



# COVENANT & CONVERSATION

## Family Edition

נצבים תשע"ט  
Nitzavim 5779

**Not Beyond  
the Sea**

### WELCOME TO COVENANT & CONVERSATION 5779 FAMILY EDITION

Covenant & Conversation: Family Edition is a new and exciting initiative from *The Office of Rabbi Sacks for 5779*. Written as an accompaniment to Rabbi Sacks' weekly *Covenant & Conversation* essay, the Family Edition is aimed at connecting teenagers and families with his ideas and thoughts on the parsha. To receive this via email please make sure you are subscribed to Rabbi Sacks' main mailing list at [www.RabbiSacks.org/Subscribe](http://www.RabbiSacks.org/Subscribe).



### PARSHAT NITZAVIM IN A NUTSHELL

In dramatic fashion, Moses gathers together all the people – leaders, tribes, elders, officials, children, wives, and strangers in the camp, from woodcutter to water-drawer – to renew their covenant with God before entering into the land of Israel. He warns them that their future depends on their faithfulness to it. If they break their faith and their promise,

they will suffer defeat, devastation, and exile. Yet even then, the covenant and God's word would remain. Even during exile, if the people return to God, He will return to them and help them to return to their land. The choice will always be theirs. Therefore, we are guided to "Choose life, that you and your children may live" (Devarim 30:19).



### THE CORE IDEA

There have been many times throughout Jewish history when Jews have been tempted by other religions and cultures. In parshat Nitzavim, Moses forewarned us:

*Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach. It is not in heaven, so that you have to ask, "Who will ascend into heaven to get it so we can listen to it and obey it?" Nor is it beyond the sea, so that you have to ask, "Who will cross the sea to get it so we can listen to it and obey it?" No, the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it. (Devarim 30:11–14)*

Moses sensed prophetically that in the future Jews would mistakenly imagine that to find inspiration we might need to search far and wide, beyond Judaism.

The beauty of Jewish spirituality is the idea that God is always close. You do not need to climb a mountain or seek a far-off place of solitude to find the Divine Presence. It is right there around the table at a Shabbat meal, in the light of the candles and the simple holiness of the Kiddush wine and the challot, in the praise of the Eishet Chayil and the blessing of children, in the peace of mind that comes when you leave the world to look after itself for a day while you celebrate the good things that come not from working but resting, not from buying but enjoying – the gifts you have had all along but did not have time to appreciate.

In Judaism, God is close. He is there in the poetry of our *tehillim*, the greatest literature of the soul ever written. He is there listening in to our debates as we study a page of the Talmud or offer new interpretations of ancient texts. He is there in the joy of the festivals, the tears of Tisha B'Av, the echoes of the shofar of Rosh Hashanah, and the appeals of Yom Kippur. He is there in the very air of the land of Israel and the stones of Jerusalem, where the oldest of the old and the newest of the new mingle together like close friends.

God is near. Judaism needed no cathedrals, no monasteries, no abstract philosophies – beautiful though all these are – because for us God is the God of everyone and everywhere, who has time for each of us, and who meets us where we are, if we are willing to open our soul to Him.

### QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. What examples of where God can be found are mentioned here? What do these all have in common?
2. Where in your everyday world can you sense God?
3. In your experience, are synagogues very grand buildings like a cathedral or more simpler buildings? Can you explain this?



## IT ONCE HAPPENED...

*The Kotzker Rebbe once asked his students where can God be found. They replied with puzzled looks, "Surely He fills all the world with His glory." Their teacher slowly shook his head and said, "No, my children. I asked where is He to be found, not where He is." The students looked at the Rabbi with more confusion and exasperation. "Did we not already say that He is everywhere?" "No, no," the Kotzker Rebbe smiled at them. "You must understand that God is to be found in the place where you open up your hearts and let Him in!"*



## THINKING MORE DEEPLY

For much of Israel's history, Jews would say that to find inspiration we have to ascend to heaven or cross the sea. It is anywhere but here. So it was for much of Israel's history during the First and Second Temple periods. First came the era in which the people were tempted by the gods of the people around them: the Canaanite Baal, the Moabite Chemosh, or Marduk and Astarte in Babylon. Later, in Second Temple times, they were attracted to Hellenism in its Greek or Roman forms. Jews have long had a tendency to fall in love with people who do not love them and pursue almost any spiritual path so long as it is not their own. But it is very debilitating.

When great minds leave Judaism, Judaism loses great minds. When those in search of spirituality go elsewhere, Jewish spirituality suffers. And this tends to happen in precisely the paradoxical way that Moses describes several times in Devarim. It occurs in ages of affluence, not poverty, in eras of freedom, not slavery. When we seem to have little to thank God for, we thank God. But when we have much to be grateful for, we forget.

The eras in which Jews worshipped idols or became Hellenised were Temple times when Jews lived in their land, enjoying either sovereignty or autonomy. The age in which, in Europe, they abandoned Judaism was the period of Emancipation, from the late eighteenth to the early twentieth centuries, when for the first time they enjoyed civil rights.

The result was that many talented Jews enriched other cultures more than their own. Part of Mahler's Eighth Symphony is a Catholic mass. Irving Berlin, son of a chazzan, wrote "White Christmas." Felix Mendelssohn, grandson of one of the first "enlightened" Jews, Moses Mendelssohn, composed church music and rehabilitated Bach's long-neglected St Matthew Passion. Simone Weil, one of the deepest Christian thinkers of the twentieth century – described by Albert Camus as "the only great spirit of our times" – was born to Jewish parents. So was Edith Stein, celebrated by the Catholic Church as a saint and

### QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. Why did the Kotzker Rebbe's students answer in the way they did?
2. What is the meaning of the answer the Kotzker Rebbe gave? How does that relate to the answers you gave for question 2 of *The Core Idea*?

martyr, but murdered in Auschwitz because to the Nazis she was a Jew. And so on.

The surrounding culture in most of these cases was hostile to Jews and Judaism. Yet Jews often preferred to adopt the culture that rejected them rather than embrace the one that was theirs by birth and inheritance, where they had the chance of feeling at home. The results were often tragic.

Becoming Baal worshippers did not lead to Israelites being welcomed by the Canaanites. Becoming Hellenised did not endear Jews to either the Greeks or the Romans. Abandoning Judaism in the nineteenth century did not end antisemitism; it inflamed it.

Was it the failure of Europe to accept the Jewishness of Jews and Judaism? Was it Judaism's failure to confront the challenge? The phenomenon is so complex it defies any simple explanation. But in the process, we lost great art, great intellect, great spirits and minds.

To some extent the situation has changed both in Israel and in the Diaspora. There has been much new Jewish music and a revival of Jewish mysticism. There have been important Jewish writers and thinkers. But we still spiritually underachieve. Because we look around, and forget to look within. Hence the power of Moses' insistence: to find truth, beauty, and spirituality, you do not have to go elsewhere. "The word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it."

The deepest roots of spirituality come from within: from within a culture, a tradition, a sensibility. They come from the syntax and semantics of the native language of the soul: "The word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it."

I am a Rabbi. For many years I was a Chief Rabbi. But in the end I think it was we, the Rabbis, who did not do enough to help people open their doors, their minds, and their feelings to the Presence-beyond-the-universe-who-created-us-in-love that

our ancestors knew so well and loved so much. We were afraid – of the intellectual challenges of an aggressively secular culture, of the social challenges of being in, yet not entirely of, the world, of the emotional challenge of finding Jews or Judaism or the State of Israel criticised and condemned. So we retreated behind a high wall, thinking that made us safe. High walls never make you safe; they only make you fearful. What makes you safe is confronting the challenges without fear and inspiring others to do likewise.

What Moses meant in those extraordinary words, “It is not in heaven ... nor is it beyond the sea,” was: *Kinderlach*, your parents trembled when they heard the voice of God at Sinai. They were overwhelmed. They said: If we hear any more we will die. So God found ways in which you could meet Him without being overwhelmed. Yes, He is Creator, sovereign, supreme power, first cause, mover of the planets and the stars.

But He is also parent, partner, lover, friend. He is *Shechinah*, from *shachen*, meaning, the neighbour next door.

So thank Him every morning for the gift of life. Say the Shema twice daily for the gift of love. Join your voice to others in prayer so that His spirit may flow through you, giving you the strength and courage to change the world. When you cannot see Him, it is because you are looking in the wrong direction. When He seems absent, He is there just behind you, but you have to turn to meet Him.

Do not treat Him like a stranger. He loves you. He believes in you. He wants your success. To find Him you do not have to climb to heaven or cross the sea. His is the voice you hear in the silence of the soul. His is the light you see when you open your eyes to wonder. His is the hand you touch in the pit of despair. His is the breath that gives you life.



## FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

This is how I have sought God: Not through philosophical proofs, scientific demonstrations or theological arguments; not through miracles or mysteries or inner voices or sudden epiphanies; not by ceasing to question or challenge or doubt; not by blind faith or existential leap; certainly not by an abandonment of reason and an embrace of the irrational. These things have brought many people to God. But they have also brought many people to worship things that are not God, like power, or ideology, or race. Instead I have sought God in people – people who in themselves seemed to point to something or someone beyond themselves ... over the years I have learned to find it so much more widely in communities that care, in the kindness of strangers, in people who touch our lives, perhaps only momentarily, doing the deed or saying the word that carry us to safety across the abyss of loneliness or self-doubt.

It's where I find God in Jewish history ... I find no way of accounting for this in terms of what Jews were, or where they lived, or what happened to them. Somehow they were touched by a sense of destiny, a vision of God and the world, that transfigured them – even at times against their will –

into a people that defied the normal rules of the decline and fall of civilisations. Their very existence seemed to testify to something vast and unfathomable that knowingly or otherwise they carried in their midst. They became what Isaiah called “God’s witnesses.” Their history, their survival against the odds, their intellectual flights and utopian endeavours, became a signal of transcendence.

*The Great Partnership, p. 89-93*

### QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. Where does Rabbi Sacks see God most clearly? How does this perspective compare to the examples he gave in *The Core Idea*?
2. Do you struggle to find God sometimes? Is it more difficult when things go wrong for you, or when you learn about bad people, and the terrible things that have happened in Jewish history?



## AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. What examples of where God can be found are mentioned in *The Core Idea*? What do these all have in common?
2. Where in your everyday world can you sense God?
3. Why do you think people are sometimes tempted by religions that are not their own?
4. Do you think Judaism has everything a person would need to find spirituality and God?
5. Which schools of thought in Judaism do you think have tried to make God the most accessible?



## QUESTION TIME

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## EDUCATIONAL COMPANION TO THE QUESTIONS

### THE CORE IDEA

1. The examples are: Shabbat rituals and meals; in the poetry of Tehillim and the debates on the pages of the Talmud; in the joy of the festivals; in the sadness of Tisha B'Av; and in the land of Israel. These are all intimate moments of Jewish ritual where we focus on finding God in the everyday (or in history, including the modern history of the State of Israel). What is most important is they are accessible to all, not just the very wise or spiritual or old or people in a specific location.
2. Take a moment to read the famous story about the Kotzker Rebbe in *It Once Happened*. God can be found anywhere and everywhere. But only if you look for Him, and are open to seeing Him there.
3. These verses, the simplest way to tell the Jewish narrative, became the core story told on Seder night every year at Pesach. All Jews find themselves at a Seder table in their lives, participating in the telling of this story. This is to ensure the national narrative is passed on to every Jewish child. It ensures that every Jewish parent becomes a master educator – a storyteller *par excellence*. Traditionally, synagogues are simple and practical buildings. While they are often elegant, they are rarely grand and opulent (and where they are built like this, it is possible to argue the designs have been influenced by the surrounding religious culture). There may be many socio-historical explanations for this, but a socio-religious explanation is that Judaism encourages Jews to see God all around, not just in grand and majestic places. God can be found, approached, and worshipped in all places.

### IT ONCE HAPPENED...

1. Philosophically we say that God is ineffable and omnipresent. He cannot be defined or limited to physical terms. Therefore He is "everywhere".
2. The Kotzker Rebbe's lesson to his students was more spiritual than philosophical. You will only find God in places where you are willing to seek Him, and find Him. He will be anywhere you will allow Him – by letting Him in. This means we can find God in the everyday mundane, if we allow Him to be seen there. He is wherever you let Him in.

### FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

1. Rabbi Sacks says he also finds God in people and in Jewish history, and these are places he looks for Divine and spiritual inspiration. These are similar to the examples given in *The Core Idea* in that they are accessible to everyone every day. If you take the Kotzker Rebbe's advice to heart (see *It Once Happened*) then you can find God in everything. All people are created in God's image and have the potential to live their lives in that way, and Jewish history is so remarkable that it is hard to explain it in any other way than Divinely-ordained.  
When we suffer, and we think of the worst kinds of people, and the many dark periods of Jewish history, it can be a challenge to find God's Presence there. But few of us have encountered truly evil people with no sense of the Divine. And for some, the dark periods of our lives, and of Jewish history, are what make the triumphs and the miracle of Jewish survival and continuity so obviously of Divine design.

### AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. See *The Core Idea*, answer 1.
2. See *The Core Idea*, answer 2.
3. It is always a temptation to be more like those around us, allowing us to fit in to society more easily. Also, sometimes that which is familiar to us, becomes boring and unengaging. So people will sometimes try to find other cultures and religions to provide them with what they feel is missing from their own.
4. Judaism is not monolithic. There is tremendous room for spiritual creativity and innovation, even within the clear boundaries of traditions and Jewish law. While Judaism can and has been influenced in its development by surrounding cultures in a positive way, the core spiritual needs of Jews can be provided for by the core aspects of Judaism.
5. While there have been in Jewish history some schools of thought that have created an elite approach to worship of God and spirituality, such as the priestly cult of the Sadducees in Temple times, and the Lithuanian Yeshiva world of the 19th century, Judaism has always believed in universal spirituality. For every elitist movement in Judaism there has been a movement created in response to give access to God back to the people. Worship of God through halachic observance (the Pharisees) and Chassidism in more modern times are examples of these.