



COVENANT & CONVERSATION

Family Edition

בס"ד

אחרי מות תשע"ט
Acharei Mot 5779

**Thinking Fast
and Slow**

WELCOME TO COVENANT & CONVERSATION 5779 FAMILY EDITION

Covenant & Conversation: Family Edition is a new and exciting initiative from *The Office of Rabbi Sacks* for 5779. Written as an accompaniment to Rabbi Sacks' weekly *Covenant & Conversation* essay, the Family Edition is aimed at connecting teenagers and families with his ideas and thoughts on the parsha. To receive this via email please make sure you are subscribed to Rabbi Sacks' main mailing list at www.RabbiSacks.org/Subscribe.



PARSHAT ACHAREI MOT IN A NUTSHELL

Parshat Acharei Mot describes the service of the High Priest on the Day of Atonement. It was a dramatic and highly charged ritual during which he cast lots on two identical goats, one of which was offered as a sacrifice while the other was sent into the wilderness to die, the so-called

"scapegoat." The entry of the High Priest into the Holy of Holies marked the spiritual high-point of the Jewish year. The parsha also outlines further prohibitions against eating blood, and the laws of forbidden relationships, both of them aspects of the life of purity God asks of the Jewish people.



THE CORE IDEA

The central element of the Yom Kippur service, described in this week's parsha, is quite a mystery. Two goats, identical in appearance, over which the High Priest cast lots, sacrificing one as a sin offering and sending the other, the "scapegoat", into the wilderness to die. Why must they be identical? And why cast lots (*goralot*) over them? Presumably, these elements were designed to inspire feelings of awe and repentance in the crowds that packed the Temple on the holiest day of the year, but how and in what way?

Over the centuries, the Sages sought to decode the mystery. Two animals, alike in appearance but different in fate, suggests the idea of twins. This and other hint led the Midrash and some commentators like Nahmanides and Abarbanel to conclude that the two goats symbolised the most famous of the Torah's twins: Jacob and Esau.

There are other clues: The word *se'ir*, "goat," is also associated in the Torah with Esau. He and his descendants lived in the land of Seir. The word *se'ir* is related to *sei'ar*, "hairy," which is how Esau was born: "His whole body was like a hairy garment" (Genesis 25:25). According to the Mishnah, a red thread was tied to the scapegoat, and "red" (Edom) was Esau's other name. So there was a tradition that the scapegoat symbolised Esau. In particular, the phrase "two kids of the goats," *shnei se'irei izim*, mentioned in the High

Priest's rites, reminds us of the very similar expression, "two kids of the goats," *shnei gedi'ei izim*, mentioned in Genesis 27, when Rebecca shares with Jacob a plan to deceive Isaac into giving him Esau's blessing: "*Go out to the flock and bring me two choice kids of the goats, so I can prepare some tasty food for your father... so that he may give you his blessing before he dies*" instructs Rebecca. Such verbal parallels are not coincidental in the Torah. They are examples of complex web of interconnected words and themes in which one verse sheds light on another.

Who then were Esau and Jacob? What did they represent and how is this relevant to Yom Kippur and atonement? Midrashic tradition tends to show Jacob as perfect and Esau as an evildoer. However, the Torah itself is not so black and white, or quick to judge. The Sages say that in one respect – honouring his father – Esau was a supreme role model.

Esau in the Torah is not a prime example of evil. Rather, he is the man of impulse. We see this in the scene in which he sells his birthright to Jacob. Coming in one day exhausted from hunting, he sees Jacob making lentil broth and immediately agrees to sell his birthright for the sake of a bowl of soup. This is an impulsive man, always driven by the emotion of the moment, be it hunger, family devotion, a desire for revenge or, at last, generosity of spirit.

Jacob is the opposite. He does not give way to his feelings. He acts and thinks long-term. That is what he does when he works for seven years for Rachel, and when his son Joseph's dreams evoke immediate jealousy from the brothers, with Jacob we are told "His father kept the matter in mind." He never acts impulsively. He thinks long and hard before acting.

Who am I? That is the question Yom Kippur forces us to ask. To be Jacob, we have to release and relinquish the Esau within us, the impulsiveness that can lead us to sell our birthright for a bowl of soup, losing eternity in the pursuit of desire.



IT ONCE HAPPENED...

Rebecca was experiencing a particularly difficult pregnancy, with the twin babies often struggling within her womb. Whenever she passed a place of Torah learning such as a Bet Midrash, or a holy place such as a synagogue, one of the twins (Jacob) would struggle and fight to try and get out. But when she walked past a house of idol worship, the other twin (Esau) would struggle to fight to try to get out.

The prophet explained to Rebecca, "There are two nations [*goyim*] inside of you, and two kingdoms shall derive from

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. Does being impulsive make you a bad person? Do you know anyone impulsive? Are they ever bad?
2. Why is it better to think something through carefully before doing or saying it? Is it ever a bad idea to think something through first?
3. Would you say you are more like Jacob or Esau?

you. One kingdom will constantly try to overcome the other..."

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. What do you think the message of this Midrash is? Is it all connected to the message of this week's *Covenant & Conversation*?
2. Do you think our personalities are fixed even before we are born, or do we have free choice to change?



THINKING MORE DEEPLY

Recent years have seen a revolution in our understanding of the human brain, and with it, the human mind. We used to think that we are, first and foremost, rational animals (see Descartes and Kant). But it has recently been shown that we are primarily emotional beings who make decisions on the basis of feelings, desires, and drives of which we may be barely conscious (see Hume). We justify our choices, but brain scans show that we may have made those choices before being aware that we had done so.

We are more driven by emotion and less by reason than Enlightenment thinkers believed. This discovery has led to new fields of study like behavioural economics (examining what people actually do rather than what theory says they do) and interdisciplinary studies linking neuroscience to morality and politics.

We have, in fact, a dual-system or twin-track brain. This is what Daniel Kahneman is referring to in the title of his famous book *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. One track is rapid, instinctive, emotional, and subconscious. The other is slower, conscious, deliberative, and careful. The former allows us to react quickly to situations of immediate

potential danger. Without it, we and our ancestors would not have survived. Many of our instinctive reactions are benign. It is natural to have empathy, and with it the tendency to feel other people's pain and come to their aid. We develop a strong sense of attachment that leads us to defend members of our family or community. But not all instincts are benign. Anger, envy, jealousy, fear, hate, and the desire for revenge may once have been functional, but they are often deeply destructive in social situations. That is why the ability to "think slow," to pause and reflect, matters so much. All animals have desires. Only human beings are capable of passing judgement on desires – of asking, should I or should I not satisfy this desire?

We cannot live, choose, or love without emotion. But one of the fundamental themes that we learnt in Genesis is that not all emotion is benign. Instinctive, impulsive behaviour can lead to violence. What is needed to be a carrier of God's covenant is the ability to "think slow" and act deliberately. That is the contrast between Isaac and Ishmael (of whom it was said, "He will be a wild donkey of a man; his hand will be against everyone and everyone's hand against him,"

Genesis 16:12). Even more so, it is the contrast between Jacob and Esau.

Which brings us to Genesis 27 and the moment when Jacob dressed up in Esau's clothes and said to his father, "I am Esau your firstborn." The two goats of the High Priest's service and the two goats prepared by Rebecca symbolise the duality within each of us: "The hands are the hands of Esau but the voice is the voice of Jacob." We each have an Esau and Jacob within us, the impulsive, emotional brain and the reflective, deliberative one. We can think fast or slow. Our fate, our *goral*, our life-script, will be determined by which we choose. Will our life be lived "to the Lord" or "to Azazel," to the random deviations of chance?

This is the moral drama symbolised by the two goats, one dedicated "to the Lord," the other "to Azazel" and released into the wilderness. The power of ritual is that it does not speak in abstractions – reason versus emotion, instinctual deferral rather than gratification. It is gripping and visceral, all the more so when it evokes, consciously or otherwise, the memory of the twins, Jacob and Esau, together at birth yet utterly divergent in their character and fate. This may be why the Yom Kippur Temple service includes this ritual of the two goats. It is encouraging us to consider who will we be this year. Will we have the strength to release our inner Esau and live instead like Jacob?



FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

We have two patterns of reaction in the brain, one focusing on potential danger to us as individuals, the other, located in the prefrontal cortex, taking a more considered view of the consequences of our actions for us and others. The first is immediate, instinctive and emotive. The second is reflective and rational. We are caught, in the psychologist Daniel Kahneman's phrase, between "thinking fast and slow".

The fast track helps us to survive, but it can also lead us to actions that are impulsive and destructive. The slow track leads us to more considered behaviour, but it is often overridden in the heat of the moment. We are each both sinners and saints, egotists and altruists, exactly as the prophets and philosophers have long maintained.

If this is so, we are in a position to understand why religion helped us to survive in the past — and why we will need it in

the future. It strengthens and speeds up the slow track. It reconfigures our neural pathways, turning altruism into instinct, through the rituals we perform, the texts we read and the prayers we pray. It remains the most powerful community-builder the world has known. Religion binds individuals into groups through habits of altruism, creating relationships of trust strong enough to defeat destructive emotions.

***The Moral Animal, published in
The New York Times, December. 23, 2012***

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. Which is more important in the life of a human being, fast thinking or slow thinking?
2. What impact can religion have on fast thinking and slow thinking?



AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. What is the connection between the two goats in this week's parsha and Jacob and Esau?
2. Do you think Esau was evil?
3. Which is more important in the life of a human being, fast thinking or slow thinking?
4. Would you say you are more like Jacob or Esau?
5. What is the connection between Jacob and Esau, the two types of thinking, and Yom Kippur?



QUESTION TIME

Do you want to win a **Koren Aviv Weekday Siddur inscribed** by Rabbi Sacks? Email CCFamilyEdition@rabbisacks.org with your name, age, city and your best question in response to a Covenant & Conversation Family Edition.

Entrants must be 18 or younger. Thank you to Koren Publishers for kindly donating these wonderful siddurim.



THE CORE IDEA

1. Rabbinic texts often present Esau as an evil person. Perhaps the socio-historic reason behind this is because we connect Esau genealogically with Edom, and Rome, and Rome represented the arch enemy of the Jews during the rabbinic period. However, on a closer reading of the Torah text itself, Esau is not necessarily evil, just impulsive. The end of the Jacob and Esau narrative is in fact reconciliation not rivalry (see Genesis 33). We all know impulsive people but it is not an indication of evil, although they may regret an action taken in anger or high emotion where they did not make the best decision.
2. While procrastination can paralyze decision-making, it is obvious how beneficial it can be to think through decisions and actions, including speech, before acting. This rings true for adults and children alike, and in the discussion it is important to focus the conversation on the lives of the children you are talking to, with concrete examples from their experience.
3. While every person is no doubt more like one or the other of these two personalities, (and if the child is struggling with self-awareness in this respect, help from parents and teachers will no doubt be forthcoming), there is a Jacob and an Esau in each of us (see *Thinking More Deeply*).

IT ONCE HAPPENED...

1. This famous Midrash (quoted by Rashi on Genesis 25:22) suggests that Jacob and his descendants are inherently good, and holy, and interested in the Torah, with a deep inclination to connecting to God through study and prayer, whereas Esau and his descendants have an inclination towards idolatry and, perhaps it even implies, evil doing (which is often central to pagan religions). The message of the *Covenant & Conversation* this week also suggests that Jacob and Esau have inherent inclinations within their personalities, but less about good and evil and more about the way they think and approach the world.
2. This is a fascinating discussion with no definitive answer. Science tells us that we are influenced by our genes, and religion and philosophy tells us we have free choice to decide beyond our nature and biology. While we should encourage our children and students to grapple with this debate themselves, a fair conclusion for those who believe in science and religion is 'both'.

FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

1. Fast thinking is our rapid, instinctive, emotional, and subconscious response. This allows us to react quickly to situations of immediate potential danger. Slow thinking is slower, reflective and rational, conscious, deliberative, and careful. Both types of thinking have their place. Without the first our ancestors would never have survived in hostile environments, and in fact this type of thinking helps us all to survive in our day to day lives. But it is the latter, slow, deliberate, conscious reflection that separates us from the rest of the animal kingdom, and makes us human beings. Both kinds of thinking have their place in our experience and survival as human beings.
2. Religion impacts both thinking for the positive. It slows down our fast thinking, our impulses, ensuring that we act within the framework of ethics and morality. And it fastens our slow thinking, by ensuring that the core values of religion such as altruism and kindness, become second nature (rather than a lengthier process of deep thought) through rituals that "reconfigures our neural pathways".

AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. There are many hidden clues suggesting the goats may represent Jacob and Esau. These include: Two animals, alike in appearance but different in fate; the word *se'ir*, "goat," is associated with Esau (he and his descendants lived in the land of Seir and the word *se'ir* is related to *se'ar*, "hairy,"); a red thread was tied to the scapegoat, and "red" (Edom) was Esau's other name; and finally "two kids of the goats," *shnei se'irei izim*, mentioned in the High Priest's rites, reminds us of the very similar expression, "two kids of the goats," *shnei gedi'ei izim*, mentioned in Genesis 27, the scene of Jacob's deception.
2. Rabbinic texts often present Esau as an evil person. Perhaps the socio-historic reason behind this is because we connect Esau genealogically with Edom, and Rome, and Rome represented the arch enemy of the Jews during the rabbinic period. However, on a closer reading of the Torah text itself, Esau is not necessarily evil, just impulsive. Esau is known as a model for the mitzvah of parental respect, and the end of the Jacob and Esau narrative is in fact reconciliation, not rivalry (see Genesis 33). We often find ourselves heavily influenced by the rabbinic approach to Esau but if we take his character at face value from the Torah text alone we see a complex picture that allows room for a more compassionate approach to Esau as a personality.
3. See *From the Thought of Rabbi Sacks*, answer 1.
4. See *The Core Idea*, answer 3.
5. This can be summed up in the last paragraph of this week's *Covenant & Conversation*: "Who am I? That is the question Yom Kippur forces us to ask. To be Jacob, we have to release and relinquish the Esau within us, the impulsiveness that can lead us to sell our birthright for a bowl of soup, losing eternity in the pursuit of desire."