

COVENANT & CONVERSATION

LIFE-CHANGING IDEAS IN THE PARSHA WITH RABBI SACKS



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— RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS



Why Isaac? Why Jacob?

Toldot 2017 / 5778

Why Isaac, not Ishmael? Why Jacob, not Esau? These are among the most searing questions in the whole of Judaism.

It is impossible to read Genesis 21, with its description of how Hagar and her son were cast out into the wilderness, how their water ran out, how Hagar placed Ishmael under a bush and sat at a distance so she would not see him die, without feeling intensely for both of them, mother and child. They are both crying. The Torah tells us that God heard Ishmael's tears and sent an angel to comfort Hagar, show her a well of water, and assure her that God would make her son "a great nation" (Gen. 21:18) – the very promise he gave Abraham himself at the start of his mission (Gen. 12:2).

Likewise in the case of Esau. The emotional climax of the parsha occurs in chapter 27, at the point when Jacob leaves Isaac's presence, having deceived him into thinking that he was Esau. Then Esau enters, and slowly both father and son realise what has happened. This is what we read:

Then Isaac trembled with a very great trembling, and said, "Who then was it who hunted game and brought it to me and I ate it before you came and I blessed him?—and he will be blessed." When Esau heard his father's words, he cried an intensely loud and bitter cry, and said to his father, "Bless me, me too, my father!" (Gen. 27:33-34)

These are among the most powerful descriptions of emotion in the whole of the Torah, and they are precisely the opposite of what we would expect. We would expect the Torah to enlist our sympathies for the chosen: Isaac and Jacob. Instead it almost forces us to empathise with the unchosen: Hagar, Ishmael and Esau. We feel their pain and sense of loss.

So, why Isaac and not Ishmael? Why Jacob and not Esau? To this there are two types of answer. The first is given by midrash. On this reading Isaac and Jacob were righteous. Ishmael and Esau were not.

Ishmael worshipped idols.¹ He violated married women.² He tried to kill Isaac with his bow and arrow while making it look as if it were an accident.³ Esau was attracted, even in the womb, to idolatrous shrines.⁴ He trapped not only animals but also his father Isaac by pretending to be pious when he was not.⁵ God cut short Abraham's life by five years so that he would not live to see his grandson violate a betrothed woman, commit murder, deny God, deny the resurrection of the dead, and despise the birthright.⁶ Such is the way of midrash. It helps us see Isaac and Jacob as perfectly good, Ishmael and Esau as dangerously bad. That is an important part of our tradition.

But it is not the way of the written Torah itself, at least insofar as we seek what Rashbam called *omek peshuto shel mikra*, the “deep plain sense of Scripture.”⁷ The Torah does not portray Ishmael and Esau as wicked. The worst it has to say about Ishmael is that Sarah saw him *metzachek* (Gen. 21:9), a word with many meanings, most of them not negative. Literally, it means, “he was laughing.” But Abraham and Sarah also laughed.⁸ So did Isaac.⁹ Indeed Isaac's name, chosen by God himself,¹⁰ means, “He will laugh.” There is nothing in the word itself that implies improper conduct.¹¹

In the case of Esau, the most pointed verse is the one in which he agrees to part with his birthright in return for a bowl of soup (Gen. 25:34). In a staccato series of five consecutive verbs, the Torah says that he “ate, drank, rose, went and despised” his birthright. Yet this tells us that he was impetuous, not that he was evil.

If we seek the “deep plain sense,” we must rely on the explicit testimony of the Torah itself – and what it tells us is fascinating. An angel told Hagar before Ishmael was born that he would be “a wild donkey of a man, his hand against everyone, and everyone's hand against him” (Gen. 16:12). He became an expert archer (Gen. 21:20). Esau, red-haired, physically mature at a young age, was “a skilful hunter, a man of the field” (Gen. 25:27). Ishmael and Esau were at home in nature. They were strong, adroit, unafraid of the wild. In any other culture they might have emerged as heroes.

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¹ Bereishit Rabbah 53:11. Shemot Rabbah 1:1.

² Bereishit Rabbah 53:11.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Bereishit Rabbah 63:6.

⁵ Tanhuma, Toldot 8.

⁶ Baba Batra 16b.

⁷ Rashbam to Gen. 37:2, 28; Ex. 3:14, 13:9.

⁸ Gen. 17:17; 18:12.

⁹ Gen. 26:8.

¹⁰ Gen. 17:19.

¹¹ Robert Alter makes the ingenious suggestion that it means that Ishmael was “Isaac-ing,” imitating his younger brother (Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses: a translation with commentary*, Norton, 2004, 103).

And that is the point. We will only understand the Torah if we recall that every other religion in the ancient world worshipped nature. That is where they found God, or more precisely, the gods: in the sun, the moon, the stars, the storm, the rain that fed the earth and the earth that gave forth food.

Even in the twenty-first century, people for whom science has taken the place of religion still worship nature. For them we are physical beings. For them there is no such thing as a soul, merely electrical impulses in the brain. For them there is no real freedom: we are what we are because of genetic and epigenetic causes over which we have no real control. Freewill, they say, is an illusion. Human life, they believe, is not sacred, nor are we different in kind from other animals. Nature is all there is. Such was the view of Lucretius in ancient Rome and Epicurus in pre-Christian Greece, and it is the view of scientific atheists today.

The faith of Abraham and his descendants is different. God, we believe, is beyond nature, because He created nature. And because He made us in His image, there is something in us that is beyond nature also. We are free. We are creative. We can conceive of possibilities that have not yet existed, and act so as to make them real. We can adapt to our environment, but we can also adapt our environment to us. Like every other animal we have desires, but unlike any other animal we are capable of standing outside our desires and choosing which to satisfy and which not. We can distinguish between what is and what ought to be. We can ask the question “Why?”

After the Flood God was reconciled to human nature and vowed never again to destroy the world (Gen. 8-9). Yet He wanted humanity to know that there is something beyond nature. That is why He chose Abraham and his descendants as His “witnesses”.¹²

Not by accident were Abraham-and-Sarah, Isaac-and-Rebekah, and Jacob-and-Rachel, unable to have children by natural means. Nor was it mere happenstance that God promised the holy land to a landless people. He chose Moses, the man who said, “I am not a man of words,” to be the bearer of His word. When Moses spoke God’s words, people knew they were not his own.

God promised two things to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob: children and a land. Throughout history, most people at most times have taken children and a land for granted. They are part of nature. They constitute the two most basic natural drives: the Darwinian imperative and the territorial imperative. All animals have children, and many have their own territory that they mark and defend.

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Jews – one of the world’s smallest people – have rarely been able to take children for granted. Abraham’s first recorded words to God were: “O Lord God, what can you give me seeing that I go childless?” and even today we ask, Will we have Jewish grandchildren? Nor have they been able to take their land for granted. They were often surrounded by enemies larger and more powerful than themselves. For many centuries they suffered exile. Even today they find the State of Israel’s very right to be called into question in a way that applies to no other sovereign people. As David Ben-Gurion said, “In Israel, to be a realist you have to believe in miracles.”

¹² Isaiah 43:10-12; 44:8.

Isaac and Jacob were not men of nature: the field, the hunt, the gladiatorial game of predator-and-prey. They were not Ishmael and Esau, people who could survive by their own strength and skill. They were men who needed God's spirit to survive. Israel is the people who in themselves testify to something beyond themselves.

Jews have consistently shown that you can make a contribution to humanity out of all proportion to your numbers, and that a small nation can outlive every empire that sought its destruction. They have shown that a nation is strong when it cares for the weak, and rich when it cares for the poor. Jews are the people through whom God has shown that the human spirit can rise above nature, testifying that there is something real that transcends nature.

That is a life-changing idea. We are as great as our ideals. If we truly believe in something beyond ourselves, we will achieve beyond ourselves.

Shabbat shalom,



LIFE-CHANGING IDEA #6

You are as great as your ideals. If you truly believe in something beyond yourself, you will achieve beyond yourself.

LIFE-CHANGING IDEAS IN SEFER BEREISHIT

- **BEREISHIT:** God believes in us even if we don't always believe in ourselves. Remember this, and you will find the path from darkness to light.
- **NOACH:** Next time you meet someone radically unlike you, try seeing difference not as a threat but as an enlarging, possibility-creating gift.
- **LECH LECHA:** Follow the inner voice, as did those who came before you, continuing their journey by bringing timeless values to a rapidly-changing world.
- **VAYERA:** First separate, then connect; it is the carefully calibrated distance that allows us to grow as individuals and create stronger relationships together.
- **CHAYEI SARAH:** To survive tragedy and trauma, first build the future. Only then, remember the past.
- **TOLDOT:** You are as great as your ideals. If you truly believe in something beyond yourself, you will achieve beyond yourself.



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