



# COVENANT & CONVERSATION

## Family Edition

תולדת תשע"ט  
Toldot 5779

### The Courage of Persistence

#### 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 older children and teenagers with his ideas and thoughts on the *parsha*. Each element of the *Family Edition* is progressively more advanced; *The Core Idea* is appropriate for all ages and the final element, *From The Thought of Rabbi Sacks*, is the most advanced section. Each section includes *Questions to Ponder*, aimed at encouraging discussion between family members in a way most appropriate to them. We have also included a section called *Around the Shabbat Table* with a few further questions on the *parsha* to think about. The final section is an *Educational Companion* which includes suggested talking points in response to the questions found throughout the *Family Edition*.



#### PARSHAT TOLDOT IN A NUTSHELL

*Toldot* tells the story of Isaac and Rebecca's twin sons, Jacob and Esau, who struggle in Rebecca's womb and seem destined to clash throughout their lives and those of their descendants. It contains two great passages: the birth and childhood of the boys, and the scene in which Jacob, as suggested by Rebecca, dresses in Esau's clothes and takes his blessing from their father Isaac, who is now blind.

In between these two stories is a narrative about Isaac and Rebecca going to *Gerar* because of famine, very similar to the story told about Abraham and Sarah in chapter 20 of Genesis (*Parshat Vayera*).



#### THE CORE IDEA

In Genesis 21 we read about an argument that arose over a well that Abraham had dug: "Then Abraham complained to Avimelekh about a well of water that Avimelekh's servants had seized" (21:25). The two men make a treaty. Unfortunately, this was not sufficient to prevent further difficulties for his son. Isaac becomes rich from God's blessings, causing envy among the Philistines. They fill the wells that Isaac's father Abraham had dug, and then Avimelekh commands Isaac to "Move away from us; you have become too powerful for us" (26:16). Isaac leaves the city and camps in the Valley of *Gerar*, and reopens the wells that his father had dug, and renames them the same names. Two of these wells once again cause tension with the local people there in the valley who claim the water for themselves. But the third well causes no arguing, so he names it *Rechovot* and says "Now the Lord has given us room (from the same root as *Rechovot*) and we will flourish in the land." (Gen. 26:22)

Isaac's response in this story is inspiring. Defeated once, he tries again. He digs another well; this too produces opposition. So, he moves on again, and eventually creates peace. How fitting it is that the town in Israel that today carries the name of this third well, *Rechovot*, is a large bustling modern city. Israel Belkind, one of the founders of the settlement in 1890, called it *Rechovot* precisely because of the verse in our *parsha*: "He named it *Rechovot*, saying, Now the Lord has given us room and we will flourish in the land."

Isaac is the least original of the three patriarchs. His life lacks the drama of Abraham or the struggles of Jacob. We see in this passage that Isaac himself did not strive to be innovative, digging the same wells and naming them with the same names as his father. Often, we try to make ourselves distinctive from our parents. We do things differently, or even if we don't, we give them different names. Isaac was not like this. He was content to be a link

in the chain of generations, faithful to what his father had started.

Isaac represents the faith of persistence, the courage of continuity. He was the first Jewish child, and he represents the single greatest challenge of being a Jewish child: to continue the journey our ancestors began, rather than drifting from it. And Isaac, because of that faith, was able to achieve the most elusive of goals, namely peace – because he never gave up. When one effort failed, he began again. So, it is with all great achievements: one part originality, nine parts persistence.



## IT ONCE HAPPENED...

“It once happened that Choni the Circle Drawer was walking along the way and he saw an old man planting a young fruit tree. Choni asked the man how long it would take until the tree would produce fruit. Seventy years,’ the old man answered him. ‘Do you really think you will be alive for another seventy years so you can enjoy the fruit from this tree?’ Choni asked the man with wonder. The man replied, ‘Just as I was born into a world with fully grown fruit trees that were planted by my ancestors, so I plant a tree for my children.’” (*Ta’anit 23a*)



## THINKING MORE DEEPLY

As well as the idea contained in the Core Idea above, there are two further aspects of this passage in the *parsha* worthy of careful attention. The first is the hint it gives us of what will later be the turning point of the fate of the Israelites in Egypt. Avimelekh says, “you have become *too powerful* for us.” Centuries later, Pharaoh says, at the beginning of the book of Exodus, “Behold, the people of the children of Israel are greater in number and *power* than we are. Come on, let us deal wisely with them ... and get them out of the land” (Exodus 1:9-10). The same word, *atzum*, “power/powerful,” appears in both cases. Our passage signals the birth of one of the deadliest of human phenomena, antisemitism.

Antisemitism is in some respects unique. It is, in Robert Wistrich’s phrase, the world’s longest hatred. No other prejudice has lasted so long, mutated so persistently, attracted such demonic myths, or had such devastating effects. But in other respects it is not unique, and we must try to understand it as best we can.

One of the best books about antisemitism, is in fact not about antisemitism at all, but about similar phenomena in other contexts, Amy Chua’s *World on Fire*. Her thesis is that any conspicuously successful minority will attract envy that may

## QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. Do you feel like you want to be different from your parents or the same?
2. Do you feel it is important to carry on the legacy of your parents (and ancestors) who went before you?
3. Is it more heroic and courageous to blaze your own path or to continue in the path of your parents/ancestors who went before you?

## QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. Who is the man Choni meets in this story focused on, his ancestors before him or his descendants that will come after him? Or both?
2. What connection can you see between this story and “The Core Idea” above?

deepen into hate and provoke violence. All three conditions are essential. The hated group must be *conspicuous*, for otherwise it would not be singled out. It must be *successful*, for otherwise it would not be envied. And it must be a *minority*, for otherwise it would not be attacked.

All three conditions were present in the case of Isaac. He was conspicuous: he was not a Philistine, he was different from the local population as an outsider, a stranger, someone with a different faith. He was successful: his crops had succeeded a hundredfold, his flocks and herds were large, and the people envied him. And he was a minority: a single family in the midst of the local population. All the ingredients were present for the presence of hostility and hate.

There is a second aspect of our passage that has had reverberations through the centuries: the self-destructive nature of hate. The Philistines did not ask Isaac to share his water with them. They did not ask him to teach them how he (and his father) had discovered a source of water that they – residents of the place – had not. They did not even simply ask him to move on. They “stopped up” the wells, “filling them with earth.” This act harmed them more than it harmed Isaac. It robbed them of a resource that would have become theirs,

once the famine had ended and Isaac had returned home. More than hate destroys the hated, it destroys the hater.

But Isaac refused to lose the faith of persistence (see The Core Idea above). I find it moving that Isaac, who underwent so many trials, from the binding when he was young, to the rivalry between his sons when he was old and blind, carries a name that means, “He will laugh.” Perhaps the name – given

to him by God Himself before Isaac was born – means what the psalm means when it says, “Those who sow in tears will reap with joy” (Psalms 126:5). Faith means the courage to persist through all the setbacks, all the grief, never giving up, never accepting defeat. For at the end, despite the opposition, the envy and the hate, lie the broad spaces, Rechovot, and the laughter, Isaac: the serenity of the destination after the storms along the way.



## FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

Historically, antisemitism has been hard to define, because it expresses itself in such contradictory ways. Before the Holocaust, Jews were hated because they were poor and because they were rich; because they were communists and because they were capitalists; because they kept to themselves and because they infiltrated everywhere; because they clung to ancient religious beliefs and because they were rootless cosmopolitans who believed nothing.

So what is antisemitism? Let’s be clear – not liking people because they’re different isn’t antisemitism. It’s xenophobia. Criticising Israel isn’t antisemitism: it’s part of the democratic process, and Israel is a democracy. Antisemitism is something much more dangerous – it means persecuting Jews and denying them the right to exist collectively as Jews with the same rights as everyone else.

It’s a prejudice that like a virus, has survived over time by mutating. So in the Middle Ages, Jews were persecuted because of their religion. In the 19th and 20th centuries they were reviled because of their race. Today, Jews are attacked because of the existence of their nation state, Israel. Denying Israel’s right to exist is the new antisemitism.

And just as antisemitism has mutated, so has its legitimisation. Each time, as the persecution descended

into barbarity, the persecutors reached for the highest form of justification available. In the Middle Ages, it was religion. In post-Enlightenment Europe it was science: the so-called scientific study of race. Today it is human rights. Whenever you hear human rights invoked to deny Israel’s right to exist, you are hearing the new antisemitism ...

Antisemitism is about the inability of a group to make space for difference. And because we are all different, the hate that begins with Jews never ends with Jews ... Antisemitism is the world’s most reliable early warning sign of a major threat to freedom, humanity and the dignity of difference. It matters to all of us. Which is why we must fight it together.

***The Mutation of Antisemitism (animation video)***

### QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. Is there still significant antisemitism in the world today or do you believe the days of antisemitism are over in our post-Holocaust world?
2. Can you envision a time when there will be no more antisemitism (or other prejudice and hatreds) in the world?



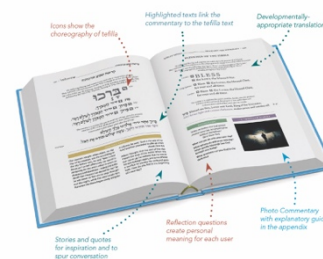
## AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. Is there a middle child in your family? What challenges do you think a middle child has to face in the family dynamic? Do you think Isaac felt like a middle child?
2. Have you ever experienced antisemitism personally? If not, do you know anyone that has?
3. Can antisemitism be explained rationally? Have you ever heard any explanations for the existence of antisemitism that made sense to you?
4. Do you think persistence and continuity can be described as heroic and courageous?
5. Is it more heroic and courageous to blaze your own path or to continue in the path of your parents/ancestors who went before you?



## QUESTION TIME

Do you want to win a **Koren Aviv Weekday Siddur**? This siddur has been designed to help young people explore their relationship to their God, and the values, history and religion of their people. Email [CCFamilyEdition@rabbisacks.org](mailto:CCFamilyEdition@rabbisacks.org) with your name, age, city and your best question or observation about the *parsha* from the *Covenant & Conversation Family Edition*. **Entrants must be 18 or younger**. Each month we will select two of the best entries, and the individuals will each be sent a siddur inscribed by Rabbi Sacks! Thank you to Koren Publishers for kindly donating these wonderful siddurim.



## EDUCATIONAL COMPANION TO THE QUESTIONS

### THE CORE IDEA

1. It is natural for every child to answer yes to both, and while it is an important part of growing up to want to rebel and challenge against the conventions of the upbringing an adolescent experiences in their parents' home, and forge a different path, it is equally normal for them to want to be like their parents. Challenge your child/student to connect to both ideas from a personal vantage point.
2. This concept is a core value of Judaism, and is one of the explanations for the miraculous history of Jewish continuity against all the odds. However, that is not to say that it is an obvious concept and value for an adolescent to connect to, especially as it demands sacrifice and weighty life choices. Challenge your child/student to evaluate this value and to connect to it on a personal level.
3. There is no question that both paths can be seen as heroic and courageous, and while it is easier to relate to the trail-blazer as courageous, Rabbi Sacks gives Isaac and the child who chooses to continue the legacy of his/her parents/ancestors dignity and worth. Try to do the same in your discussion on this point.

### IT ONCE HAPPENED...

1. There is a dual focus here. The man is clearly concerned with the world his descendants will inherit and therefore, despite his old age and the unlikelihood he will benefit from his efforts, strives to improve the world for them by planting a carob tree. However he also displays an awareness of and gratitude for his ancestors who did the same for their world and therefore for his. The story presents both the value of concern and responsibility for future generations, as well as the value and responsibility to continue the legacy of previous generations.
2. These values, responsibility for future generations and to continue the legacy of previous generations, can be seen in the way that Rabbi Sacks explores Isaac's character and life story. He could be seen as someone who lived the same life as his father without achieving anything significant himself. But Rabbi Sacks presents him as a someone who continues his father's legacy in order to be a link in the chain without which future generations would not exist.

### FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

1. Sadly, reported incidents of antisemitism are on the rise the world over, especially in Europe and the United States. While previous generations have believed that we live in a world where antisemitism and even racism can no longer exist, it is hard to imagine anyone feeling that way today.
2. Obviously there are no wrong answers to this question. Jews believe that one day the world will live in a redeemed state where there will no longer be conflict or hatred (messianic times). The question is whether it is mankind's responsibility to bring this about (and with it the messianic time period) or whether this redemption will be divinely achieved. Either way, it is an act of faith to believe this will one day happen, and this is something to explore with your child/student – what do they believe is the destiny of humanity?

### AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. A middle child will often feel unloved or unnoticed, as they are forced to compete with both the oldest and youngest child. The oldest child is seen as more mature and closer to an adult, and often given extra responsibilities and privileges. The youngest child is often over-protected and indulged as the baby, the status that the middle child loses with their birth. Isaac had to follow in the footsteps of his great father, the progenitor of our nation, the iconoclast, who trail-blazed a new path in the world. It is easy to imagine this must have defined his life and life-choices. Jacob perhaps felt less pressure being one generation removed, felt freer to make his own way in the world, and did just that. Although Isaac had no way to know the impact Jacob would make, for us, we see Isaac as the middle of our three patriarchs, with the challenge that presents. Ask your child/students to try and relate to the middle child in their family and Isaac who faced the same challenges.
2. If your child/students have not experienced antisemitism, and you have, share your own experiences of it, or those you have heard from others.
3. Many theories have been suggested for the existence of antisemitism that in reality is an irrational phenomenon that evades true explanation. You may wish to share Rabbi Sacks' approach to antisemitism, found in the *Covenant & Conversation Family Edition* in the "From the Thought of Rabbi Sacks" section (Rabbi Sacks also writes about this at length in his book *Future Tense*).
4. There is a dignity and perhaps courage in continuing a legacy. This *Covenant & Conversation* extends that to Isaac, and in your discussion you can find other examples from life to do the same.
5. This is an open question with no incorrect answers. There is courage in both, and it is important to extend the same dignity and value to someone who chooses to continue in the path of previous generations (a Jewish core value modelled by Isaac) as well as those who blaze their own trail even in opposition to the generally accepted norms of society (as modelled by Abraham).