

**Destructive  
& Self-  
Destructive**

# COVENANT & CONVERSATION

## Family Edition

**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 TZAV  
IN A NUTSHELL**

Parshat Tzav continues the laws of sacrifices begun in the previous parsha, this time from the perspective of the Priests who are the ones performing the ritual. The laws of the burnt and grain offerings, sin and guilt offerings, and peace offerings, are discussed, each with its own specific

method. How Aaron and his sons will be initiated into their roles as Priests is then described, before the inauguration (opening ceremony) of the service of the Sanctuary.

**THE  
CORE IDEA**

This sedra, speaking about sacrifices, prohibits the eating of blood: "Wherever you live, you must not eat the blood of any bird or animal. If anyone eats blood, that person must be cut off from their people." (Lev. 7:26-27) This is not just one prohibition among others. The ban on eating blood is fundamental to the Torah. For example, it occupies a central place in the covenant God makes with Noah – and through him, all humanity – after the Flood: "But you must not eat meat that has its lifeblood still in it" (Genesis 9:4), and Moses even re-emphasises this command in his great closing address in the book of Deuteronomy (Deut. 12:23-25).

What is so wrong with eating blood? Maimonides and Nahmanides each offer a different interpretation. For Maimonides this is part of the Torah's continuous battle against idolatry. He compares the language the Torah uses for the prohibitions of idolatry and eating blood, and notices that identical language is used: "I will set My face against that person who eats blood and will cut him off from his people" (Leviticus 17:10) and "I will set My face against that man [who engages in Moloch worship] and his family and will cut him off from his people" (Lev. 20:5).

The expression "set My face against" is only found in the Torah when it speaks of blood and idolatry. Idolaters, says

Maimonides, believed that blood was the food of the spirits, and that by eating it, they would have "something in common with the spirits." Eating blood is forbidden because it is a form of idolatry.

Nahmanides however says that the ban has to do with human nature. We are affected by what we eat: "If one were to eat the life of all flesh [blood] ... the result would be a hardening of the human soul and it would become similar to the nature of the animal soul." Eating blood, Nahmanides believes, makes us cruel and violent, like an animal.

**QUESTIONS TO PONDER:**

1. Which of the two reasons we studied makes more sense to you, Maimonides or Nahmanides? Why?
2. What are your thoughts on the Torah allowing us to eat *meat*, but restricting the eating of *blood*?
3. Do you think our behaviour is affected by our environment, such as the people we surround ourselves with, the places we visit, and the food we eat?



## IT ONCE HAPPENED...

In late 1990 Dr George Carey had been elected, but not yet taken up office, as Archbishop of Canterbury. I had been elected, but not yet taken up office, as Chief Rabbi. Someone discovered that we were both Arsenal (football club) supporters. He asked whether we would like our first ecumenical gathering to take place at Highbury Stadium — a midweek match for obvious religious reasons. We both replied enthusiastically that we would.

The great day arrived. We were taken down to meet the players. We went out, beneath the floodlights, onto the sacred turf, to present a cheque to charity. The loudspeakers announced our presence. You could hear the buzz go around the ground. Whichever way one chose in the theological wager, that night Arsenal had friends in high places. They could not possibly lose.

A *nachtiger tog*, as my grandmother used to say: Would that it were so. Arsenal went down to their worst home defeat in 63 years. They lost 6-2 to Manchester United.

The Archbishop was beside himself in agony. The next day, one of the national newspapers ran the story and came to the conclusion that if, between them, the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Chief Rabbi could not bring about a win for Arsenal, did this not prove that God does not exist? “On the contrary,” I said, “it proves that God exists. It’s just that He supports Manchester United!”

For Rabbi Sacks’ further analysis of this story see *From the Thought of Rabbi Sacks* below.

### QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. Can you see any similarities between a football match and religious worship?
2. In *From the Thought of Rabbi Sacks* below, we will discuss football as a substitute for war. How could this be, and what does this idea have to do with this week’s parsha?



## THINKING MORE DEEPLY

Which of the two explanations we saw in *The Core Idea* is correct? There is evidence, from archaeology and anthropology, that *both* are. Maimonides was quite right to see the eating of blood as an idolatrous rite. Human sacrifice was widespread in the ancient world.

Barbara Ehrenreich argues in her book *Blood Rites: Origins and History of the Passions of War*, that one of the most formative experiences of the first human beings must have been the terror of being attacked by an animal predator. They knew that the likely outcome was that one of the group, usually an outsider, an invalid, a child, or perhaps an animal, would fall as prey, giving the others a chance to escape. It was this embedded memory that became the basis of subsequent sacrificial rites.

Ehrenreich’s point is that “the sacrificial ritual in many ways mimics the crisis of a predator’s attack. Someone is singled out for slaughter, often in a spectacularly bloody manner.” That is why blood is offered to the gods, and why the gods who play a part in these ceremonies are usually imagined as beasts of prey.

Ehrenreich does not end there, however. Her view is that this emotional reaction – fear and guilt – survives to the present as part of our genetic inheritance. It leaves two legacies: one, the human tendency to band together in the face of an external

threat; the other, the willingness to risk self-sacrifice for the sake of the group. These emotions appear at times of war. They help explain why it is so easy to mobilise people for war by conjuring up the threat of an external enemy.

War is a destructive and self-destructive activity. Why then does it persist? Ehrenreich’s insight suggests an answer. It is the dysfunctional survival of instincts, profoundly necessary in an age of hunter-gatherers, into an era in which such responses are no longer necessary. Human beings still thrill at the prospect of shedding blood.

Nahmanides was equally correct to see eating blood as a symptom of human cruelty. We now sense the profound wisdom of the law forbidding the eating of blood. Only thus could human beings be gradually cured of the deeply ingrained instinct, deriving from a world of predators and prey, in which the key choice is to kill or be killed.

Evolutionary psychology has taught us about these genetic residues from earlier times which – because they are not rational – cannot be cured by reason alone, but only by ritual, strict prohibition, and habituation. The world continues to be scarred by violence and terror. Sadly, the ban against blood sacrifice is still relevant. The instinct against which it is a protest – sacrificing life to exorcise fear – still lives on.

Where there is fear, it is easy to turn against those we see as “the other” and learn to hate them. Which is why each of us must take a stand against the instinct to fear, and against the

corrosive power of hate. All it takes for evil to flourish is for good people to do nothing.



## FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

(This analysis follows the story above in *It Once Happened ...*)

Football is a ritualised substitute for war, a way of channelling emotions that would otherwise lead to violence. The passions football evokes — loyalty, identification with one side against the other, jubilation, heartbreak — are precisely those that once led nations into battle. Not just nations: religions as well.

Homo sapiens is a violent animal, the Bible and socio-biologists agree. Without the capacity to fight, our ancestors would not have survived. For centuries, however, that genetic instinct has been dysfunctional, increasingly so as our technologies grow more powerful.

But the emotions that once led to war remain today, and even in the 21st century still seek expression. I weep at the descent of Afghanistan and Iraq into what Hobbes called “the war of every man against every man” in which life is “nasty brutish and short”. We still witness the sacrifice of human life on the altar of someone else’s desire to win, sometimes even in the name of God Himself.

Which brings me back to football. I learnt that night that the game is bigger than the team. And the game only exists by both sides playing by the same rules. If you try to win by

practising violence against your opponents, you don’t win. You merely destroy the game.

The same applies to every form of human conflict, including religion. If you try to demonstrate your faith by violence — as, for instance, the crusaders did to the Jews and Muslims in Jerusalem in 1099 — you destroy truth and faith. Only madness could lead us to believe otherwise.

My joke about God supporting Manchester United has a serious point. What if the God of my side were also the God of the game? Might that not give us pause before imposing our views on others by force? Might it not lead us to seek less destructive, more rule-governed ways of expressing our violent instincts? Like football.

*Credo, The Times, 10th June 2006*

### QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. Why does Rabbi Sacks say “Homo sapiens is a violent animal”? Does it have to be that way?
2. What larger lesson can the conclusion, that God might not just be the God of Arsenal or Manchester United, but rather the “God of the game”, teach us? How might this lessen hate and violence in the world?



## AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. Why do you think the Torah prohibits the eating of blood (what other reasons could there be besides those given by Maimonides and Nahmanides)?
2. If it is argued that eating blood can make us animalistic, do you think there is an argument to be made for vegetarianism?
3. Why do you think man is inherently violent?
4. Does it have to be that way? What can we do to limit or even eradicate violence from the world?
5. Why is ritual (reputation that leads to habituation) more effective than reasoned rational thought for understanding values and incorporating them into our behaviour?



## 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 about the parsha after reading 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

### THE CORE IDEA

1. Maimonides' approach to many of the mitzvot in the Torah is that they were designed to wean the people away from the conventions of worship at the time, which was idolatry. In an age where polytheism and idolatry is all but absent in the western world, it may be hard to relate to this approach to mitzvot. Nahmanides takes an approach that is based on human nature. Sadly, there is little evidence that this aspect of human nature – the propensity to violence – has changed at all since the biblical period.
2. This is a great opportunity to have a discussion that may invoke strong opinions. The Torah clearly permits the eating of meat, yet at the same time has a deeply developed ethical legal approach to how we eat meat, where the rights and experience of the animal is central. However, vegetarianism is a legitimate approach in Judaism and some Jewish thinkers would even suggest that while it is not mandatory, it is a higher ethical way of living. However, the Jewish law makes it clear that consuming blood, the life force of an animal, is prohibited. Further to the two opinions presented here, there is the overall symbolism of consuming the very essence of the life of an animal, and this prohibition has a deep significance and educational value in that respect.
3. This question is asking whether we can be impervious to our environment, whether that be our surroundings, the people we mix with, or even the food we eat. The ideas discussed here suggest we do think we are affected by our environment. Judaism and Jewish law tries to ensure that even while eating animals, we do so in a moral and ethical way, ensuring we are not impacted in a negative way by the act of eating another being. In this way we are sanctifying the physical.

### IT ONCE HAPPENED...

1. While some may think that football fandom is dangerously close to idolatry (as in, worship of something that is not God) there are many other less dangerous similarities that can be a constructive feature in one's life. The sense of community and belonging, the passion and dreams for a common destiny, the rituals of fandom, and the moral code that governs the game, are all similar to religious worship.
2. However, football (and any team sport) also has many similarities with war, and some sociologists suggest it is a safe proxy for man's need for conflict. Uniforms, war cries, combative battle (on the pitch, but sadly sometimes in the stands also) make sports a benign substitute for what some believe is the need to have an enemy and wage war with them. What is interesting is that built into the structure of professional football is that at periodic times during the season opposing fans are forced to be on the same side as they support their national team. This is an effective way to remind us that ultimately we all have much more in common with each other than that which is different and separates us. What an important message for "real life"!

### FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

1. This comment reflects on the evolution of humankind. Written into the DNA of every human is the need to survive and guarantee the continuation of their species. This often tends towards violence when we or our progeny are threatened. This has caused humans to become tribal, and often leads to violence against those outside of the tribe (even in cases where there is no real threat). A higher form of existence is to conquer the need for violence (in cases where there is no real threat) and create a society where difference is celebrated.
2. Rabbi Sacks is using football as a metaphor for life. It is too easy to feel that God embraces, loves and protects only our "tribe", whether that be my religion, my nation, or my community (which could include my football tribe!) If we take a moment to realise that God is big enough to be the God of my tribe as well as yours, that He is "the God of the game", then we are more likely to embrace and respect our differences, aware that we are all loved by God.

### AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. Blood symbolises the source of life itself. While it is permissible to eat God's creations, not eating blood ensures we have a sensitivity to the essence of life and the status of animals as God's creations that also received life from God in the same way as humans.
2. The Torah clearly permits the eating of meat, yet at the same time has a deeply developed ethical legal approach to how we eat meat, where the rights and experience of the animal is central. However, vegetarianism is a legitimate approach in Judaism and some Jewish thinkers would even suggest that while it is not mandatory, it is a higher ethical way of living. But it should be noted that Nahmanides' approach is not that the act of eating an animal makes a human bloodthirsty, but rather the act of consuming the animals' blood, which he feels has some kind of impact on our own soul which will take on the characteristics of the animal (because we have consumed specifically the blood).
3. See *From the Thought of Rabbi Sacks*, answer 1.
4. See *From the Thought of Rabbi Sacks*, answers 1 and 2.
5. Sometimes it takes repeated action to absorb an idea as a value. Rational thought cannot be guaranteed in every situation. Sometimes our reason deserts us, but ritual becomes second nature. Practice makes certain responses immediate and intuitive, bypassing the slow, deliberative circuits in the brain. See <http://rabbisacks.org/credo-ritual-develops-habits-that-can-lift-us-to-greatness/> for more on this.