



# 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 older children and teenagers 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 VAYESHEV IN A NUTSHELL

The story now shifts from Jacob to his children. The tension we have already sensed between Leah and Rachel is transferred to the next generation in the form of the rivalry between Joseph and his brothers, the story whose twists and turns take us to the end of Genesis. Joseph is Jacob's favourite son, firstborn of his beloved Rachel. The envy and antagonism of his brothers leads them to sell Joseph into slavery in Egypt, an act that will many years later result in the entire family, by then a nation, being enslaved.

A common thread running through the *parsha* is the power of the story to confuse our expectations. Reuben, the firstborn, seems to suffer self-doubt that robs him of the courage to take decisive action. Jacob's endless grief hides a refusal to give up hope. Tamar turns out to be a model of morals and courage. Two unlikely women play a part in the lineage of David, Israel's greatest king. Part of the continuing power of these stories lies in their refusal to play out the way we would expect. You can never predict in advance, the Torah seems to suggest, where virtue is to be found.



### THE CORE IDEA

The deception has taken place. Joseph has been sold into slavery. His brothers dipped his coat in blood. They bring it back to their father, saying: "Look what we have found. Do you recognise it? Is this your son's coat or not?" Jacob recognises it and replies, "It is my son's coat. A wild beast has devoured him. Joseph has been torn to pieces." We then read:

Jacob tore his clothes, put on sackcloth, and mourned his son for a long time. His sons and daughters tried to comfort him, but he *refused to be comforted*. He said, "I will go down to the grave mourning for my son." (Gen. 37:34-35)

There are laws in Judaism about the limits of grief – *shiva*, *sheloshim*, a year. There is no such thing as a bereavement for which grief is endless. The Talmud says that God rebukes one who weeps beyond the appointed time. And yet Jacob refuses to be comforted.

A Midrash gives a remarkable explanation. "One can be comforted for one who is dead, but not for one who is still living," it says. In other words, Jacob refused to be comforted *because he had not yet given up hope that Joseph was still alive*. That, tragically, is the fate of those who have lost members of their family (the parents of soldiers missing in action, for example), but have as yet no proof that they are dead. They cannot go through the normal stages of mourning because they cannot abandon the possibility that the missing person is still capable of being rescued. Their continuing anguish is a form of loyalty; to give up, to mourn, to be reconciled to loss is a kind of betrayal. In such cases, grief lacks closure. To refuse to be comforted is to refuse to give up hope.

## QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. Why do you think Judaism has specific time periods for different levels of mourning, such as *shiva* (the first week after the death of a loved one), *shloshim* (the first 30-day period of mourning), and the completion of the first year?

2. Do you think the pain is greater for the loss of a child, or when a child is missing presumed dead?

3. Do you know of any stories of parents who refused to give up hope that their child may still be alive? What can we learn from Jacob and these other parents?



## IT ONCE HAPPENED...

A legend is told of Napoleon, the French Emperor in the early nineteenth century, taking a stroll through the streets of Paris with his advisors one Tisha B'Av during his reign. As his entourage passed a small synagogue they heard wailing and crying coming from within. Puzzled by the commotion, Napoleon sent an aide inside to inquire as to what had happened.

The aide returned after a few minutes and told Napoleon that the Temple of the Jews had been destroyed and they were in mourning over its loss. Napoleon was outraged! "How can it be I have no knowledge of this event? Where in the Empire did this occur? When did this befall the Jews of that community and who were the perpetrators?"

The aide responded, "Sir, the Temple was lost in Jerusalem on this date more than 1,700 years ago."

Napoleon stood in silence and shock. "A people who can mourn for Jerusalem so long, will one day have it restored to them!", he said.

## QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. What is the message of this story? How is it connected to the story of Jacob's grief and refusal to give up hope?
2. What do you think would have happened if we had moved on after the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in 70CE? Why are Jews so obsessed with remembering history?



## THINKING MORE DEEPLY

On what basis did Jacob continue to hope that Joseph was still alive? Surely he had recognized Joseph's blood-stained coat – he said explicitly, "A wild beast has devoured him. Joseph has been torn to pieces." Do these words not mean that he had accepted that Joseph was dead?

The late David Daube made a suggestion that I find convincing. The words the sons say to Jacob – *haker na*, literally "identify please" – have a quasi-legal connotation. Daube relates this passage to another, Exodus 22:10-13, with which it has close linguistic parallels. The issue discussed is the extent of responsibility borne by a guardian (*shomer*). If an animal is lost through negligence, the guardian is at fault and must make good the loss. If there is no negligence, merely *force majeure*, an unavoidable, unforeseeable accident, the guardian is exempt from blame. One such case is where the loss has been caused by a wild animal. The wording in the law – *tarof yitoref*, "torn to pieces" – exactly parallels Jacob's judgment in the case of Joseph: *tarof toraf Yosef*, "Joseph has been torn to pieces."

An elder brother carried a similar responsibility for the fate of a younger brother placed in his charge, as, for example, when the two were alone together. That is the significance of Cain's

denial when confronted by God as to the fate of Abel: "Am I my brother's guardian [*shomer*]?" (Gen. 4:9).

We now understand a series of nuances in the encounter between Jacob and his sons upon their return without Joseph. Normally they would be held responsible for their younger brother's disappearance. To avoid this, as in the case of later biblical law, they "bring the remains as evidence." If those remains show signs of an attack by a wild animal, they must – by virtue of the law then operative – be held innocent. Their request to Jacob, *haker na*, must be construed as a legal request, meaning, "Examine the evidence." Jacob has no alternative but to do so, and by virtue of what he has seen, to acquit them. A judge, however, may be forced to acquit someone accused of a crime because the evidence is insufficient to justify a conviction, while still retaining lingering private doubts. So Jacob was forced to find his sons innocent, without necessarily trusting what they said. In fact Jacob did not believe it, and his refusal to be comforted shows that he was unconvinced. He continued to hope that Joseph was still alive. That hope was eventually justified: Joseph was still alive, and father and son were ultimately reunited.

The refusal to be comforted sounded more than once in Jewish history. The prophet Jeremiah was sure that Jews would return to Israel *because* they refused to be comforted – meaning, they refused to give up hope (Jeremiah 31:15-17). So it was during the Babylonian exile, as articulated in one of the most paradigmatic expressions of the refusal to be comforted: “By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept, As we remembered Zion...”

Jews are the people who refused to be comforted because they never gave up hope. All the evidence of Jewish history

may seem to signify irretrievable loss, a decree of history that cannot be overturned, a fate that must be accepted. Jews never believed the evidence because they had something else to set against it – a faith, a trust, an unbreakable hope that proved stronger than historical inevitability. It is not too much to say that Jewish survival was sustained in that hope. And that hope came from a simple – or perhaps not so simple – phrase in the life of Jacob. He refused to be comforted. And so – while we live in a world still scarred by violence, poverty and injustice – must we.



## FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

This was perhaps the greatest contribution of Judaism – via the Judaic roots of Christianity – to the West. The idea that time is an arena of change, and that freedom and creativity are God’s gift to humanity, resulted in astonishing advances in science and our understanding of the world, technology and our ability to control the human environment, economics and our ability to lift people out of poverty and starvation, medicine and our ability to cure disease. It led to the abolition of slavery, the growth of a more egalitarian society, the enhanced position of women, and the emergence of democracy and liberalism...

To be a Jew is to be an agent of hope. Every ritual, every command, every syllable of the Jewish story is a protest against escapism, resignation and the blind acceptance of fate. Judaism, the religion of the free God, is a religion of freedom. Jewish faith is written in the future tense. It is

belief in a future that is not yet but could be, if we heed God’s call, obey His will and act together as a covenantal community. The name of the Jewish future is hope...

Jews were and are still called on to be the voice of hope in the conversation of humankind.

*Future Tense, p. 249-252*

### QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. How did Judaism introduce the idea to the world that the future can be different from the past, and we can have hope in a better world?
2. What do you think is the source of the obstinate Jewish refusal in history to give up hope?



## AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. Why do you think Jacob refused to give up hope that Joseph was still alive?
2. Can you think of examples from Jewish history of when the Jewish people refused to give up hope?
3. What do you think is the source of this refusal to give up hope?
4. There is no documented evidence that the story about Napoleon and the Jews on Tisha Ba’av actually happened, but is the message of the story still valid and important? What is the message of the story?
5. What can other people of the world learn from the Jewish refusal to give up hope in the face of adversity?



## 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.



## THE CORE IDEA

1. Jewish law strives to create a balance between too much and too little grief. Hence the various stages of bereavement. Judaism ordains a precisely calibrated sequence of grief, from the initial, numbing moment of loss itself, to the funeral and the return home, to the period of being comforted by friends and members of the community, to a more extended time during which one does not engage in activities associated with joy. The more we learn about the psychology of bereavement and the stages through which we must pass before loss is healed, so the wisdom of Judaism's ancient laws and customs has become clearer. However, in our *parsha*, Jacob refuses to allow himself to pass through these stages of grief because deep down he did not believe that Joseph was dead.
2. Although this is an impossible question to answer, one can imagine that as long as there is a chance the child is still alive, in the absence of proof to the contrary, then there can be a glimmer of hope that perhaps can distract from the pain.
3. In Israel there are several stories of parents and families of soldiers missing in action who refused to give up hope until they were given absolute proof of the death of their child. These parents did everything in their power to influence governments and other agencies to bring back their children, or at least bring proof of their death, and bring back their bodies. Never giving up hope can achieve very powerful and meaningful results.

## IT ONCE HAPPENED...

1. The message of this story is the impressive emotional connection that these (and all) Jews had to their history. So much so that they mourned the destruction of their Temple 1700 years ago as if it had just happened. Their refusal to be consoled over the centuries that had passed impressed Napoleon so much that he was convinced they would merit as a nation to see Jerusalem restored to them.
2. If Jews over the centuries had given up their hope of returning as a sovereign nation to their land and moved on with their national life, then it is hard to see how the re-emergence of the Jewish national movement in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century that ultimately led to the establishment of the State of Israel would have happened. In fact, some historians believe that this unbreakable hope and will is one factor that ensured the existence of the Jewish people in exile for so many generations, as opposed to the narratives of so many other conquered ancient nations who assimilated into host societies and no longer exist.

## FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

1. In his book *Future Tense* (p.231-241), Rabbi Sacks identifies 4 features of Jewish faith that distinguish Jews and Jewish thought, and encouraged them to always believe that the future can be better than the present:
  - a. God reveals His name to Moshe at the burning bush as *Ehyeh asher ehyeh* (*Shemot* 3:14) - literally "*I will be what I will be*". God's name is in the future tense.
  - b. A Jewish sense of time is a radical break with the ancient concept of time, which was merely cyclical. In Judaism, "Human life is an arena of transformation".
  - c. Jewish narrative in the Bible and in history breaks the rules of narrative form. Jewish history is a story without ending. Its conclusion is yet to be fulfilled.
  - d. Judaism's "golden age" is always in the future – the Messiah has not yet come.
2. Perhaps hope is written into Jewish DNA because of the 4 factors written in the question above. Perhaps it is a steadfast faith in the existence of a God who acts for the good of the Jewish people and humanity in history.

## AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. The love a parent has for their child is so strong that until incontrovertible proof is presented to prove there is no hope, the parent will refuse to be consoled, stop grieving, and give up hope of reuniting with their child.
2. The whole of Jewish history is a story of refusing to give up hope. In the face of profound adversity, the Jewish people have refused to give up their religion and their age-old dream of returning to their land. The Jewish dream of a world of peace and redemption in a Messianic Age is also a dream they have refused to give up on.
3. Historians have struggled to explain this aspect of Jewish history. Perhaps the only explanation is a steadfast faith in the existence of a God who acts for the good of the Jewish people and humanity in history.
4. The historical accuracy of the story doesn't take away from the depth of the message. If Napoleon had stumbled across a synagogue of mourning Jews on Tisha B'av, it is easy to imagine he would have been surprised, shocked, and impressed by the scene. The message of this story is the powerful emotional connection that these (and all) Jews had to their history. So much so that they mourned the destruction of their Temple 1700 years ago as if it had just happened. Their refusal to be consoled over the centuries that had passed impressed Napoleon so much that he was convinced they would merit as a nation to see Jerusalem restored to them.
5. Life for both the individual and on a national level, can often be difficult and challenging, and despair and loss of hope are easy to understand. The Jewish story can inspire and be an antidote to this. Few peoples can compare their national suffering and pain or point to quite so many tragic and dark periods in their history. Yet the Jews refused to despair or lose hope. In a world that still suffers great moments of darkness, they continued to have believe in a better future for humanity.