



# Table Talk: Quotes and Questions for Family Discussions

Prepared by Rabbi Marc Eichenbaum

Yeshiva University's Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks-Herenstein  
Center for Values and Leadership

“Shavuot is when we celebrate the giving of the law at Mount Sinai. The fact that we read Ruth’s story at this time tells us that society cannot be made by laws alone. It needs something more – the unforced, unlegislated kindness that makes us reach out to the lonely and vulnerable, even if we are lonely and vulnerable ourselves. Then and now, society needs the kindness of strangers.”

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *The Power of Ideas: Words of Faith and Wisdom*, (Hodder & Stoughton, 2021): 78.

- **What does Rabbi Sacks think is the reason we read Ruth on Shavuot?**
- **Can you think of other reasons we read Ruth on Shavuot?**
- **When was the last time you experienced the kindness of a stranger?**

וּמֹשֶׁה עָלָה אֶל הָאֱלֹקִים וַיִּקְרָא אֵלָיו ה' מִן הַהָר לֵאמֹר כֹּה תֹאמַר לְבֵית יַעֲקֹב וְתִגִּיד לְבָנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:

“And Moses went up to God. God called to him from the mountain, saying, “Thus shall you say to the house of Jacob and declare to the children of Israel.”

Exodus 19:3

- **Rashi segments the audience for this into two groups, “house of Jacob” and “children of Israel.” Why?**
- **What might the different verbs associated with each group teach us?**
- **When have you used different communication skills to convey the same message to different people?**

“Only he who has the commandments of God engraved on his soul and who is not subject to human dictates can be called free. The children of Israel were not summoned to the service of God until they had ceased to be in Pharaoh’s service. The road from Egypt to Sinai represented a momentous spiritual and physical transition and it is this that the text refers to when it states: ‘You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, How I bore you aloft on eagles’ wings and brought you to Myself.’”

Dr. Nechama Leibowitz, *Studies in Shemot*, (World Zionist Organization, 1981): 298-299.

- **According to Dr. Leibowitz, when is a person truly free?**
- **Why do B’nei Yisrael need to leave one service to enter another?**
- **What human dictates are holding you back from being truly free and dedicated to God?**

“When the Jews were delivered from the Egyptian oppression and Moses rose to undertake the almost impossible task of metamorphosing a tribe of slaves into a nation of priests, he was told by G-d that the path leading from the holiday of Pesach to Shavuot, from initial liberation to consummate freedom, leads through the medium of time. The commandment of sefirah was entrusted to the Jew; the wondrous test of counting 49 successive days was put to him. These 49 days must be whole. If one day is missed, the act of numeration is invalidated... A slave who is capable of appreciating each day, of grasping its meaning and worth, of weaving every thread of time into a glorious

fabric, quantitatively stretching over the period of seven weeks but qualitatively forming the warp and woof of centuries of change, is eligible for Torah. He has achieved freedom.”

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, "Sacred and Profane: Kodesh and Chol in World Perspectives" (*Tradition*, 1993): 67.

- **According to Rabbi Soloveitchik, what is the purpose of the mitzvah of sefirat ha'omer?**
- **How else does the mitzvah of sefirat ha'omer prepare us for Shavuot?**
- **What can you do right now to make each day count more?**

“Ruth’s hug was one-sided. Naomi did not embrace Ruth in return. She offered no words of acknowledgment or love to her needy and vulnerable daughter-in-law. Naomi herself explains why later, when she speaks to those who greet her at the entrance to Bethlehem: She regards herself as punished by God. She is bitter and feels herself unworthy of love. Grief has emptied her. But Naomi’s story did not end here. Because of Ruth’s hug, Naomi was eventually allowed the truly restorative embrace that comes later, in chapter four. A child, Obed, was born to Ruth and Boaz, and ‘Naomi took the child and held it to her bosom’ (4:16).”

Dr. Erica Brown, *Ruth and the Long Embrace*, (First Things, 2021)

- **Ruth offers so many words of comfort to Naomi, who says nothing in return. Why not?**
- **How might this explanation relate to the holiday of Shavuot?**
- **Who in your life needs a restorative embrace?**

“Rabbi Elazar said, ‘Anyone who performs charity and justice is considered as if he filled the whole world in its entirety with kindness.’”

BT Sukka 49b

- **How do you think charity and justice fills the entire world with kindness?**
- **Connect Shavuot to kindness.**
- **Who in the world might benefit from your kindness now?**

“A chosen people is the opposite of a master race, first, because it is not a race but a covenant; second, because it exists to serve God, not to master others. A master race worships itself; a chosen people worships something beyond itself. A master race values power;

a chosen people cares for the powerless. A master race believes it has rights; a chosen people knows only that it has responsibilities.”

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, *Not in God’s Name*, (Schocken Books, 2015): 198-199.

- **How does Rabbi Sacks interpret the concept of Jewish chosenness?**
- **What are the philosophical difficulties associated with chosenness?**
- **In what ways are you taking responsibility to care for the powerless?**

“The purpose of Revelation is to develop human qualities. What is enacted at Sinai is the revelation of the human being in larger range and strength. A new consciousness is born in this revelation; the Israelites endure an initiation that ensures them against the extremities of history. God comes at Sinai, so that the human may come fully into its own.”

Dr. Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, *The Particulars of Rapture: Reflections on Exodus*, (Schocken Books, 2001): 264

- **According to Dr. Gottlieb Zornberg, how did Revelation prepare us against the extremities of history?**
- **Other than the Aseret ha-Dibrot, the Ten Commandments, what else did we receive at Har Sinai?**
- **In what ways can we enhance our Torah education in that it also helps develop our unique human qualities?**

“The link between God and man is not an emotional communion that takes place within the love of a God incarnate, but a spiritual or intellectual relationship which takes place through an education in Torah. It is precisely a word, not incarnate, from God that ensures a living God among us. Confidence in a God Who is not made manifest through any worldly authority can rely only on internal evidence and the values of an education. To the credit of Judaism, there is nothing blind about this.”

Emmanuel Levinas: *Difficult Freedom*, “*Loving the Torah more than God*,” (Athlone Press, 1990): 144.

- **According to Levinas, through what medium do we connect to God?**
- **Relate prophecy to Levinas’ assertion.**
- **What can you do to improve your Torah learning in the coming year?**