lived for and why. As you turn the pages, you reach the last, which carries no entry but a heading. It bears your name.

TAKEAWAY THOUGHT

We have discussed the duality of being naturally included while still striving to make our learning personal. This idea manifests in the dual nature of these brachot we say every morning before studying Torah. On the one hand, we say *asher bachur banu* – we thank Hashem for being included in His special covenantal community. We are all included, no matter what. And yet, as per the other bracha, we each have an obligation to delve deep, *la'asok*, to plumb the depths of Torah. The more we do so, the more we will be individually connected to *limmud HaTorah*.

POINTS TO PONDER

You are now holding the book of our heritage, your heritage in your hands. The next page is blank. You have the quill. What will be your contribution? What chapter will you write?

The Torah is ours. It was gifted to us by Hashem. While we all have a portion in the Torah naturally, what can you do – starting today – to make the Torah your own?

CHALLENGE

Just as a Torah Scroll is incomplete with even a single letter missing, so too our people would be incomplete without the unique contributions of each individual. This includes you and your contributions.

Perhaps now is a good time to consider: What acts of *chesed* or *chinuch* can you do for others in your family/community in the coming weeks?



“Where what you want to do meets what needs to be done, that is where God wants you to be.”

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

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