



## Course Outline – Fall 2023

**Course Title: Rabbi Sacks on the Chumash**

**Instructor: Rabbi Johnny Solomon**

**Course Description:** Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks zt'l was a Torah scholar, philosopher, and global religious leader. But above all else, he was a teacher who inspired Jews and non-Jews around the world through his remarkable lectures and through his 39 published books including 10 volumes on the weekly Torah portion. In this course we will identify and explore the exegetical methodologies used by Rabbi Sacks in his remarkable Torah essays, and consider how Jewish Studies teachers can *use* those skills in their classrooms.

### **Introduction and Goals:**

In this 12-week online course, students will learn how Rabbi Sacks read, translated, interpreted and drew religious and moral lessons from the text of the Chumash. While doing so, students will:

- learn about the art of Biblical translation;
- reflect upon the freedom from, and loyalties of, Orthodox teachers to translate and interpret Biblical texts according to the rabbinic tradition;
- examine the different skills, both old and new, that can be used for the purpose of Torah interpretation;
- consider the various ways in which modern challenges of the Bible can be addressed in the classroom;
- reflect upon the various ways in which Biblical law and narrative can speak to us today.

### **Each unit will include:**

1. A study of one or more sections of Chumash
2. The reading of one or more excerpts from Rabbi Sacks' writings
3. Pedagogical techniques: Applying the methodology in the classroom
4. Making this unit relevant for our students
5. Additional sources and teaching resources

### **Unit 1 – The Bible as Truth as Story: Bereishit Chapter 1**

To teach Torah we must understand Torah, and especially when it comes to Sefer Bereishit, teachers can easily confuse their students based on an erroneous understanding of what Sefer Bereishit is. As Rabbi Sacks explains, '[Bereishit] is not myth. It is not history in the conventional sense...Nor is it theology. Bereishit is less about God than about human beings and their relationship with God... What Bereishit is, in fact, is philosophy written in a deliberately non-philosophical way...To put it as its simplest: philosophy is truth as system. *Bereishit is truth as story.*' In fact, while Rabbi Sacks states this about Bereishit, he actually insists that 'truth-as-story' it is a foundational principle for our understanding of the entire Tanach. In this first unit we will explore what Rabbi Sacks means and consider its implications in terms of how we teach biblical stories. **How we interpret sequences of biblical events, and why 'hope' is a central value in our reading and teaching of Tanach.**

### **Unit 2 – How the Bible teaches us about responsibility: Bereishit Chapters 3-11**

According to Rabbi Sacks 'the first humans lost paradise when they sought to hide from responsibility'. In fact, he explains that Chapters 1-11 in Bereishit teach us a series of lessons, through a drama in four acts, 'on the theme of responsibility and moral development'. In this unit we will revisit these four stories, and study how Rabbi Sacks reads these stories and which particular commentaries he turns to that inspire his interpretation. We will consider how to extrapolate moral themes when teaching biblical narratives.

### **Unit 3 – Addressing the moral challenges that arise from the Bible: Bereishit Chapter 22**

According to Rabbi Sacks, 'religion must guard against a literal reading of its hard texts if it is not to betray God's deeper purposes'. And when it comes to Akeidat Yitzchak ('The Binding of Isaac'), which is arguably one of Judaism's hardest texts, not only did Rabbi Sacks write a number of essays on this story, but in each instance, he proposed an interpretation "somewhat different from the ones given by the classic commentators". In this unit we will survey Rabbi Sacks' various interpretations of this story; we will consider the importance of biblical stories being re-read at different ages and stages, and we will reflect on why Rabbi Sacks felt the need to adopt a different interpretive perspective than those proposed by our classic Jewish exegetes.

### **Unit 4 - Learning universal lessons from particular Biblical narratives: Bereishit Chapters 37-50**

According to Rabbi Sacks, "the book of Genesis is, among other things, a set of variations on the theme of sibling rivalry: Cain and Abel, Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers. The book begins with fratricide and ends with reconciliation". What this means is that a major theme of the second half of Sefer Bereishit relates to forgiveness. However, as Rabbi Sacks explores in depth in his book 'Not in God's Name', an additional lesson that we learn from here is that we should not be threatened by the existence of other people or other faiths. In this unit we will explore this idea and its theological implications while considering how Rabbi Sacks considers Judaism as honouring, 'both the universality of the human condition and the particularity of Jewish faith'.

### **Unit 5 - The Bible as a grand lesson about knowing your story: Shemot Chapters 3-15**

Central to Rabbi Sacks' explanation of the Exodus is its emphasis on storytelling, where 'Moses turns to the future and to the duty of parents to educate their children about the story that was shortly to unfold'. In fact, according to Rabbi Sacks, 'no story, at least in the West, was more influential than that of the Exodus, the memory that the supreme power intervened in history to liberate the supremely powerless'. Undoubtedly, a key message which runs through all of Rabbi Sacks' teachings is the relationship between story and identity, how knowing one's story helps know one's identity, and how 'those who tell the story of their past have already begun to build their children's future'. At the same time, a great concern of Rabbi Sacks was that Jews are forgetting their story. In this unit we speak about the importance of knowing and telling our national story, how the classroom is one of the most important locations to do so, and how doing so strengthens the Jewish identity of learners.

### **Unit 6 - The birth of the politics of freedom: Shemot Chapter 20**

Rabbi Sacks explains that 'Biblical morality is the morality of freedom, its politics are the politics of freedom, and its theology is the theology of freedom'. Specifically, 'it was the covenant at Sinai and all that flowed from it... that inspired the birth of freedom'. And why is this such an important idea? Because 'at the heart of Judaism is the idea – way ahead of its time, and not always fully realised – that the free God desires the free worship of free human beings.' In this unit we will explore the centrality of freedom in Judaism, and how freedom is a running theme throughout all biblical laws and narratives.

### **Unit 7 - Law as a pathway to righteousness: Shemot Chapters 21-24**

According to Rabbi Sacks, 'God's great gift of love was law: the law that establishes human rights and responsibilities, that treats rich and poor alike'. What this means is that 'Judaism is a religion of law – not because it does not believe in love, but because without justice, neither love nor liberty nor human life itself can flourish.' Consequently, 'the greatness of Judaism is not simply in its noble vision of a free, just and compassionate society, but in the way it brings this vision down to earth in detailed legislation'. In this unit we will consider how we relate to biblical law, and how we can teach biblical law in the classroom in a way that helps learners understand its contribution to making society a better place.

### **Unit 8 - The Tabernacle as a lesson for creating a good society: Shemot Chapters 25-40**

Among the great questions that fascinated Rabbi Sacks was 'How do we build a successful society?'. And according to him, we can begin answering this question by reflecting upon the Tabernacle-building project described in the second part of Sefer Shemot. This is because, as De Tocqueville asserted, great societies are built through the 'art of association' - meaning, the desire to come together to make something together. Significantly, this theme interested Rabbi Sacks so much that it formed the backbone of his book 'The Home We Build Together'. In this unit we will learn how Rabbi Sacks drew various insights from Midrashic literature to see the Tabernacle-building project as being a blueprint for all social and physical building projects in the future, and how Rabbi Sacks thereby transformed the way in which we relate to this section of the Chumash.

### **Unit 9 - The theological lesson of the sacrifices: Vayikra Chapters 1-7**

Many theologians have struggled to understand the meaning of animal sacrifices in the modern age. However, what made Rabbi Sacks unique is how he argued that 'sacrifice in Judaism has nothing intrinsically to do with the offerings of animals on the altar'. Instead, 'what matters in sacrifice is the act of renunciation. We give up something of ourselves, offering it to God in recognition of the gifts He has given us.' In fact, according to Rabbi Sacks, it is this deeper understanding of sacrifices which is precisely why 'Judaism was able to survive the loss of the Temple, its rites, and sacrifices with its religious life largely intact.' In this unit we will study how Rabbi Sacks explores and explains the sacrifices, and how he believes that there is still much we can learn from these passages today.

### **Unit 10: The Biblical definition of holiness: Vayikra Chapter 19**

According to Rabbi Sacks, 'the holy is the space man makes for God', and it is 'where God is experienced as absolute presence'. The problem, however, is that many of us struggle to understand this concept of holiness. This was a topic addressed by Rabbi Sacks, and in this unit, we will consider how he explained the command to 'be Holy' (Vayikra 19:2) in a way that it continues to resonate to a modern audience.

### **Unit 11: Rational and irrational law: Bemidbar Chapter 19**

We often describe 'Mishpatim' as rational laws, while we describe 'Hukkim' as 'irrational laws'. However, Rabbi Sacks had an altogether different view of Hukkim as, 'commands deliberately intended to bypass the rational brain, the pre-frontal cortex' – meaning that Hukim are not irrational. Instead, they are laws that are better grasped by the non-rational parts of the brain. And why do we have 'Hukkim'? Because human beings are not perfectly rational beings. In this unit we will take a closer look at this distinction, and consider how we should teach Hukkim in a way that resonates with the modern mindset.

### **Unit 12: Teaching Torah as a song: Devarim Chapter 31**

Moshe famously refers to the Torah as a song, and for Rabbi Sacks, this description is not just a word for Torah, but it also describes how we should relate to Torah. For Rabbi Sacks, 'Faith is more like music than science... and as music connects note to note, so faith connects episode to episode, life to life, age to age in a timeless melody that breaks into time.' In this final unit, we will consider how Rabbi Sacks taught Torah as a song, and how we can do the same.