



# COVENANT & CONVERSATION

## Family Edition

FINDING FAITH IN THE PARSHA WITH RABBI SACKS

"With thanks to *The Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation* for their generous sponsorship of *Covenant & Conversation*. Maurice was a visionary philanthropist. Vivienne was a woman of the deepest humility. Together, they were a unique partnership of dedication and grace, for whom living was giving."

בס"ד

צו תש"ף  
Tzav 5780

**Left- and Right-Brain Judaism**

### \*\* KEY IDEA OF THE WEEK \*\*

**Combine Priestly detail and Prophetic vision to reach spiritual greatness.**



### PARSHAT TZAV IN A NUTSHELL

Parshat Tzav continues the laws of sacrifices that we began to learn in last week's parsha, but this time we learn about the requirements of the Kohanim who will be the ones actually performing the rituals.

The laws of the burnt and grain offerings, sin and guilt offerings, and peace offerings, are all discussed, and each one has special details of how to bring the offering. Then we learn how Aaron (the Kohen Gadol) and his sons will be

initiated into their roles as Priests. Finally, the opening ceremony of the service of the Mishkan is described.

### QUESTION TO PONDER:

The root of the word for sacrifice (*korban*) means 'to come close'. How do you think giving God a sacrifice brings us closer to Him?



### THE CORE IDEA

The idea of reading the Haftarah – connecting a passage from the prophetic literature to read alongside the Torah portion of the week – is an ancient one, dating back at least 2000 years. Scholars are not sure when, where, and why it was instituted. Some say that it began when Antiochus IV's attempt to eliminate Jewish practice in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE sparked the revolt we celebrate on Chanukah. At that time, so the tradition goes, public reading from the Torah was forbidden. So the Sages ruled that we should read a prophetic passage whose theme would remind people of the subject of the weekly Torah portion.

Another view is that it began in protest of the Samaritans, and later the Sadducees, who denied the authority of all the prophetic books except the book of Joshua.

Often the connection between the parsha and the haftarah is straightforward and obvious. Sometimes, though, the choice of prophetic passage is instructive, teaching us something deeper about what the Sages understood as the key message of the parsha.

But there are some haftarot that are so strange that they deserve to be called paradoxical, since their message seems

to challenge rather than reinforce that of the parsha. Our parsha is a good example of this. Tzav is focused on the various kinds of sacrifices. Then comes the haftarah, with Jeremiah's almost incomprehensible remark:

*For when I brought your ancestors out of Egypt and spoke to them, I did not just give them commands about burnt offerings and sacrifices, but I gave them this command: Obey Me, and I will be your God and you will be My people. Walk in obedience to all I command you, that it may go well with you.*  
(Jer. 7:22-23)

This seems to suggest that sacrifices were not part of God's original intention for the Israelites. It seems to minimise the importance of the very substance of the parsha.

What does it mean? The simplest interpretation is that it means "I did not *only* give them commands about burnt offerings and sacrifices." Perhaps God is saying, yes I commanded these, but they were not the whole of the law, nor were they even its primary purpose.

A second interpretation is the famously controversial view of Rambam that the sacrifices were not what God would have wanted in an ideal world. What He wanted was *avodah*: He

wanted the Israelites to worship Him. But they, accustomed to religious practices in the ancient world, could not yet conceive of *avodah shebalev*, the “service of the heart,” namely prayer. They were accustomed to the way things were done in Egypt (and virtually everywhere else at that time), where worship meant sacrifice. On this reading, Jeremiah meant that from a Divine perspective sacrifices were *bedi'avad* not *lechatchilah*, an after-the-fact concession not something desired at the outset.

A third interpretation is that the entire sequence of events from Shemot 25 to Vayikra 25 was a response to the episode of the Golden Calf. This mistake, I believe, represented a passionate need on the part of the people to have God close not distant, in the camp not at the top of the mountain, accessible to everyone not just Moses, and on a daily basis not just at rare moments of miracle. That is what the

Mishkan, with all its service and its sacrifices, represented. It was the home of the Shechinah, the Divine Presence, from the same root as *sh-ch-n*, “neighbour.” Every sacrifice – in Hebrew *korban*, meaning “that which is brought near” – was an act of coming close. So in the Mishkan, God came close to the people, and in bringing sacrifices, the people came close to God.

The Torah contains the details of *how* to do this, but only the haftarah tells us *why* – to help us stay connected to God and remind us to walk in His way.

### QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. According to the parsha, **how** do we come close to God?
2. According to the haftarah, **why** do we need sacrifices and the Mishkan to worship God?



### IT ONCE HAPPENED...

From the film screenplay of **Dead Poets Society**

**Mr Keating:** Gentlemen, open your texts to page 21 of the introduction. Mr. Perry, will you read the opening paragraph of the preface, entitled 'Understanding Poetry'?

**Perry:** *Understanding Poetry*, by Dr. J. Evans Pritchard, Ph.D. To fully understand poetry, we must first be fluent with its meter, rhyme, and figures of speech. Then ask two questions: One, how artfully has the objective of the poem been rendered, and two, how important is that objective. Question one rates the poem's perfection, question two rates its importance. And once these questions have been answered, determining a poem's greatness becomes a relatively simple matter.

As you proceed through the poetry in this book, practice this rating method. As your ability to evaluate poems in this matter grows, so will your enjoyment and understanding of poetry."

**Mr Keating:** Now I want you to rip out that page. Go on, rip out the entire page. You heard me, rip it out. Rip it out! Rip! Be gone, J. Evans Pritchard, Ph.D. Rip. Shred. Tear. Rip it out!

*In my class you will learn to think for yourselves again. You will learn to savour words and language. No matter what anybody tells you, words and ideas can change the world. We don't read and write poetry because it's cute. We read and write poetry because we are members of the human race. And the human race is filled with passion. Medicine, law, business, engineering, these are all noble pursuits, and necessary to sustain life. But poetry, beauty, romance, love, these are what we stay alive for.*

### QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. What is the value in analysing poetry through rules? Why are rules important in general?
2. What does Pritchard's approach to poetry overlook?



### THINKING MORE DEEPLY

Daily sacrifices were not in God's original plan, and, as we discussed last week, they could be problematic. In Shemot verses 19-24, we see the original plan was that God would be the people's sovereign and lawmaker. He would be their king, not their neighbour. He would be distant, not close (see Shemot 33:3, Also see haftarah for Tzav, from Jeremiah). The people would obey His laws; they would not bring Him sacrifices on a regular basis. God does not need sacrifices. But God responded to the people's wish, much as He did when they said they could not continue to hear His overwhelming voice at Sinai: "I have heard what this people said to you. Everything they said was good" (Devarim 5:25). *What brings*

*people close to God has to do with people, not God.* That is why sacrifices were not God's initial intent but rather the Israelites' spiritual-psychological need: a need for closeness to the Divine at regular times.

Now let's look at the haftarah for the morning of Yom Kippur, from the 58<sup>th</sup> chapter of Isaiah, one of the most astonishing passages in the prophetic literature:

"Is this the fast I have chosen – a day when a man will oppress himself? ... Is this what you call a fast, 'a day for the Lord's favour'? No: this is the fast I choose. Loosen the bindings of evil and break the slavery chain. Those who were crushed, release

to freedom; shatter every yoke of slavery. Break your bread for the starving and bring dispossessed wanderers home. When you see a person without clothes, clothe them: do not avert your eyes from your own flesh." (Isaiah 58:5-7)

The message is unmistakable. We spoke of it in last week's *Covenant and Conversation*. The commands between us and God and those between us and our fellows are inseparable. Fasting is of no use if at the same time you do not act justly and compassionately to your fellow human beings. You cannot expect God to love you if you do not act lovingly to others. That much is clear.

But to read this in public on Yom Kippur, immediately after having read the Torah portion describing the service of the High Priest on that day, together with the command to "afflict yourselves," seems jarring, even illogical. In fact, the sudden shift of focus reinforces a crucial teaching. First we read the Torah commands to fast, atone and purify ourselves, and then suddenly the Prophet is telling us that none of this will work unless we engage in some kind of social action, or at the very least behave honourably toward others. Our Torah and haftarah seem in conflict here. But they are actually two voices singing in harmony.

What connects these two haftarot is their insistence on the moral dimension of Judaism. As Jeremiah puts it in the closing verse of the haftarah, "I am the Lord, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight," (Jeremiah 9:23). What is genuinely unexpected is that the Sages joined together sections of the Torah and passages from the prophetic literature so different from one another that they sound as if coming from different universes with different laws of gravity.

That is the greatness of Judaism. It is a choral symphony scored for many voices. It is an ongoing argument between different points of view. Without detailed laws, no sacrifices. Without sacrifices in the biblical age, no coming close to God. But if there are only sacrifices with no prophetic voice, then people may serve God while abusing their fellow humans. They may think themselves righteous while they are, in fact, merely self-righteous.

The Priestly voice we hear in the Torah readings for Yom Kippur and Tzav tells us *what* and *how*. The Prophetic voice tells us *why*. They are like the left and right hemispheres of the brain; or like hearing in stereo, or seeing in 3D. That is the complexity and richness of Judaism.

Put Priestly and Prophetic voices together and we see that ritual is a training in ethics. Repeated performance of sacred acts reconfigures the brain, reconstitutes the personality, reshapes our sensibilities. The commandments were given, said the Sages, to refine people. The external act influences inner feeling. "The heart follows the deed," as the Sefer haChinuch puts it.

**I believe that this tension between Torah and Haftarah, Priestly and Prophetic voices, is one of Judaism's great glories. We hear both how to act and why. Without the how, action is lame; without the why, behaviour is blind. Combine Priestly detail and Prophetic vision and you have spiritual greatness.**

#### QUESTION TO PONDER:

What is the difference between left-brain and right-brain thinking, and what do they have to do with the Priestly voice in the parsha and the Prophetic voice in the haftarah?



#### FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

*"Science takes things apart to see how they work. Religion puts things together to see what they mean. Without going into neuroscientific detail, the first is a predominantly left-brain activity, the second is associated with the right hemisphere... Science is about explanation.*

*Religion is about meaning. Science analyses, religion integrates. Science breaks things down to their component parts. Religion binds people together in relationships of trust. Science tells us what is. Religion tells us what ought to be. Science describes. Religion beckons, summons, calls. Science sees objects. Religion speaks to us as subjects. Science practises detachment. Religion is the art of attachment, self to self, soul to soul. Science sees the underlying order of the physical world. Religion hears the music beneath the noise. Science is the conquest of ignorance. Religion is the redemption of solitude."*

**The Great Partnership, p. 2-6**



#### AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. Which of the reasons given above do you think best explains the institution of the haftarah?
2. What do you think the haftarah achieves today?
3. What is the message of this week's haftarah?



## QUESTION TIME

Do you want to win a **Koren Aviv Weekday Siddur**? Email [CCFamilyEdition@rabbisacks.org](mailto:CCFamilyEdition@rabbisacks.org) with your name, age, city and your best question based on the ideas from the *Covenant & Conversation Family Edition*. **Entrants must be 18 or younger.** Thank you to Koren Publishers for kindly donating these wonderful siddurim.



## EDUCATIONAL COMPANION TO THE QUESTIONS

### IN A NUTSHELL

1. The root of the Hebrew word for sacrifice is *k-r-v* which means close. When we give a gift to a friend this brings us closer to them and them closer to us. The giver feels good that they have given something they have (monetary value, time, creativity, care) to another person, and this makes them feel closer and more connected. In the case of God, we feel closer and more connected when we give up something for God. It could be a sacrifice in the Temple times, or our time and passion today in the form of praying or carrying out mitzvot.

### THE CORE IDEA

1. The details of the Tabernacle and the sacrificial service are the "how" to worship God in this week's parsha.
2. The haftarah says: "For when I brought your ancestors out of Egypt and spoke to them, I did not just give them commands about burnt offerings and sacrifices, but I gave them this command: Obey Me, and I will be your God and you will be My people. Walk in obedience to all I command you, that it may go well with you." (Jeremiah 7:22-23) This suggests that these laws are ultimately to encourage a closeness and connection with God. The Tabernacle addressed a passionate need on the part of the people to have God close not distant, in the camp not at the top of the mountain, accessible to everyone not just Moses, and on a daily basis not just at rare moments of miracle.

### IT ONCE HAPPENED...

1. Rules give life structure. Rules to analyse poetry help us to find the literary techniques, the patterns and structure contained within poems (and all other forms of art).
2. If you only use rules to write and analyse poetry you may well miss the passion, emotions and spirit of poetry. This is the equivalent of the prophetic message found in the haftarah that help us understand the priestly rules found in the Torah.

### THINKING MORE DEEPLY

1. Our brain has two hemispheres, and they are used for different types of thinking. The left-hand side of the brain is used for mostly analytical and methodical thinking and the right-hand side of the brain is for more creative and artistic thinking. Rabbi Sacks is suggesting that this corresponds to the priestly approach (found in the Torah) which uses detail-orientated ritual to approach God, while the prophetic voice (found in this week's haftarah) is more focused on the emotional and spiritual needs that underly our service of God.

### AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. The first theory mentioned is that the haftarah was instituted when Antiochus IV's attempted to eliminate Jewish practice in the second century BCE, and specifically the public reading from the Torah. So the Sages instituted that we should read a prophetic passage whose theme would remind people of the subject of the weekly Torah portion. Another view is that it was introduced to protest the views of the Samaritans, and later the Sadducees, who denied the authority of the prophetic books except the book of Joshua. Finally there is the theory that the haftarah contains a message from the rabbis to help us understand what they think is the core important message from the Torah portion.
2. Perhaps the most important goal today is to expose us to the books of the Prophets. We are generally very Torah-centric (for obvious reasons) and sometimes we might neglect to study and teach the rest of Tanach, so the haftarah ensures we have some familiarity with the prophetic books.
3. Sacrifices are an important part of how we serve God, and Vayikra is very focused on the details of this service. The preferred interpretation of why this week's haftarah was chosen to accompany parshat Tzav is that the entire sequence of events from Exodus 25 to Leviticus 25 was a response to the episode of the Golden Calf. The Tabernacle represented a passionate need on the part of the people to feel God's closeness, to have a way for His Presence to be accessible to everyone not just Moses, and on a daily basis not just at rare moments of miracle. Every sacrifice – in Hebrew *korban*, meaning "that which is brought near" – was an act of coming close. So in the Tabernacle, God came close to the people, and in bringing sacrifices, the people came close to God. The haftarah gives the details of the ritual aspects of the Tabernacle some much needed perspective, shifting our focus from these details to the truest ways to serve God and achieve spiritual greatness.