

## Sir Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z"l, and The Torah of Transitions

If you travel around parts of the Bible Belt you might find cool recreations from our Torah, like the [Ark Encounter in Kentucky](#) spanning some 510 feet. In the Bible Belt, most of the Bible is presented for a young viewing audience, perhaps even given a G rating.



But the *Tanakh*, the Hebrew Bible, is not rated G. It's not even PG; in places, it would struggle to get a PG-13 rating, as we saw in this morning's *haftarah* where an attractive young woman: Avishag, is brought into "warm" the elderly King David.

Forget the rating, this is just not appropriate on any level.

But this is just the tip of the iceberg as the text continues with intrigue: competing groups claim that they will succeed King David. His son Adoniyah goes around boasting, "*Ani Amlokh, Ani Amlokh!* – I will be King, I will be King."

And even though he is not supposed to do any of that, his father does not scold him for it, nor when he takes chariots and horses and 50 outrunners to run next to his carriage.

Apparently, the text says he was very handsome and had a huge Twitter following – oh, wait, the text does not say that...sorry.

But the intrigue gets even messier.

Bat-sheva who wants her son, Solomon, to become the next king confers with Natan the prophet who tells her that she better run quick and convince David before it's too late to save the life of her son. Apparently,

back then, if you lost an election, I mean, selection, then the losers were often killed so they were not around to cause any more trouble!

Batsheva reminds her elderly husband that he promised her that her son Solomon would inherit the throne. And she tells him what his other son, Adoniyah has done.

As she is warning him that the eyes of the world are on him, Natan the prophet arrives seemingly by coincidence (but, of course, they planned it) and he reminds King David of his promise.

Natan tells him of all the people who are already going around shouting “*Yehi Hamelekh Adoniyahu* – Long live King Adoniyahu!”

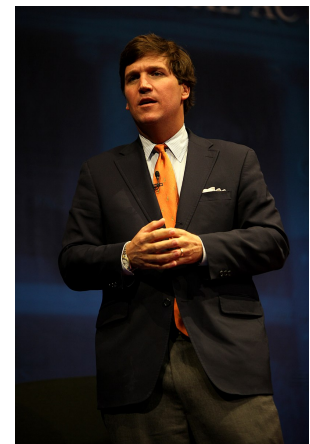
The echoes to this moment are just too eerie.

But as opposed to Fox News and most of the Republican senators who seem unable to acknowledge the simple truth that Joe Biden won the election, King David realizes the truth and what he has to do.

He takes an oath: “As God, who has rescued me from every trouble, lives: the oath that I swore to you [Bat-sheva] by *Adonai*, the God of Israel, that your son Solomon should succeed me as king and that he should sit upon my throne in my stead, I will fulfill this very day!” (I Kings 1:29-30)

While sometimes the Torah reading or the *haftarah* has some subtle connections to modern current events, sometimes, I really struggle to find a connection, and sometimes, we really do not have to do anything at all!

This would be a case of the latter.



The *haftarah* is exactly the messiness of this moment.

And it really is a mess.

This political transition is like nothing we have ever seen.

Thanks to the infantile and spiteful behavior of the current inhabitant of the White House and his followers – they are just like Adoniyah and his followers. People do not change that much, even after three millenia.

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In case, you've been hibernating for the last 12 days:

1. We just held the most secure election in our country's history, according to independent official government agencies.
2. President-elect Biden won the electoral college by plenty and won the popular vote by over 5.2 million votes.
3. People have been told misinformation at "Stop the Steal" rallies.
4. Right-wing radio talk shows are discussing barely-existing election fraud non-stop; for example Rush Limbaugh, who has 15 million listeners a week, mentioned it 204 times last week.
5. This is damaging the American people's long-term faith in our democracy.
6. We have people encouraging violence, like former White House Chief Strategist Steven Bannon who suggested that Dr. Anthony Fauci and FBI Director Christopher Wray should be beheaded.

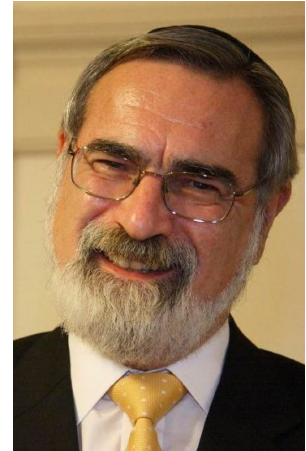
I'm beginning to think that *House of Cards* or *Game of Thrones* might be a nice gentle program to watch to calm us down from the news.

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Against this backdrop, I want to shift gears and hold up the memory of a Torah giant whom we lost last Shabbat: Sir Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z"l

– may his memory be blessed and may it continue to teach us.

Sacks served as the chief rabbi of the United Kingdom from 1991 until 2013 and served as the spiritual leader of London’s largest Orthodox synagogue. A prolific author, Sacks was able to traverse worlds and transmit classical Torah texts to any audience. He was comfortable moving from Maimonides to Martin Luther King, Jr. His books inspired people around the globe and his classic *The Dignity of Difference* gave Jews the permission to be proud of our Jewishness, while not degrading the value of any other human being.



Many of you have sent me his *divrei Torah* and they have inspired me in my teaching over my career.

My colleague and friend, Jeremy Burton, the head of the JCRC of Greater Boston, pointed me to a wonderful teaching of Rabbi Sacks that serves as the perfect counterpoint to the *haftarah*.



Before I share that, let me just say that the transition in the Torah reading is much smoother than the messiness of the *haftarah*. While there is some bartering when Abraham must buy a burial plot for Sarah, things mostly go smoothly. A wife is found for Isaac and at the end of the *parashah*, Abraham remarries, and then, he dies old and content, and there is no fight for control of his estate. He seems to have settled everything smoothly.

In fact, his sons, Isaac and Ishmael, who had issues getting along in last week’s *parashah*, seem to have reunited and they bury their father

together in the same Cave of *Makhpelah* where Abraham had buried his wife at the opening of the *parashah*.

Now, in his book *Covenant & Conversation*, Rabbi Sacks points to Abraham's relationship with Hagar, the mother of his son Ishmael. Rabbi Sacks emphasizes how both Isaac and Ishmael are present at their father's funeral. Since there has been a family split, Rabbi Sacks sees this moment as somewhat surprising.

He cites an 8<sup>th</sup> century *midrash*, *Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer*, which explains that father and son had been reconciled through Ishmael's second wife, a woman named Fatimah, who herself embodied Abraham's approach to welcoming strangers into the tent.

Sacks notes this and that given the timing of the writing of this Jewish text in the 8<sup>th</sup> century as Islam is spreading rapidly, the name Fatimah is no coincidence. It is also the name of Mohammad's daughter in the Koran; it "is highly significant...making an explicit, and positive, reference to Islam."

Thus, the "the hidden story" of this week's reading "has immense consequences for our time" in its tale of reconciliation. "Between Judaism and Islam there can be friendship and mutual respect," Sacks writes, "Abraham loved both of his sons, and was laid to rest by both. There is hope for the future in this story of the past."

Let this Torah be the light and the hope to guide us at this time; try to ignore the immaturity of people who seem unable to lead and focus on the Torah of reconciliation, as Rabbi Sacks teaches us.

May those teachings strengthen us as we transition to the future.

