

COVENANT & Conversation

A STUDY OF SPIRITUALITY IN THE PARSHA WITH RABBI SACKS

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— RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS



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How the Light Gets In

Vayetse - 21 November 2015 / 9 Kislev 5776

Why Jacob? That is the question we find ourselves asking repeatedly as we read the narratives of Genesis. Jacob is not what Noah was: righteous, perfect in his generations, one who walked with God. He did not, like Abraham, leave his land, his birthplace and his father's house in response to a Divine call. He did not, like Isaac, offer himself up as a sacrifice. Nor did he have the burning sense of justice and willingness to intervene that we see in the vignettes of Moses' early life. Yet we are defined for all time as the descendants of Jacob, the children of Israel. Hence the force of the question: Why Jacob?

The answer, it seems to me, is intimated in the beginning of this week's parsha. Jacob was in the middle of a journey from one danger to another. He had left home because Esau had vowed to kill him when Isaac died. He was about to enter the household of his uncle Laban, which would itself present other dangers. Far from home, alone, he was at a point of maximum vulnerability. The sun set. Night fell. Jacob lay down to sleep, and then saw this majestic vision:

He dreamed and, look, there was a ladder set on the earth, with its top reaching heaven; and, look, angels of God were ascending and descending on it. And, look, the Lord stood beside him and said, "I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; and your

offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread forth to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed through you and through your offspring. And look, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.” Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, “Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!” And he was afraid, and said, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.” (Gen. 28:12-17)

Note the fourfold “and look,” in Hebrew *ve-hinei*, an expression of surprise. Nothing has prepared Jacob for this encounter, a point emphasised in his own words when he says, “the Lord is in this place – and I did not know it.” The very verb used at the beginning of the passage, “He came upon a place,” in Hebrew *vayifga ba-makom*, also means an unexpected encounter. Later, in rabbinic Hebrew, the word *ha-Makom*, “the Place,” came to mean “God.” Hence in a poetic way the phrase *vayifga ba-makom* could be read as, “Jacob happened on, had an unexpected encounter with, God.”

Add to this Jacob’s night-time wrestling match with the angel in next week’s parsha and we have an answer to our question. *Jacob is the man who has his deepest spiritual experiences alone, at night, in the face of danger and far from home.* He is the man who meets God when he least expects to, when his mind is on other things, when he is in a state of fear and possibly on the brink of despair. Jacob is the man who, in liminal space, in the middle of the journey, discovers that “Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!”

Jacob thus became the father of the people who had their closest encounter with God in what Moses was later to describe as “the howling wasteland of a wilderness” (Deut. 32:10). Uniquely, Jews survived a whole series of exiles, and though at first they said, “How can we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?” they discovered that the Shekhinah, the Divine presence, was still with them. Though they had lost everything else, they had not lost contact with God. They could still discover that “the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!”

“Jacob is the man who meets God when he least expects to, when his mind is on other things, when he is in a state of fear and possibly on the brink of despair.”

Abraham gave Jews the courage to challenge the idols of the age. Isaac gave them the capacity for self-sacrifice. Moses taught them to be passionate fighters for justice. But Jacob gave them the knowledge that precisely when you feel most alone, God is still with you, giving you the courage to hope and the strength to dream.

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The man who gave the most profound poetic expression to this was undoubtedly David in the book of Psalms. Time and again he calls to God from the heart of darkness, afflicted, alone, pained, afraid:

Save me, O God,
for the floodwaters are up to my neck.
Deeper and deeper I sink into the mire;
I can't find a foothold.
I am in deep water,
and the floods overwhelm me. (Ps 69:2-3)

From the depths, O Lord,
I call for your help. (Ps. 130:1)

Sometimes our deepest spiritual experiences come when we least expect them, when we are closest to despair. It is then that the masks we wear are stripped away. We are at our point of maximum vulnerability – and it is when we are most fully open to God that God is most fully open to us. “The Lord is close to the broken-hearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit” (Ps.34:18). “My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise”(Ps. 51: 17). God “heals the broken-hearted and binds up their wounds” (Ps. 147:3).

Rav Nahman of Bratslav used to say; “A person needs to cry to his Father in heaven with a powerful voice from the depths of his heart. Then God will listen to his voice and turn to his

cry. And it may be that from this act itself, all doubts and obstacles that are keeping him back from true service of Hashem will fall from him and be completely nullified.”¹

We find God not only in holy or familiar places but also in the midst of a journey, alone at night. “Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil for You are with me.” The most profound of all spiritual experiences, the base of all others, is the knowledge that we are not alone. God is holding us by the hand, sheltering us, lifting us when we fall, forgiving us when we fail, healing the wounds in our soul through the power of His love.

My late father of blessed memory was not a learned Jew. He did not have the chance to become one. He came to Britain as a child and a refugee. He had to leave school young, and besides, the possibilities of Jewish education in those days were limited. Merely surviving took up most of the family’s time. But I saw him walk tall as a Jew, unafraid, even defiant at times, because when he prayed or read the Psalms he felt intensely that God was with him. That simple faith gave him immense dignity and strength of mind.

That was his heritage from Jacob, as it is ours. Though we may fall, we fall into the arms of God. Though others may lose faith in us, and though we may even lose faith in ourselves, God never loses faith in us. And though we may feel utterly alone, we are not. God is there, beside us, within us, urging us to stand and move on, for there is a task to do that we have not yet done and that we were created to fulfil. A singer of our time wrote,

“There is a crack in everything. That’s how the light gets in.”

The broken heart lets in the light of God, and becomes the gate of heaven.

“The broken heart lets in the light of God, and becomes the gate of heaven.”



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¹ Likkutei Maharan 2:46.