



# Covenant & Conversation



Jonathan Sacks  
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

TOLDOT • תולדות

STUDIES IN SPIRITUALITY

BASED ON THE TEACHINGS AND WRITINGS OF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ל"צ

With thanks to the Schimmel Family for their generous sponsorship of Covenant & Conversation, dedicated in loving memory of Harry (Chaim) Schimmel.

*"I have loved the Torah of R' Chaim Schimmel ever since I first encountered it. It strives to be not just about truth on the surface but also its connection to a deeper truth beneath. Together with Anna, his remarkable wife of 60 years, they built a life dedicated to love of family, community, and Torah. An extraordinary couple who have moved me beyond measure by the example of their lives."* — Rabbi Sacks

## A Father's Love

● This summary is adapted from this week's main Covenant & Conversation essay by Rabbi Sacks, available at

[www.RabbiSacks.org/covenant-conversation/toldot/a-fathers-love/](http://www.RabbiSacks.org/covenant-conversation/toldot/a-fathers-love/)

Yaacov and Eisav were twins, but they were wildly different. We can easily understand why Rivka loved Yaacov our forefather, but **why did Yitzchak love Eisav**, who was not a scholar or a man of God, but one who rebelled from Judaism, who was rough and wild, and married out?

The answer is simple. **Yitzchak loved Eisav because Eisav was his son, and that is what parents do.** They love their children no matter what. This does not mean that Yitzchak thought Eisav was the right person to continue the covenant, or that he was happy with Eisav marrying Hittite women. The text explicitly says he was troubled by this. Yitzchak could see Eisav's true character. But he also knew that a parent must love their child because this is their child. They can still reproach them for their actions. But a parent does not disown their child, even when they are disappointed in them. Yitzchak was teaching us a fundamental lesson in parenthood.

Yitzchak knew that his father had sent his brother Yishmael away. He may have known how much that pained Avraham and injured Yishmael. There is, in fact, a series of midrashim that suggest that Avraham visited Yishmael even after he sent him away, and others that say it was Yitzchak who brought about the reunion. Yitzchak was therefore determined not to inflict the same fate on Eisav.

Likewise, he knew to the emotional trauma both he and his father has suffered from the trial of the Binding. The trial was surely necessary, otherwise God would not have commanded it. But it left wounds, psychological scars, and it left Yitzchak determined not to have to sacrifice Eisav, his own child. In some way, then, Yitzchak's

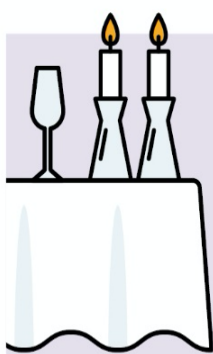
unconditional love of Eisav was a tikkun for the rupture in the father-son relationship brought about by the Binding.

We could even go further. In a way, **Yitzchak's gift of paternal love helped prepare the way for the next generation, in which all of Yaacov's children remained within the fold.**

There is a fascinating argument in the Mishnah on the meaning of Devarim 14:1, the *passuk* that says about the Jewish people, "You are children of the Lord your God." Rabbi Yehudah said this applied only when Jews behaved in a way worthy of the children of God. But Rabbi Meir said that it was unconditional: **whether Jews behave like God's children or not, they are still called the children of God.**

To take seriously the Jewish idea of *Avinu Malkeinu*, that our God, our King is first and foremost our **Parent**, is to instil the most profound emotions into our relationship with God. There is bound to be conflict, as all children sometimes conflict with their parents. The relationship can be fraught, even painful, yet what gives it its depth is the knowledge that it is unbreakable. **Whatever happens, a parent is still a parent, and a child is still a child. The bond may be deeply damaged but it is never broken beyond repair.**

Perhaps that is what Yitzchak was signalling to all generations by his continuing love for Eisav, who was so unlike him, so different in character and destiny, yet never rejected by him – just as the Midrash says that Avraham never rejected Yishmael and found ways of communicating his love. **Unconditional love is not uncritical, but it is unbreakable. That is how we should love our children – for it is how God loves us.**



## Around the Shabbat Table

1. What do you think is the source of the deep love parents have for their children?
2. Do you think Eisav deserved the love of his father?
3. Why does the Torah need to teach the lesson of unconditional love? Is it not a natural emotion?



## A STORY FOR SHABBAT



### One Handshake

by Rabbi Dr. Sam Lebens

I was a fresh-faced undergraduate, attending a weekend event for Jewish students. Rabbi Sacks and his wife Elaine were our guests of honour. Kabbalat Shabbat had just begun. Rabbi Sacks was sitting at the front. I was at the back.

Some years earlier, I had written to Rabbi Sacks in the midst of a personal crisis of faith and self-confidence. We had kept in touch. When he saw me standing there at the back, he left his seat, came all the way over to me, gave me a hearty handshake and a “Shabbat Shalom,” and went back to his seat.

Everyone was looking at me. Who was I? Why did the Chief Rabbi interrupt his prayers to greet me?

But he knew me. He knew what his handshake would mean to me: that he’d noticed me and valued me; that I should have confidence in myself because he had confidence in me. He was also giving me public recognition so that I might feel less like an outsider; empowered to step forward; to volunteer for positions of leadership in such a community.

Erich Auerbach said that the text of the Torah is “fraught with background.” According to Rabbi Sacks, this means that, in the Torah, “more is left unsaid than said.” It was one handshake. Two words. But it was “laden with background” – with the care and compassion of a Rabbi for his student. I carry it with me to this day.

● Rabbi Dr. Samuel Lebens is a professor of philosophy at the University of Haifa. His latest book is ‘A Guide for the Jewish Undecided.’



## A CLOSER LOOK

● Delving deeper into the thoughts shared by Rabbi Sacks on Toldot,

**Rabbi Lebens** now shares his own reflections on the main piece.

### What was your main takeaway from ‘A Father’s Love’?

That the love of a parent for a child should be utterly unbreakable. Our children can hurt us, or disappoint us, but Isaac’s love for Esau should remind us that the bonds of love that tie us to our children should be impossible to sever.

### What inspired you in this week’s piece?

As a parent, it inspired me to make sure that my children know the depth of my love for them, and that through my love for them, I can teach them how God’s love for all of us is also unconditional; that however far we may stray in this life, there is always a route back, paved by God’s unconditional and parental love.

### What is your favourite quote from Rabbi Sacks’ essay this week, and why?

“A parent does not disown their child, even when the child disappoints their expectations. Isaac was teaching us a fundamental lesson in parenthood.” Sadly we do hear of parents, God forbid, disowning their children when their children have deeply disappointed them. Sometimes people think that, in disowning their rebellious child, they’re being especially pious or religious. But Rabbi Sacks hears the opposite message in the words of the Torah. How will our children learn that there’s always a way back to God, unless they learn that God’s love for them is unbreakable, and how will our children learn that lesson about God unless they learn what unconditional love really means, in the context of their parents, and their family?



## TORAH TRIVIA

Q: Yitzchak blesses Eisav

“*mishmanai ha’aretz yihyeh moshavecha*” which Rabbi Sacks translates to mean, “Of the cream of the land you home shall be, of the dew of heaven above.” (See Bereishit 27:39)

According to Rashi, which country is Yitzchak referring to in his blessing to Eisav?

A: Rashi teaches us that this refers to Italy.

● Adapted from Torah IQ by David Woolf, a collection of 1500 Torah riddles, available worldwide on Amazon.