



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.



PARSHAT VAYIGASH IN A NUTSHELL

Vayigash begins with the scene that is the dramatic climax to the story that began in last week's parsha, in which Joseph finally reveals himself to his brothers. Moved by Judah's emotional and passionate appeal for Benjamin's freedom, in return for which he declares himself ready to

take Benjamin's place as a slave, Joseph reveals his identity and the distance and separation of the brothers comes to an end. On Joseph's instructions, they return to Jacob with the news that his beloved son is still alive, and the family is reunited.



THE CORE IDEA

It is one of the great questions we naturally ask each time we read the story of Joseph. Why did he not, at some time during their twenty-two-year separation, send word to his father, Jacob, that he was alive? For part of that time – when he was a slave in Potiphar's house, and when he was in prison – it would have been impossible. But he certainly could have done so when he became the second most powerful person in Egypt, or when the brothers came before him on their first journey to buy food.

Joseph knew how much his father loved him. He must have known how much their separation grieved him. He did not know what Jacob thought had happened to him, but this surely he knew, that it was his duty to communicate with him when the opportunity arose, to tell his father that he was alive and well. Why then did he not?

The story of Joseph's descent into slavery and exile began when his father sent him, alone, to see how the brothers were faring. Immediately prior to this episode, the Torah tells us about the second of Joseph's dreams: "the sun and moon and eleven stars were bowing down to me." When he told his father as well as his brothers, his father rebuked him and said, "What is this dream you had? Will your mother and I and your brothers actually come and bow down to the ground before you?" (Gen. 37: 9-11).

Immediately afterwards, we read of Jacob sending Joseph, alone, to his brothers. It was there, at that meeting far from home, that they plotted to kill him, lowered him into a pit, and eventually sold him as a slave. Joseph had many years to reflect on that episode. That his brothers were hostile to him, he knew. But surely Jacob knew this as well. In which case, why did he send Joseph to them? Did Jacob not contemplate the possibility that they might do him harm? Did he not know the dangers of sibling rivalry? (In fact, he knew this better than anyone from his personal experience with Esau!) Did Jacob not contemplate the possibility that by sending Joseph to them he was risking his life?

Yet Jacob sent Joseph to his other sons knowing that they were jealous of him and hated him. What else could he conclude, as he reflected on the events that led up to his sale as a slave, that Jacob had deliberately placed him in this danger? Why? Because of the immediately prior event, when Joseph had told his father that "the sun and moon" – his father and mother – would bow down to him. This angered Jacob, and Joseph knew it. His father had "rebuked" him. What else could he conclude but that Jacob had deliberately put his life at risk? *Joseph did not communicate with his father because he believed his father no longer wanted to see him or hear from him.*

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. Do you think it is normal for a child to question how much their parents really love them?

2. Do you think Jacob was wrong to send Joseph to check on his brothers?

3. From this story what can we learn about how important communication is in relationships?



IT ONCE HAPPENED...

The following is a short story based on “Somebody’s Son” by Richard Pindell.

As David sat on the side of the road in the Dakota plains, waiting for his next ride, he wrote:

“Dear Mom, if Dad will permit it, I would like to come home. I know there’s little chance he will. I’m not going to kid myself. I remember he said once, if I ever ran off, I might as well keep going. All I can say is that I felt like leaving home was something I had to do. I wanted to find out more about life and about me, and the best way for us (life and me) to live with each other. You won’t be able to reach me by mail, because I don’t know where I will be next. But in a few days, I hope to be passing our place. If there’s any chance Dad will have me back, please ask him to tie a white cloth to the apple tree in the south pasture. I’ll be going by on the train. If there’s no cloth on the tree, I’ll just quietly, and without any hard feelings toward Dad, keep going. Love, David”

David mailed the letter with a knot in his stomach. The coming days and weeks brought new acquaintances and adventures as David hitchhiked with cars, vans, trucks, and freight trains, all the time edging closer to his home in Maryland.

Finally, as he ascended the passenger train that would be the last leg of his journey homeward, the knot returned and firmly lodged itself in his core. He could hardly bring himself to imagine the apple tree in the pasture of his childhood home,

for fear it would be bereft of the white cloth, even in his imagination.

As he sat down next to the window that would deliver his fate, an elderly gentleman sat in the seat beside him. As day turned to night, and once again back to day, the travel companions shared their stories. As David regaled his neighbor with stories of the West Coast, Canada, and even Mexico, he realized that in just a short while the train tracks would take a gentle bend to the right, and there would be the farm on which he grew up, with its south-facing pasture, and the old apple tree which he used to climb as a child. He couldn’t look. He was too afraid the cloth would not be there – too afraid he would find, staring back at him, just another tree, just another field – so he turned quickly away.

Desperately, he nudged his travel companion beside him. “Mister, will you do me a favor? Around this bend on the right, you’ll see an apple tree. I wonder if you’ll tell me if you see a white cloth tied to one of its branches.”

“Son,” the man said in a voice slow with wonder, “I see a white cloth tied on almost every twig.”

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. What is the message of this story, and how is it linked to the story of Joseph in our *parsha*?

2. Do you think parental love is unconditional?



THINKING MORE DEEPLY

Joseph did not communicate with his father because he believed his father no longer wanted to see him or hear from him. His father had terminated the relationship. That was a reasonable inference from the facts as Joseph knew them. He could not have known that Jacob still loved him, that his brothers had deceived their father by showing him Joseph’s bloodstained cloak, and that his father mourned for him, “refusing to be comforted.” We know these facts because the Torah tells us. But Joseph, far away, in another land, serving as a slave, could not have known. This places the story in a completely new and tragic light.

Evidence for this theory is contained in the choice of name Joseph gave to his firstborn son Menasheh: “It is because God has made me forget all my trouble *and all my father’s house*” (Gen. 41: 51). Uppermost in Joseph’s mind was the desire to forget the past, not just his brothers’ conduct towards him but “all my father’s house.” Joseph believed that his father had deliberately put him at his brothers’ mercy because, angered by the second dream, he no longer wanted contact with the son he had once loved. That is why he never sent a message to Jacob that he was still alive.

If this is so, it sheds new light on the great opening scene of *Vayigash*. What was it in Judah's speech that made Joseph break down in tears and finally reveal his identity to his brothers? Judah says words that, for the first time, allow Joseph to understand what had actually occurred twenty-two years previously. Judah recounted what happened after the brothers returned from their first journey to buy food in Egypt when Jacob refused to allow the brothers to return with Benjamin, saying: "You know that my wife bore me two sons. One of them went away from me, and I said, 'He has surely been torn to pieces.' And I have not seen him since. If you take this one from me too and harm comes to him, you will bring my gray head down to the grave in misery." (Gen. 44: 27-31)

At that moment Joseph realised that his fear that his father had rejected him was unwarranted. On the contrary, he had been bereft when Joseph did not return. He believed that he had been "torn to pieces," killed by a wild animal. His father still loved him, still grieved for him. This explains why after revealing himself to his brothers Joseph's first thought is not about Judah or Benjamin, but about Jacob. A doubt he had harboured for twenty-two years had turned out to be

unfounded. Hence his first question: "Is my father still alive?" (Gen. 45:1-3)

The theme of fathers and sons runs through the Book of Genesis. How did Isaac feel towards Abraham, knowing that he had lifted a knife to sacrifice him? How did Jacob feel towards Isaac, knowing that he loved Esau more than him? How did Leah's sons feel about Jacob, knowing that he loved Rachel and her children more? *Does my father really love me?* – that is a question we feel must have arisen in each of these cases. Now we see that there is a strong case for supposing that Joseph, too, must have asked himself the same question.

For Sigmund Freud, the Oedipus complex – the tension between fathers and sons – is the single most powerful determinant of the psychology of the individual, and of religion as a whole. Freud, however, took as his key text a Greek myth, not the narratives of Genesis. Had he turned to Torah instead, he would have seen that this fraught relationship can have a non-tragic resolution. Abraham did love Isaac. Isaac did bless Jacob a second time, this time knowing he was Jacob. Jacob did love Joseph. And transcending all these human loves is divine love, rescuing us from feelings of rejection, and redeeming the human condition from tragedy.



FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

If there's one element of Judaism I'd love to share with everyone it's this: If you want to survive and thrive as a people, a culture, a civilisation, celebrate the family. Hold it sacred. Eat together. Tell the story of what most matters to you across the generations. Make children the most important people. Put them centre stage. Encourage them to ask questions, the more the better. That's what Moses said thirty-three centuries ago and Judaism is still here to tell the tale having survived some of the most brutal persecutions in human history, yet as a religious faith were

still young and full of energy. (*Thought for the Day, BBC Radio 4, 30th March 2012*)

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. Why do you think Rabbi Sacks claims that celebrating the family is the secret to Jewish continuity?
2. Do you see any evidence that Judaism makes "children the most important people"?



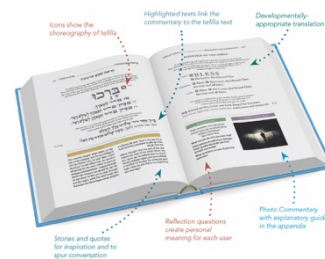
AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. Do you think Jacob was wrong to send Joseph to check on his brothers?
2. Do you think Joseph was wrong to not send word to Jacob that he was alive and well?
3. Who do you relate to more in this tragic story, Joseph or Jacob? Why?
4. What lessons can we draw from this story?
5. Why do you think the theme of parental love runs through the Book of Genesis?



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.



EDUCATIONAL COMPANION TO THE QUESTIONS

THE CORE IDEA

1. This is obviously a natural and normal phenomenon and the power of the biblical narrative is it presents our forefathers as very human personalities with very human emotions.
2. Just as Joseph is presented in this story as vulnerable, Jacob's fallibility is also highlighted. It seems clear he was not in touch with the dynamics of the relationships among his children. It is hard to lay blame at his door for what transpired after he sent Jacob.
3. Communication is fundamental to healthy relationships. Trust in a relationship is also critical. When we can trust someone to show ourselves as vulnerable, then communication and avoiding miscommunication (or lack of communication) becomes much easier.

IT ONCE HAPPENED...

1. The central message of this story is the power of parental love. Despite disappointment, or a dissonance between the values, ideas, and decisions, of the child and parent, a healthy parent-child relationship will always be based on forgiveness, compassion, understanding, and love. Joseph feared this was not the case with his relationship with his father Jacob, but he was mistaken.
2. This is a complex question as it is based on the complex reality of the human condition. This is a great opportunity to have an honest discussion with your child about your relationship with them (or to explore parental relationships with your students).

FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

1. The most formidable vehicle for the transmission of values, culture, and heritage, is the family structure. It is no exaggeration to claim that Judaism's obsession with parenting and family is a major factor explaining the improbable miracle of Jewish survival under profoundly adverse conditions through 2000 years of exile and persecution.
2. Judaism has an almost emphatic obsession with family, children and education. Thousands of years before any other civilisation, Jewish law instituted compulsory education from the youngest age. Judaism enshrined the sanctity in having and rearing children in Jewish law. And Judaism placed learning and education at the centre of Jewish life. While other civilisations saw children as the property of their parents with no rights of their own, Judaism and Jewish law spoke of parental responsibility to children. Judaism always understood that our children are the secret of the survival of the Jewish people.

AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. See "The Core Idea" question 2.
2. There is no correct or incorrect answer to a question like this, but this is a good opportunity to both try and connect empathetically to both Joseph and Jacob, and the predicaments they find themselves in. Encourage in your conversation about this a simulation/role playing in order to do this. It is also a great opportunity to explore the value of not judging people, and of showing compassion to people when considering the decisions they make.
3. If you find that adults/parents find it easier to identify with Jacob, and children with Joseph, then challenge them to switch their position and express what must have been going through the mind of the other character in order to try and connect and empathise with them more.
4. These could include the power of parental love, the importance of communication, trust, and honesty in relationships, the parent-child relationship as a model for our relationship with God.
5. The Book of Genesis explores the human condition, from the universal themes of creation and humanity earlier in the book, to the narrower themes of familial relationships later on in the narrative. The parent-child relationship is central to the human condition, and the Torah wants to present it in an honest way and provide models for us. Rabbi Sacks also suggests at the end of the *Covenant & Conversation* this week that this relationship can be seen as a model for our relationship with God. We certainly believe that God's love for us is unconditional, in a way that we hope the parental love in our lives is also.