



# COVENANT & CONVERSATION

## Family Edition

פינחס תשע"ט  
Pinchas 5779

The Crown  
All Can  
Wear

### 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 PINCHAS IN A NUTSHELL

Parshat Pinchas begins by completing the episode which began in Parshat Balak: Pinchas had ended the plague that was devastating the Israelites who had been led into idolatry by the Moabite and Midianite women. Pinchas' reward for his zealotry was a "covenant of peace" (Bamidbar 25:12) and "lasting Priesthood" (25:13).

The parsha then moves on to the second census in the book, this time accounting for the new generation that would enter the land. We next read two stories, one about the daughters of Tzelophechad, and the second about Moses' request that God appoint a successor. The parsha ends with two chapters about the sacrifices to be brought at different times, daily, weekly, monthly, and on festivals.



### THE CORE IDEA

A man named Tzelophechad had died. His five daughters went to Moses with a question. It had been decided that sons would inherit their portion of the land of Israel from their fathers, but since this man had left no sons, the daughters asked if they might instead inherit from their father. Moses asked God and the request was granted. Then Moses asked a question of his own:

*"Then Moses said to the Lord, "May the Lord, God of the spirits of all flesh, appoint a man over this community ... so the Lord's people will not be like sheep without a shepherd."*

Why does Moses' question come right after the request of Tzelophechad's daughters? The Sages found a connection, and an important revelation, in both Moses' question and God's answer.

Moses had recently lost his siblings Miriam and Aaron, and he knew that he, too, would not live long enough to lead the Children of Israel into the Land of Israel. God had also just informed Moses he was at his last resting place. His thoughts were therefore firmly on his own mortality, and how he would not live to cross the Jordan and bring the people into the land, which would have been the fulfillment of his life's work.

Now he asked God who take over the leadership role. Paying careful attention to context, and listening to the immediately previous passage about the daughters of Tzelophechad, the Sages found a clue to why Moses chose this moment to ask God this question, and what he may have been hoping the answer would be.

*Moses reasoned: The time is right for me to make my own request. If daughters inherit, it is surely right that my sons should inherit my glory. The Holy One, Blessed Be He, said to him, "He who keeps the fig tree shall eat its fruit" (Prov. 27:18). Your sons sat idly by and did not study the Torah. Joshua served you faithfully and showed you great honour. It was he who rose early in the morning and remained late at night at your House of Assembly. He used to arrange the benches and spread the mats. Seeing that he has served you with all his might, he is worthy to serve Israel, for he shall not lose his reward."*

This was another great disappointment for Moses. Not only was he not going to enter the land, but he was also destined to see his sons overlooked in the search for a successor.

But it is precisely here that we find, for the first time, one of Judaism's most powerful ideas. Joshua *earned* the right to inherit the role of leader and teacher. This is a profoundly

egalitarian concept (democratic and class-less) that teaches us an important message about Jewish leaders: the concept that we are a nation of individuals standing with equal dignity in the presence of God. And yes, there is an inheritance relationship between Torah and the Jew, but the former has to be loved if it is to be earned. You have to love Torah if you are to inherit it.

### QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. Why do you think Moses might have wanted to know that his son would become the next leader of the Jewish people?
2. How does the fact that Joshua merited to take over from Moses prove that Judaism's concept of a nation is an egalitarian one?
3. Can you think of anything else in Jewish thought or Jewish law that also suggests Judaism believes that all Jews are equally holy and valued in the eyes of God?



### IT ONCE HAPPENED...

Joshua Ben Gamla was a High Priest in Israel, in the last years of the Second Temple. It is written in Talmud Bavli, Bava Batra 21a ...

*May the name of that man, Joshua ben Gamla, be blessed and remembered, because, were it not for him, the Torah would have been forgotten and lost from the Jewish People.*

*For at first, if a child had a father, the father taught the child, and if they had no father, they did not learn at all....*

*They then made an ordinance that teachers of children should be appointed in Jerusalem....*

*Even so, however, if a child had no parent, there would be no one who would take them to learn in Jerusalem*

*They therefore ordained that teachers should be appointed in each region, and that children should enter school at the age of sixteen or seventeen.*

*However, these children were nearly grown, and it happened that if the teacher punished them, they would rebel and leave the school.*

*Eventually Joshua ben Gamla came and ordained that teachers of young children should be appointed in each district and each town, and that children should enter the school at the age of six or seven.*

### QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. Why does the Talmud suggest that without these measures introduced by Joshua ben Gamla, the Torah would have been forgotten?
2. How is this connected to the idea of an egalitarian approach to the people discussed in *The Core Idea*?



### THINKING MORE DEEPLY

The egalitarian tradition in Judaism is summed up in this famous Maimonidean ruling:

*"With three crowns was Israel crowned – with the crown of Torah, the crown of Priesthood, and the crown of Kingship. The crown of Priesthood was bestowed on Aaron and his descendants. The crown of Kingship was conferred on David and his successors. But the crown of Torah is for all Israel. Whoever wishes, let them come and take it. Do not suppose that the other two crowns are greater than that of Torah.... The crown of Torah is greater than the other two crowns."*

This had immense social and political consequences. Throughout most of the biblical era, all three crowns were in operation. In addition to Prophets, Israel had kings and an active Priesthood serving in the Temple. The dynastic principle – leadership passing from father to son – still dominated two of the three roles. But with the destruction of the Second Temple,

Kingship and a functioning Priesthood ceased. Leadership passed to the Sages who saw themselves as heirs to the Prophets.

In biblical Israel, though, it was the Priests and not the Prophets who were the primary guardians and teachers of Torah. It would therefore, on the face of it, have been a natural step from Priest to Rabbi, but the Sages instead defined themselves as successors to the Prophets. Why did the Sages not see themselves as heirs to Aaron and the Priesthood? There are many reasons, but one is surely this: the Priesthood was a dynasty. It was not open to everyone. It was restricted by birth. Prophetic leadership, by contrast, could never be predicted in advance. The proof was Joshua ben Nun, whose actions allowed him to become the next prophet after Moses. It meant that anyone, by discipleship and dedication, could aspire to Rabbinic leadership and the crown of Torah.

Hence we find in the sources a paradox. On the one hand, the Torah describes itself as an inheritance: “Moses commanded us the Torah as an inheritance [*morasha*] of the congregation of Jacob” (Devarim. 33:4). On the other, the Sages were insistent that Torah is not an inheritance: “R. Yose said: Prepare yourself to learn Torah, for it is not given to you as an inheritance [*yerusha*]” (Mishnah Avot 2:12).

The simplest resolution of the contradiction is that there are two kinds of inheritance. Biblical Hebrew contains two different words for what we receive as a legacy: *yerusha/morasha* and *nachala*. *Nachala*, is related to the word *nachal*, “a river.” It signifies something passed down automatically across the generations, as river water naturally flows downstream. *Yerusha* comes from the root *yarash*, meaning “to take possession.” It refers to something to which you have legitimate title, but which you need positive action to acquire.

A hereditary title, such as being a duke or an earl, is passed from parent to child. So too is a family business. The difference is

that the first needs no effort on the part of the heir, but the second requires hard work if the business is to continue to be worth something. Torah is like a business, not a title. It must be earned if it is to be sustained.

Moses’ personal tragedy was Israel’s consolation. The Torah could be inherited by all the people he led, and all of their descendants. In Nedarim 81a, the Sages put it this way: “Why is it not usual for scholars to give birth to children who are scholars? ... So that it should not be said that the Torah is their inheritance.”

The fact that his successor was not a child of Moses, but rather Joshua, his disciple, meant that one form of leadership – historically and spiritually the most important of the three crowns – could be an aspiration for everyone. Dignity is not a privilege of birth. Honour is not confined to those with the right parents. In the world defined and created by Torah, everyone is a potential leader. We can all earn the right to wear the crown.



## FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

Ezra and Nechemiah [instituted a public reading of the Torah. This is where our tradition of reading the weekly parsha each Shabbat comes from.

This] set in motion a profound change in Jewish life, one whose early details are hard to come by because of the shortage of literary materials from Jewish sources between the fourth and second centuries BCE. But we can take up the story with Shimon ben Shetach in the first century BCE. Until then, education had largely taken place within the family. Shimon ben Shetach established the first national educational system in Israel, creating schools throughout the country for sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds ... This was the first system of its kind in the world. The Talmud also contains the world’s first regulations about teacher provision and class size.

As H.G. Wells noted in his Outline of History, “The Jewish religion, because it was a literature-sustained religion, led to the first efforts to provide elementary education for all

children in the community.” By contrast, universal compulsory education did not exist in England until 1870. There was nothing remotely similar in the ancient world. Even the great academies of ancient Greece were confined to an elite. Rabbinic Judaism set itself to achieve a society of universal literacy. Paul Johnson calls it an “ancient and highly efficient social machine for the production of intellectuals.”

*Ceremony & Celebration, Shavuot: The Greatest Gift,*  
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### QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. What is the link between Ezra and Nechemiah and Shimon Ben Shetach, and how does it connect to Judaism's egalitarian tradition explored in this week's *Covenant & Conversation*?
2. Do you think education is a basic human right?



## AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. What was on Moses' mind when he asked God to find a successor?
2. Do you think education is important for all children and all adults?
3. Why do you think it was important for Moses to know that his son would take over from him as leader of the Jewish people?
4. How does the fact that Joshua merited to become the next leader after Moses prove that Judaism's concept of a nation is an egalitarian one?
5. What is the difference between a *nachala* and a *yerusha*? Which one is the Torah?



## QUESTION TIME

Do you want to win a **Koren Aviv Weekday Siddur inscribed** by Rabbi Sacks? Email [CCFamilyEdition@rabbisacks.org](mailto:CCFamilyEdition@rabbisacks.org) with your name, age, city and your best question in response to a 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

### THE CORE IDEA

1. One answer could be that everyone else was able to pass on a legacy to their children. All of Aaron's children were to become Kohanim, even to this day. Tzelophechad's daughters also were able to inherit from their father. But for Moses this wasn't merely hope to be able to give his sons a job or status. When a child takes over a parent's legacy it is as if it is the parent continuing it themselves. It's a kind of eternity achieved when the next generation continues in the path you have set, and it means that your name and your ideas will continue beyond your death. Everyone wants to know their life is meaningful and will not be forgotten, and this often feels like a way to guarantee that.
2. The fact that Moses' son did not automatically receive the job of leader means that everyone stands an equal chance, and is seen as equally valued in the eyes of God. This meritocracy is what an egalitarian society looks like.
3. Jewish education and Torah learning is open to everyone and encouraged for everyone (see *It Once Happened*, *Thinking More Deeply* and *In the Thought of Rabbi Sacks*). There is no hierarchy in Judaism when it comes to connecting to God or serving God. All spiritual, normative (legal) and personal ritual aspects of Judaism are open to everyone.

### IT ONCE HAPPENED...

1. Without education a society cannot pass its heritage to the next generation. This will lead to assimilation and ultimately the end of that distinctive nation and culture. Joshua ben Gamla realised that it wasn't enough to educate just the academic or spiritual elite, and to truly ensure the continuity of the Jewish people he introduced universal education for every Jew. This was thousands of years before the rest of the world saw the value in universal education.
2. Universal education predicated on the value of all people deserving education as a basic human right, and being equally important in the eyes of society. Some ancient societies believed only the elite deserved education, or that it was only worthwhile educating those who were intelligent enough to receive that education. Judaism believes all people fall into this category.

### FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

1. Ezra and Nechemiah found a way to ensure that every Jew, from the most scholarly Rabbi to the average person on the street, had access to the Torah on a regular basis. Shimon Ben Shetach (and Joshua Ben Gamla before him – see *It Once Happened*) built on this idea by establishing universal education in the form of formal schooling for all Jewish children. All of these initiatives ensured that not just the rich or the privileged or the academically smart in Jewish society would be educated but all Jews, ensuring equal access to a Torah education.
2. Education gives an individual power and dignity in society. All democratic systems are founded on an educated society. In this respect it is a universal human right, thus ensured by all democratic nations. This was instituted generations earlier in Jewish Talmudic society.

### AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. Moses had recently seen both his siblings die, and had been told he was at the end of his life, so he knew that he would be unable to complete his life's work and bring the Children of Israel into the Land of Israel. He wanted to ensure a worthy successor would be chosen to complete this mission. He had also recently presented the question of the daughters of Tzelophechad to God, asking what happens when a man only has daughters to inherit his state. This raised the question in his mind of his own legacy and the role his children would play in continuing it.
2. See *From the Thought of Rabbi Sacks*, answer 2. Torah education is also encouraged as a daily activity even for adults who have learned for many years. We study Torah again and again, and the more we learn, the more we discover.
3. See *The Core Idea*, answer 1.
4. See *The Core Idea*, answer 2.
5. A *nachala*, like a stream, flows to the next generation without any action required. A child automatically inherits their parent's estate. A *yerusha* on the other hand needs to be actively taken as an inheritance. *Yerusha* means "to take possession." It refers to something to which you have legitimate title, but which you need positive action to acquire. This is the Torah, our inheritance, that we must work hard to earn. And even though a child born from a Jewish mother is automatically Jewish, to fully acquire the Torah we must study and engage with it all of our lives.