

COVENANT & CONVERSATION

LIFE-CHANGING IDEAS IN THE PARSHA WITH RABBI SACKS



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— RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS



The Struggle of Faith

vayishlach 2017 / 5778

There are Mozarts and there are Beethovens. Which are you?

I have only the most amateur knowledge of music, but the impression one gets about Mozart is that, from him, music flowed. There is something effortless and effervescent about his compositions. They are not “sicklied o’er by the pale cast of thought.” He wrote at speed. He carried the worries of the world lightly.

Not so Beethoven, for whom it sometimes took years for an idea to crystallise into its final form, with countless drafts and revisions and crossings-out. This was a man who could be angry with himself and with the world, for whom creativity was a struggle from which he emerged triumphant with work that is rarely less than strenuous and full of conflict until its final majestic resolution. The ethereal, mystical, almost other-worldly quality of his last compositions, the sublime late piano sonatas and string quartets, are the creation of one who has finally found peace after a life of wrestling with his own angels and demons.

All of this is, for me, a way of coming to understand Jacob, the man who became Israel, our father in faith. Jacob is not the most obvious choice of religious hero. He does not appear – at least on the surface of the biblical text – as a man with Abraham’s courage or kindness, Isaac’s faithfulness and self-restraint, Moses’ vigour and passion, David’s politics and poetry, or Isaiah’s lyricism and hope.

He was a man surrounded by conflict: with his brother Esau, his father-in-law Laban, his wives, Leah and Rachel, and his children, whose sibling rivalry eventually brought the whole family into exile in Egypt. His life seems to have been a field of tensions.

Then there were his transactions: the way he purchased Esau's birthright, took his blessing, and eventually outwitted his wily father-in-law Laban. In each case he seems to have won, but then his situation deteriorates. The episode in which, at Rebekah's request, he dressed up as Esau and deceived his blind father, forced him to leave home and – as we see in this week's parsha – left him traumatised with fear at the prospect of meeting Esau again. Almost the same deception he practised on Isaac, he suffered at the hand of Laban. Even his escape from Laban might have ended in tragedy, had God not warned him not to harm Jacob (Hence the passage in the Haggada: "Go and learn what Laban the Aramean sought to do to our father Jacob"). His life as portrayed in the Torah seems to be a constant series of escapes from one trouble to the next.

So who and what was Jacob?

To this there are two radically different answers. There is the Jacob of midrash who even in the womb longed for a synagogue¹, who spent his years as a young man studying in the bet midrash², who looked like Abraham³ and whose arms were like pillars of marble.⁴ His motives were always pure. He bought Esau's birthright because he could not bear to see Esau offering sacrifices (the privilege of the firstborn) to idols.⁵ As for his father's blessing, the very reason Isaac became blind in old age was so that this could be possible.⁶ Esau was the opposite, a violent and mercurial character who had deceived his father into thinking he was ultra-pious,⁷ but who had – on the day he came in "tired" from the field – committed a whole series of crimes including murder.⁸

This is an extreme portrayal, but not without scriptural basis. Jacob is called an ish tam, which conveys the sense of simplicity, integrity and single-mindedness. The plain sense of the oracle Rebekah received before the twins were born was that "the elder will serve the younger."⁹ She knew Jacob was the son destined to prevail. Besides which, as Maharatz Chajes says in his Introduction to the Aggadic

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¹ Bereishit Rabbah 63:6.

² Bereishit Rabbah 63:10.

³ Midrash Lekach Tov, Bereishit 47:18.

⁴ Bereishit Rabbah 65:17.

⁵ Bereishit Rabbah 63:13.

⁶ Bereishit Rabbah 65:8.

⁷ See Rashi to Gen. 25:27.

⁸ Baba Batra 16b.

⁹ Elsewhere in past 'C&C's on Toldot, I have pointed out that this text is freighted with ambiguity.

Literature¹⁰, midrash paints biblical characters in moral black-and-white for obvious moral and educational reasons. It is difficult to teach children how to behave if all you have to offer is a series of studies in ambiguity, complexity and shades-of-grey.

The other Jacob, though, is the one we read in the plain sense of the text. The obvious question is: why did the Torah choose to portray the third of the patriarchs in this way? The Torah is highly selective in the details it chooses to relate. Why not paint Jacob in more attractive colours?

It seems to me that the Torah is delivering, here as elsewhere, an extraordinary message: that if we can truly relate to God as God, in His full transcendence and majesty, then we can relate to humans as humans in all their fallibility. In every other religious literature known to me, heroes are idealised until they no longer seem human at all. They are Divine or semi-Divine, perfect and infallible. There is no one like that in the whole of Tanakh. Even Noah (righteous, perfect) is seen drunk and dishevelled. Even Job (blameless, upright) eventually curses his fate. The man who, more than any other, epitomises fallibility is Jacob.

And perhaps that is the point. Jacob was a Beethoven, not a Mozart. His life was a series of struggles. Nothing came easily to him. He, alone of the patriarchs, was a man who chose to be chosen. Abraham was called by God. Isaac was chosen before his birth. Moses, Joshua, Samuel, David, Isaiah, Jeremiah: these were all singled out by God for their mission. Not so Jacob. It was he who bought the birthright and took the blessing, he who chose to carry Abraham's destiny into the future.

Not until he was running away from home did God appear to him. Not until years later, alone, at night, terrified at the prospect of meeting Esau, did God or an angel wrestle with him. He alone was given, by God or the angel, a completely new name, not an enhancement of his old one but a completely new identity: "Israel." Even more strikingly, despite the fact that he was told "Your name shall no more be called Jacob,"¹¹ the Torah continues to call him Jacob, suggesting that his struggle was lifelong – as, often, is ours.

Were I to choose a soundtrack for the Jacob I have come to know, it would be Beethoven's Hammerklavier Sonata or his Grosse Fugue, music of such overwhelming tension that it seems on the verge of bursting through all form and structure. Yet it was through these epic struggles that Beethoven eventually reached his own version of serenity, and it was through Jacob's extended wrestling-match with destiny that he eventually achieved what neither Abraham nor Isaac accomplished: all his children stayed within the faith. "According to the pain is the reward," said the sages¹². That is Jacob.

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There are saintly people for whom spirituality comes as

¹⁰ R. Zvi Hirsch Chajes, Mavo ha-Aggadot (printed at the beginning of standard editions of Ein Yaakov).

¹¹ He is told this twice, first by the angel, then by God Himself: Gen. 32:29; 35:10.

¹² Mishnah, Avot 5:23.

easily as did music to Mozart. But God does not reach out only to saints. He reaches out to all of us. That is why He gave us Abraham for those who love, Isaac for those who fear, and Jacob/Israel for those who struggle.

Hence this week's life-changing idea: if you find yourself struggling with faith, you are in the company of Jacob-who-became-Israel, the father-in-faith of us all.

Shabbat shalom,



LIFE-CHANGING IDEA #8

If you find yourself struggling with faith, you are in the company of Jacob-who-became-Israel, the father-in-faith of us all.

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.
- **VAYETSE:** The deepest crises of your life can turn out to be the moments when you encounter the deepest truths and acquire your greatest strengths.
- **VAYISHLACH:** If you find yourself struggling with faith, you are in the company of Jacob-who-became-Israel, the father-in-faith of us all.



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