



COVENANT & CONVERSATION

Family Edition

ויצא תשע"ט
Vayetse 5779

When the
"I" is Silent

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.



PARSHAT VAYETSE IN A NUTSHELL

Jacob leaves home, running away from Esau his brother who had promised to kill him, but then finds himself in a difficult relationship with Laban, his uncle, who agreed to take him in. He falls in love with Laban's younger daughter Rachel and agrees to work for seven years to earn her hand in marriage. When the wedding eventually takes place, Jacob wakes the next morning to discover that Laban had switched his elder daughter, Leah, in place of Rachel.

Jacob later marries Rachel as well, but there is tension between the sisters. Leah, who feels unloved, is blessed with many children; Rachel, deeply loved by Jacob, is not. There is further tension between Jacob and Laban – about flocks, wages and ownership – which eventually leads Jacob to run away once again, this time homeward. The *parsha* begins and ends with these two journeys.



THE CORE IDEA

In this week's *parsha* Jacob, alone and far from home, lies down for the night, with only stones for a pillow, and dreams of a ladder set on earth but reaching heaven, with angels ascending and descending. Jacob calls the dream an encounter with the "house of God", hinting that this is the future location of the Temple, which will be a model for our "house of God" today, the synagogue. This was the first dream of a "gate of heaven" that would allow access to a God that stands above, letting us know finally that "God is truly in this place."

There is, though, something strange in the Hebrew text that is lost in translation, and it took the Hassidic masters to remind us of it. The word *yadati* means "I knew," and *lo yadati*, "I did not know." When Jacob wakes from his sleep, however, he says, "Surely the Lord is in this place *ve'anokhi lo yadati*." *Anokhi* means "I," which in this sentence is superfluous. To translate it literally we would have to say, "And I, I knew it not." Why the double "I"?

To this, Rabbi Pinchas Horowitz (*Panim Yafot*) gave a magnificent answer. How, he asks, do we come to know

that God is in this place? By *ve'anokhi lo yadati* – not knowing the I. We know God when we forget the self. We sense the "Thou" of the Divine Presence when we move beyond the "I" of egocentricity (thinking about ourself first). Only when we stop thinking about ourselves do we become truly open to the world and the Creator.

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. Have you ever been so engrossed in something you have forgotten where you are and what time it is? Have you ever forgotten who you are for just a split second?
2. Can you think of a festival in the Jewish calendar when Jewish law makes demands on us designed to do just this – ignore ourselves and only concentrate on the world and the Creator?
3. Why do you think being focused on ourselves prevents us from praying or establishing a deep relationship with God?



IT ONCE HAPPENED...

The Hassidic master Rabbi Simcha Bunim of Peschischa used to say to his students: “Everyone must have two pockets, with a note in each pocket, so that he or she can reach into the one or the other, depending on the need. When feeling lowly and depressed, discouraged or disconsolate, one should reach into the right pocket, and there, find the words: *For my sake was the world created.* But when feeling high and mighty one should reach into the left pocket and find the words: *I am but dust and ashes.*”

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. What is the message of this story? What connection can you see between this story and “The Core Idea” above?
2. Which of the two pieces of paper do you think is more important to focus on? Can they both be true at the same time?



THINKING MORE DEEPLY

The idea presented in “The Core Idea” above gives us insight into some of the great questions about prayer: What difference does it make? Does it really change God? Surely God does not change. Besides which, does not prayer contradict the most fundamental principle of faith, which is that we are called on to do God’s will rather than ask God to do ours? What really happens when we pray?

Prayer has two dimensions, one mysterious, the other not. In times of crisis we cry out from the depths of our soul, and something happens. Sometimes we only realise it later, looking back. Prayer makes a difference to the world – but how it does so is mysterious.

There is, however, a second dimension which is non-mysterious. Less than prayer changes the world, it changes us. The Hebrew verb *lehitpalel*, meaning “to pray,” is reflexive, implying an action done to oneself. Literally, it means “to judge oneself.” It means, to escape from the prison of the self and see the world, including ourselves, from the outside. Prayer is where the relentless first person singular, the “I,” falls silent for a moment and we become aware that we are not the centre of the universe. There is a reality outside. That is a moment of transformation.

If we could only stop asking the question, “How does this affect me?” we would see that we are surrounded by miracles.

There is the almost infinite complexity and beauty of the natural world. There is the divine word, our greatest legacy as Jews, the library of books we call the Bible. And there is the unparalleled drama, spreading over forty centuries, of the tragedies and triumphs that have befallen the Jewish people. Respectively, these represent the three dimensions of our knowledge of God: creation (God in nature), revelation (God in holy words) and redemption (God in history).

Sometimes it takes a great crisis to make us realise how self-centred we have been. The only question strong enough to endow existence with meaning is not, “What do I need from life?” but “What does life need from me?” That is the question we hear when we truly pray. More than an act of speaking, prayer is an act of listening – to what God wants from us, here, now. What we discover – if we are able to create that silence in the soul – is that we are not alone. We are here because someone, the One, wanted us to be, and He has set us a task only we can do. We emerge strengthened, transformed.

More than prayer changes God, it changes us. It lets us see, feel, know that “God is in this place.” How do we reach that awareness? By moving beyond the first person singular, so that for a moment, like Jacob, we can say, “I know not the I.” In the silence of the “I,” we meet the “Thou” of God.



FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

Prayer is our intimate dialogue with Infinity, the profoundest expression of our faith that at the heart of reality is a Presence that cares, a God who listens, a creative Force that brought us into being in love. It is this

belief more than any other that redeems life from solitude and fate from tragedy. The universe has a purpose. We have a purpose. However infinitesimal we are, however brief our stay on earth, we matter. The universe is more

than particles of matter endlessly revolving in indifferent space. The human person is more than an accidental concatenation of genes blindly replicating themselves. Human life is more than 'A tale, told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.' (Macbeth 5.5.26–28). Prayer gives meaning to existence.

It is possible to believe otherwise. There can be a life without faith or prayer, just as there can be a life without love, or laughter, or happiness, or hope. But it is a diminished thing, lacking dimensions of depth and aspiration. Descartes said, 'I think, therefore I am.' Judaism says, 'I pray, therefore I am not alone.'

It takes courage to believe. Jews need no proof of the apparent injustice of events. It is written on the pages of our history. Jews had no power or earthly glory. For the better part of forty centuries our ancestors lived dispersed throughout the world, without a home, without rights, all too often experiencing persecution and pain. All they had was an invisible God and the line connecting us to Him: the Siddur, the words of prayer. All they had was faith. In Judaism, we do not analyse our faith, we pray it. We do not philosophise about truth, we sing it, we daven it. For Judaism, faith becomes real when it becomes prayer.

In prayer we speak to a presence vaster than the unfathomable universe yet closer to us than we are to ourselves: the God beyond who is also the Voice within. Though language must fail when we try to describe a Being beyond all parameters of speech, yet language is all we have, and it is enough. For God who made the world with creative words, and who revealed His will in holy words, listens to our prayerful words. Language is the bridge that joins us to Infinity.

In prayer God becomes not a theory but a Presence, not a fact but a mode of relationship. Prayer is where God meets us, in the human heart, in our offering of words, in our acknowledged vulnerability.

Ten Paths to God – Unit 2, Prayer: Speaking to God

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. Using this source as well as the ideas contained in this week's *Covenant & Conversation*, how many themes and processes can you identify behind the act of praying?
2. Which of these do you most connect to when you pray?



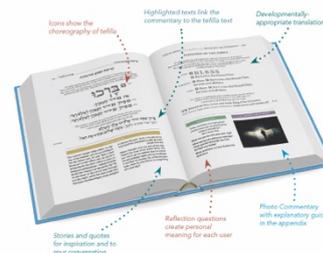
AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. What are the positive reasons to practice a movement away from being self-centred? Are there any potential negatives associated with this?
2. If, as we believe, God is a loving and caring God who acts in history for our benefit, why do you think Rabbi Sacks is arguing that it is necessary to negate ourselves to some extent to connect to Him?
3. Have you – or anyone you know – ever had an instance where you have prayed and felt that your prayers have been answered – what Rabbi Sacks calls the mysterious dimension of prayer?
4. What is the linguistic message behind the grammatical form of the verb "to pray" (*lehitpallel*)?
5. Do you feel prayer changes 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 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. This question asks for the reader to reflect on experiences they have had where they became so engrossed they lost a sense of themselves, even if it was momentarily. This could be reading a book, watching a movie, listening to music, or even just day dreaming. The idea behind the question is to allow the child to tap into an experience where they had a short period of self-negation. This will help them connect to the core idea from the *Covenant & Conversation*.
2. Yom Kippur has five prohibitions, designed to limit the sense of self (and self-enjoyment) in order to be able to concentrate on the larger ideas of the day such as the judgement of the world and one's relationship with God. These prohibitions are eating and drinking; sexual relations; wearing leather shoes; washing; and anointing oneself.
3. It is human nature to be concerned and focused on oneself, to the exception of other things, such as other people, the world in general, or God. God is transcendental, and certainly transcends our small and finite lives, so focusing on that is a barrier to connecting to the infinite and transcendental Divine. Having said that, *tefilla* (Jewish prayer) is a more realistic and healthy balance between these two poles. Much of prayer, especially during the weekday *amida* (the standing prayer at the core of all prayer services) focuses on our own individual, national, and universal needs. Judaism represents a balance between our own needs and concerns and the infinite divine, as will be seen further on in this *Covenant & Conversation*.

IT ONCE HAPPENED...

1. The story represents the healthy balance between self-negation ("I am but dust and ashes") which will prevent pride and arrogance and give one more chance of building a relationship with God, and the dignity of the human being that is found in the knowledge that, as is stated in Genesis, all mankind is created in the Divine image ("For my sake was the world created"). The dignity and sense of self-worth that this affords every human being is also a core value in Judaism, and the story encourages each person to find a balance between these two poles in order to live a balanced and fulfilling life connected to God and humanity. "The Core Idea" above asks the reader to understand the need for self-limitation and negation in order to build a relationship with God based on prayer. However, there is a danger when this is taken to an extreme, so the story represents a very Jewish and healthy balanced approach.
2. The answer to this could depend on the natural inclination of the individual. Those that are prone to lack self-esteem should focus on the piece of paper that declares "For my sake was the world created" and those prone to arrogance should focus on the paper that declares "I am but dust and ashes". Ask your child/student to analyse their own personality to answer this question and encourage them to consider the appropriateness of a balanced approach between the two.

FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

1. These may include: silencing the "I"; mysterious prayer (when God responds to our prayers); non-mysterious prayer (when we respond to our prayers); prayer as intimate dialogue with Infinity; prayer as the profoundest expression of our faith; prayer that redeems life from solitude and fate from tragedy; prayer as a declaration that the universe has a purpose and that we have a purpose; prayer as the song of truth; in prayer God becomes not a theory but a Presence; prayer is where God meets us, in the human heart.
2. Push your child/student to analyse their own prayer and if none of these speak to them, make sure they volunteer another mode of prayer as meaningful to them. And if prayer is not meaningful in any way to them, then make sure to ask them to articulate why.

AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. Much has been written and researched about the dangers of the iGen generation growing up in the world of smartphones and selfies, and much of it revolves around a heightened sense of self and self-worth, to the extreme. Having a more balanced approach to the self, will avoid some of the ills in society and difficulty this generation are experiencing finding their place in the world. Having said that, too much self-negation can also lead to the secondary issues that come from low self-esteem. On a societal level, a society that negates the individual can lead to totalitarianism and other evils. The Jewish approach attempts to find a suitable median.
2. While we do believe that God is a personal God who acts in history to our benefit, on a personal, national, and universal level, God transcends the universe itself. To connect to an infinite transcendental God, one must be able to focus and connect to the world beyond the self.
3. The people around your Shabbat table may have felt a sense of divine providence in their life. Ask them to share instances when they have or stories they have heard from others that have.
4. *Lehitpallel*, to pray, comes from the Hebrew root *p-l-l* which means 'to judge' (or 'criminal' in Modern Hebrew). It is in the reflexive grammatical form (*lehitpallel*) and therefore this process is happening to oneself. So prayer on some level is self-judgement. When you stand before God and list your needs and deepest wishes, you are forced to examine your life, your needs, your dependencies, and your worthiness. This process is self-judgement.
5. This is a very personal question, and even if the previous answer does not speak to the people around your table, there are many other ways which prayer can change the way we see the world and connect to it. Perhaps this might include a humility engendered from an acknowledgement of dependency and need, or a deep connection to the Jewish people across time and space, or prayer may be powerful a spiritual and meditative experience. These are just some examples, other than self-judgement, and the power for positive change that may come from it, that prayer can achieve.