



COVENANT & CONVERSATION

THOUGHTS ON THE WEEKLY PARSHA
FROM RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

בס"ד

ויגש תשע"ט
Vayigash 5779



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COVENANT & CONVERSATION: FAMILY EDITION

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Does My Father Love Me

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 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 certainly he could have done so when he became the second most powerful person in Egypt. At the very least he could have done so 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, could 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 following explanation¹, is a tantalising possibility.

The story of Joseph's descent into slavery and exile began when his father sent him, alone, to see how the brothers were faring:

His brothers had gone to graze their father's flocks near Shechem, and Israel said to Joseph, "As you know, your brothers are grazing the flocks near Shechem... So he said to him, "Go and see if all is well with your brothers and with the flocks, and bring word back to me." Then he sent him off from the Valley of Hebron. (Gen. 37:12–14)

What does the narrative tell us immediately prior to this episode? It tells us about the second of Joseph's dreams. In the first, he had dreamt that he and his brothers were in the field binding sheaves. His stood upright while the sheaves of his brothers bowed down to him. Naturally, when he told them about the dream, they were angry. "Do you intend to reign over us? Would you rule over us?" There is no mention of Jacob in relation to the first dream.

The second dream was different:

Then he had another dream, and he told it to his brothers. "Listen," he said, "I had another dream, and this time 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?" His brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the matter in mind. (Gen. 37:9–11).

¹ I am indebted for this entire line of thought to Mr. Joshua Rowe of Manchester.

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? Did he not at least contemplate the possibility that by sending Joseph to them he was risking Joseph's life?

No one knew this better from personal experience. Recall that Jacob himself had been forced to leave home because his brother Esau threatened to kill him, once he discovered that Jacob had taken his blessing. Recall too that when Jacob was about to meet Esau again, after an interval of twenty-two years, he was "in great fear and distress," believing that his brother would try to kill him. That fear provoked one of the great crises of Jacob's life. So Jacob knew, better than anyone else in Genesis, that hate can lead to killing, that sibling rivalry carries with it the risk of fratricide.

Yet Jacob sent Joseph to his other sons knowing that they were jealous of him and hated him. Joseph presumably knew these facts. 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. It was outrageous to suggest that his parents would prostrate themselves before him. It was wrong to imagine it, all the more so to say it. Besides which, who was the "moon"? Joseph's mother, Rachel, the great love of Jacob's life, was dead. Presumably, then, he was referring to Leah. But his very mention of "the sun and moon and eleven stars" must have brought back to his father the pain of Rachel's death. Joseph knew he had provoked his father's wrath. 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. 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.

Is there any supporting evidence for this interpretation? There is. Joseph must have known that his father was capable of being angered by his sons. He had seen it twice before.

"This places the story in a completely new and tragic light."

The first time was when Shimon and Levi killed the inhabitants of Shechem after their prince had raped and abducted their sister Dina. Jacob bitterly reprimanded them, saying:

"You have brought trouble on me by making me a stench to the Canaanites and Perizzites, the people living in this land. We are few in number, and if they join forces against me and attack me, I and my household will be destroyed"(Gen. 34:30).

The second happened after Rachel died. "While Israel was living in that region, Reuben went in and slept with his father's concubine Bilhah – and Israel heard of it" (Gen. 35:22). Actually according to the sages, Reuben merely moved his father's bed², but Jacob believed that he had slept with his handmaid, an act of usurpation.

As a result of these two episodes, Jacob virtually broke off contact with his three eldest sons. He was still angry with them at the end of his life, cursing them instead of blessing them. (See Genesis 49:4–7)

² Rashi to Bereishit 35: 22; Shabbat 55b

So Joseph knew that Jacob was capable of anger at his children, and of terminating his relationship with them (that is why, in the absence of Joseph, Judah became the key figure. He was Jacob's fourth son, and Jacob no longer trusted the three eldest).

There is evidence of another kind as well. When Joseph was appointed second-in-command in Egypt, given the name Tzafenat Pa'neah, and had married an Egyptian wife, Asenat, he had his first child. We then read:

Joseph named his firstborn Menasheh, saying, "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." Why so, if not that he associated "all my trouble" not just with his siblings but also with his father Jacob? 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? One answer is that Judah, by asking that he be held as a slave so that Benjamin could go free, showed that he had done *teshuva*; that he was a penitent; that he was no longer the same person who had once sold Joseph into slavery. That, as I have argued previously, is a central theme of the entire narrative. It is a story about repentance and forgiveness.

"What was it that made Joseph break down in tears and finally reveal his identity to his brothers?"

But we can now offer a second interpretation. Judah says words that, for the first time, allow Joseph to understand what had actually occurred twenty-two years previously. Judah is recounting what happened after the brothers returned from their first journey to buy food in Egypt:

Then our father said, "Go back and buy a little more food." But we said, "We cannot go down. Only if our youngest brother is with us will we go. We cannot see the man's face unless our youngest brother is with us."

Your servant my father said to us, "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 grey 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. Against this background we can better understand Joseph's reaction to this disclosure:

Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all his attendants, and he cried out, "Have everyone leave my presence!" So there was no one with Joseph when he made himself known to his brothers. And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard him, and Pharaoh's household heard about it. Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph! Is my father still alive?" (Gen. 45:1–3)

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?"

Is this the only possible interpretation of the story? Clearly not. But it is a possibility. In which case, we can now set the Joseph narrative in two other thematic contexts which play a large part in Genesis as a whole.

The first is tragic misunderstanding. We think here of at least two other episodes. The first has to do with Isaac and Rebecca. Isaac, we recall, loved Esau; Rebecca loved Jacob. At least one possible explanation, offered by Abarbanel³, is that Rebecca had been told “by God,” before the twins were born, that “the elder will serve the younger.” Hence her attachment to Jacob, the younger, and her determination that he, not Esau, should have Isaac’s blessing.

The other concerns Jacob and Rachel. Rachel had stolen her father’s *terafim*, “icons” or “household gods,” when they left Laban to return to the land of Canaan. She did not tell Jacob that she had done so. The text says explicitly, “Jacob did not know that Rachel had stolen the gods” (Gen. 31:32). When Laban pursued and caught up with them, he accused Jacob’s party of having stolen them. Jacob indignantly denies this and says “If you find anyone who has your gods, he shall not live”. Several chapters later, we read that Rachel died prematurely, on the way. The possibility hinted at by the text, articulated by a Midrash and by Rashi⁴, is that, unwittingly, Jacob had condemned her to death. In both cases, misunderstanding flowed from a failure of communication. Had Rebecca told Isaac about the oracle, and had Rachel told Jacob about the *terafim*, tragedy might have been averted. Judaism is a religion of holy words, and one of the themes of Genesis as a whole is the power of speech to create, mislead, harm or heal. From Cain and Abel to Joseph and his brothers (“They hated him and could not speak peaceably to him”), we are shown how, when words fail, violence begins.

The other theme, even more poignant, has to do with fathers and sons. 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.

“Though my father and mother may forsake me, the Lord will receive me,” says Psalm 27. That is a line that resonates throughout Genesis. No one did more than Sigmund Freud to place this at the heart of human psychology. For 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.

Shabbat shalom

“Transcending all these human loves is divine love, rescuing us from feelings of rejection, and redeeming the human condition from tragedy.”

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³ Abarbanel to Bereishit 25:28. Isaac loved Esau, Abarbanel argues, because he was the firstborn. Isaac believed, therefore, that he would inherit the divine blessing and covenant. From her oracle, Rebecca knew otherwise. On this reading, the drama unfolded because of a failure of communication between husband and wife.

⁴ Rashi to Bereishit 31:32; Bereishit Rabbah and Zohar ad loc.