



COVENANT & CONVERSATION

Family Edition

FINDING FAITH IN THE PARSHA WITH RABBI SACKS



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וישלח תש"ף
Vayishlach 5780

**No Longer
Shall You
Be Called
Jacob**

** KEY IDEA OF THE WEEK **

Can we learn from Jacob, and try to be brave enough to be ourselves?



PARSHAT VAYISHLACH IN A NUTSHELL

In this week's *parsha*, we read the story of Jacob and Esau's reunion. After many years of separation, Jacob hears that his brother is on his way to meet him with an army of four hundred men. So he decides to do three things. 1. He divides his camp into two separate groups. 2. He prays to God for help. 3. He sends servants to deliver gifts to Esau.

That night he is attacked by a mysterious stranger, who he fights. He refuses to let the stranger go until he is given a blessing. Instead, the stranger gives Jacob a new name - Israel, which means "someone who fights with God and with men and wins." Our

Rabbis teach us that Jacob had been re-named by an angel.

The next day the two brothers meet, and hug. Jacob had been scared they would fight but instead there is only love between them.

The *parsha* ends with the death of Isaac, and a list of all of the descendants of Esau

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. What do you think was going through Jacob's mind when Esau was approaching?



THE CORE IDEA

After his wrestling match with the angel, Jacob was told: "No longer shall you be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have fought with God and men, and have won" (Bereishit 32:29). This new name is in fact given a second time in our *parsha*. After his meeting with Esau, and the story of Dina and Shechem, God tells Jacob to go to Beth El. Then we read: "After Jacob returned from Paddan Aram, God appeared to him again and blessed him. God said to him, 'Your name is Jacob, but you will no longer be called Jacob; your name will be Israel.' So He named him Israel" (Bereishit 35:9-10).

This is not an adjustment of an existing name by the change or addition of a letter, like when God changed Abram's name to Abraham, or Sarai's to Sarah. It is an entirely new name, as if to say that

this will be a complete change of character. It is therefore puzzling that having said twice that his name will no longer be Jacob, *the Torah continues to call him Jacob*. God Himself does so. So do we, every time we pray to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. How can this be when the Torah twice tells us that his name will no longer be Jacob?

The Radak suggests that "your name will no longer be called Jacob" means, "your name will no longer only be called Jacob." You will have another name as well. This is clever, but it certainly is not the plain meaning of the verse. Sforno says, "In the Messianic Age, your name will no longer be called Jacob." This is also difficult. The future tense in the Torah generally means the near future, not the distant one, unless clearly specified.

A third approach is to read this not as a statement but as a request, a challenge, an invitation. Read it not as, "You *will* no longer be called Jacob but Israel." Instead read it as, "Let your name no longer be Jacob but Israel," meaning don't be what the name Jacob represents, rather be what the name Israel represents.

So the question is, what do the names Jacob and Israel represent?

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. Why did Jacob need a new name? What was wrong with his old name?
2. Do names matter? What do they represent?



IT ONCE HAPPENED...

They say the chances of two world-class athletes being born in to the same family were as likely as the same parents giving birth to Picasso and Monet. And yet Venus and Serena Williams, two of the greatest tennis players of all time, are sisters.

Venus was born in June 1980, followed by her sister Serena just 15 months later. Venus' obvious talent as a tennis player was first spotted when she was 7, and by the time she was 10 the family had moved to Florida so she and Serena could attend a tennis academy there.

Venus was the first to turn professional, aged just 14, followed by Serena exactly one year later. Venus was also the first to win Wimbledon and the first to be ranked World No. 1. In their early professional matches playing against each other, Venus was the dominant player, winning 4 of their first 5 matches. The pressure on Serena must have been immense. Her desire to be, and to beat, her older sister may have fuelled her hard work.

Today, Serena has spent many more weeks ranked as World No. 1 (316 weeks for Serena, 11 weeks for Venus) and she has won 72 singles titles to Venus'

49. They have played each other 30 times, Serena leading Venus 18-12.

Serena played tennis to emulate her sister, as younger siblings often do. She soon found out she was just as talented as her sister, and that she could find her own strengths and develop a unique and forceful style, playing in her own way. She progressed as a player, and achieved astounding successes.

Most important in this story is the close bond of love between the two sisters. They hate playing against each other, because they know there will have to be a loser. But this strong relationship brings a unique perspective to competition. For one sister, the joy of winning is dimmed by the pain of having inflicted a loss. For the other, the pain of losing will be brightened by the joy of watching a loved one win. And when the two sisters play together in doubles matches, they are an almost invincible team!

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. Do you think you would be more or less likely to take up tennis if your sister was Venus Williams?
2. What do you think is the most important message we can take from this story?



THINKING MORE DEEPLY

Jacob and Esau are two different kinds of human being. Jacob represents reason, logic, order, self-control, while Esau stands for emotion, passion, nature, wildness and chaos. Jacob value restraint and modesty and Esau flashiness and excess.

Or it may be that Esau represents the Hunter, considered a hero in many ancient cultures, but not so in the Torah, which represents the agrarian and pastoral ethic of farmers and shepherds. With the transition from hunter-gatherer to farmer-and-herdsman, the Hunter is no longer a hero and instead is seen as a figure of violence, especially when

combined, as in the case of Esau, with an unpredictable temperament. It is not so much that Esau is bad and Jacob good, but that Esau represents the world that was, while Jacob represents, a new world about to be brought into being, whose spirituality would be radically different, new and challenging.

The fact that Jacob and Esau were twins is fundamental in understanding them. Their relationship is one of the classic cases of sibling rivalry. Key to understanding their story is mimetic desire: the desire to have what someone else has,

because they have it. Ultimately, this is the desire to be someone else.

That is what the name Jacob signifies. It is the name he acquired because he was born holding on to his brother Esau's heel. That was his posture during the key events of his early life. He bought his brother's birthright. He wore his brother's clothes. At his mother's request, he took his brother's blessing. When asked by his father, "Who are you, my son?" He replied, "I am Esau, your firstborn."

Jacob was the man who wanted to be Esau. Why so? Because Esau had one thing he did not have: his father's love. "Isaac, who had a taste for wild game, loved Esau, but Rebecca loved Jacob."

All that changed in the great wrestling match between Jacob and the unknown stranger. That was when he was told that his name would now be Israel. The stated explanation of this name is: "for you have wrestled with God and with man and have prevailed." It also resonates with two other senses. *Sar* (root letters in the name *Yisrael*) means "prince, royalty." *Yashar* means "upright." Both of these are in sharp contrast with the name "Jacob," one who "holds on to his brother's heel."

The stranger, and then God, challenged Jacob to, "Let your name no longer be Jacob but Israel," meaning, "Act in such a way that this is what people call you." Be a prince. Be royalty. Be upright. Be yourself. Don't long to be someone else. This would turn out to be a challenge not just then but many times in the Jewish future.

Often, Jews have been content to be themselves. But from time to time, they have come into contact with a civilisation whose intellectual, cultural and even spiritual sophistication was undeniable. It made them feel awkward, inferior, like a villager who comes to a city for the first time. Jews lapsed into the condition of Jacob. They wanted to be someone else.

The first time we hear this is in the words of the prophet Ezekiel: "You say, 'We want to be like the nations, like the peoples of the world, who serve wood and stone.' But what you have in mind will never happen" (Ezekiel 20:32). In Babylon, the people encountered an impressive empire whose military and economic success contrasted radically their own condition of exile and defeat. Some wanted to stop being Jews and become someone else, anyone else.

We hear it again in the days of the Greeks. Some Jews became Hellenised. We recognise that in the names of High Priests like Jason and Menelaus. The battle against this is the story of Chanukah. Something similar happened in the days of Rome. Josephus was

one of those who went over to the other side, though he remained a defender of Judaism.

It happened again during the Enlightenment. Jews fell in love with European culture. With philosophers like Kant and Hegel, poets like Goethe and Schiller, and musicians like Mozart and Beethoven. Some were able to integrate this with faithfulness to Judaism as creed and deed – figures like Rabbis Samson Raphael Hirsch and Nehemiah Nobel. But some did not. They left the fold. They changed their names. They hid their identity. None of us is entitled to be critical of what they did. The combined impact of intellectual challenge, social change, and incendiary antisemitism, was immense. Yet this was a Jacob response, not an Israel one.

It is happening today in large swathes of the Jewish world. Jews have overachieved. Judaism, with some notable exceptions, has underachieved. There are Jews at or near the top of almost every field of human endeavour today, but all too many have either abandoned their religious heritage or are indifferent to it. For them, being Jewish is a slender ethnicity, too thin to be transmitted to the future, too hollow to inspire.

We have waited so long for what we have today and have never had simultaneously before in all of Jewish history: independence and sovereignty in the state of Israel, freedom and equality in the diaspora. Almost everything that a hundred generations of our ancestors prayed for has been given to us. Will we really throw this all away? Will we be Israel? Or will we show, to our shame, that we have not yet outlived the name of Jacob, the person who wanted to be someone else? Jacob was often fearful because he was not sure who he wanted to be, himself or his brother. That is why God said to him, "Let your name not be Jacob but Israel." When you are afraid, and unsure of who you are, you are Jacob. When you are strong in yourself, as yourself, you are Israel.

The fact that the Torah and tradition still use the word Jacob, not just Israel, tells us that the problem has not disappeared. Jacob seems to have wrestled with it throughout his life, and we still do today. It takes courage to be different, a minority, countercultural. It's easy to live for the moment like Esau, or to "be like the peoples of the world" as Ezekiel said.

I believe the challenge issued by the angel still echoes today. Are we Jacob, embarrassed by who we are? Or are we Israel, with the courage to stand upright and walk tall in the path of faith?

QUESTION TO PONDER:

In what ways in your life do you show you are proud of who you are?



FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

"Now is the time for Jews, Christians and Muslims to say what they failed to say in the past: We are all children of Abraham. And whether we are Isaac or Ishmael, Jacob or Esau, Leah or Rachel, Joseph or his brothers, we are precious in the sight of God. We are blessed. And to be blessed, no one has to be cursed. God's love does not work that way."

Not in God's Name, p.280



AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. Why was Jacob jealous of Esau? Why did he wish to be him?
2. What message was contained in the new name the angel gave to Jacob?
3. What can Jews learn today from Jacob's two names?



QUESTION TIME

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EDUCATIONAL COMPANION TO THE QUESTIONS

IN A NUTSHELL

1. While this is impossible to know, we can speculate based on human nature and our understanding of their relationship from the narrative in the text. The Torah tells us that Jacob was afraid. Esau was mad and had sworn to kill him. Jacob must have hoped they could reconcile (proved by his subservience in the message he sent and the gifts he sent ahead to Esau). But perhaps he also had a greater sense of self- and self-worth, now many year later from when he was jealous of Esau in their youth. Perhaps now he could fully embrace Esau as an equal, and hoped he would have the opportunity to do so.

THE CORE IDEA

1. The message here is that his old name represented a desire to replace Esau. From his first act, Jacob was grabbing on to the heel of his brother in an attempt to better him, or even be him. His new name, Israel, represented a pride in who he was (*yashar* – straight, or a *sar* – prince). His new name was a challenge set to him to move on from his desire to be his elder brother, and come to terms with his own identity and role.
2. Names represent identity. They are given to us by our parent (or in this case God) as a statement of values and culture. They indicate who we are. In this story they represent who Jacob is called on to be – his destiny.

IT ONCE HAPPENED...

1. Sibling rivalry occurs when siblings focus only on themselves and their needs and desires. "I deserve this" or "it is not fair that you have that because I want it". It can also be fueled by lack of self-worth. These two brothers saw what they had and were grateful for it.

And they saw what their brother lacked and showed concern and love. Their focus was outward. They saw their brother's situation, and were not blinded or obsessed by their own.

2. There are many messages to be taken, including the values of altruism and brotherly love, concern for one's fellow, gratitude for one's own lot. The deeper connection to the message in our parsha is that when we find happiness and satisfaction with who we are and what we have, we can then look outward and be concerned with the lot of those around us.

THINKING MORE DEEPLY

1. Non-Jews respect Jews who respect their own identity and traditions. We all have opportunities in our lives to show and be proud that we are Jews. Whether in conversation or with our external appearances.

AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

These questions are all open, to encourage thought and debate. There are no wrong answers. However, here are some thoughts to consider:

1. Jacob was born holding on to his brother Esau's heel. Right from the beginning he wanted to be in Esau's place. He bought his brother's birth right. He wore his brother's clothes. At his mother's request, he took his brother's blessing. When asked by his father, "Who are you, my son?" He replied, "I am Esau, your firstborn." Jacob wanted be Esau. The main reason (apart from his belief that the firstborn would inherit the covenant with God) was that Esau had one thing he did not have: his father's love.
2. The angel gave Jacob a new name not as a statement but as a request, a challenge, an invitation. Not "You *will* no longer be called Jacob but Israel" but, "*Let* your name no longer be Jacob but Israel," meaning "Act in such a way that this is what people call you." The name Israel means: "for you have wrestled with God and with man and have prevailed." But it also contains two other meanings. *Sar* means "prince, royalty." *Yashar* means "upright." Both of these are in sharp contrast with the name "Jacob," one who "holds on to his brother's heel." Be a prince. Be royalty. Be upright. Be yourself. Don't long to be someone else.
3. Often, Jews have been content to be themselves. But from time to time, they have come into contact with a civilisation whose intellectual, cultural and even spiritual sophistication was undeniable. It made them feel inferior and caused them to want to be someone else. This has happened in the time of the Babylonian exile, the Hellenised society of Chanukah times, and in more modern times during the enlightenment. And it happens today also. *The fact that the Torah and tradition still use the word Jacob, not just Israel, tells us that the problem has not disappeared.* Jacob seems to have wrestled with it throughout his life, and we still do today. It takes courage to be different, a minority, countercultural.