



# Covenant & Conversation



Jonathan Sacks  
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

VAYISHLACH • וַיִּשְׁלַח

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

## Feeling the Fear

● This summary is adapted from this week's main Covenant & Conversation essay by Rabbi Sacks, available at [www.RabbiSacks.org/covenant-conversation/vayishlach/feeling-the-fear/](http://www.RabbiSacks.org/covenant-conversation/vayishlach/feeling-the-fear/)

When Yaacov heard that his brother Eisav was coming to meet him with a force of four hundred men, he was terrified. To prepare, he took three actions: He sent Eisav a huge gift of cattle and flocks, to make peace with him. He prayed to God. And he prepared for war, dividing his household into two separate camps, so that at least one would survive.

What happens next is one of the most mysterious episodes in the Torah, but it is also one of the most important, because it is the moment that gives the Jewish people its name: *Yisrael*, meaning **someone who "wrestles with God and with men and prevails"**.

Yaacov remained anxious. Alone that night, he wrestled with a stranger until dawn. Who was the stranger? It is not clear, but there are many interpretations. One is particularly fascinating. It comes from Rashi's grandson, the Rashbam. He sees it as a *type-scene*, an episode that is repeated in Tanach, because it reminds him of two others: of the story of Yonah, and of that time when Moshe was on his way back to Egypt... "When they were in the place where they spent the night along the way, God confronted Moshe and wanted to kill him." (Shemot 4:24) Tziporah then saves Moshe's life by performing a *brit milah* on their son.

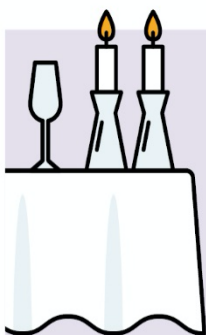
**The story of Yonah provides the key to understanding these other stories.** When Yonah was told to warn the people of Nineveh that their city would be destroyed if they did not repent he instead fled in a boat to Tarshish, but God brought a storm that threatened to sink the ship. The prophet was then thrown into the sea and swallowed

by a giant fish that later spat him out alive. Yonah then realised that escaping was impossible.

The same, says Rashbam, applies to Moshe who, at the Burning Bush, repeatedly showed he was unwilling to undertake the task God had set him. Evidently, Moshe was still trying to avoid his mission even after beginning the journey, which is why God was angry with him.

So it was with Yaacov. Rashbam says he was afraid of encountering Eisav, despite God's promises. His courage failed him, and he was trying to run away. God sent an angel to stop him. Here are three great men, Yaacov, Moshe, and Yonah, yet all three, teaches Rashbam, were afraid. Of what? None was a coward. **They were afraid, essentially, of their mission.**

Moshe kept telling God at the Burning Bush: They won't believe in me. Who am I? I am not a man of words. Yonah was reluctant to deliver a message from God to Bnei Yisrael's enemies. And Yaacov had just said to God, "I am unworthy of all the kindness and faith that You have shown me" (Ber. 32:11). This is not physical fear. It is the fear that comes from a feeling of personal inadequacy. **Sometimes the greatest have the least self-belief, because they know how immense is the responsibility, and how small they feel in relation to it.** Courage does not mean having no fear. It means having fear but overcoming it. If that is true of physical courage it is no less true of moral and spiritual courage. To feel fear is fine. To give way to it, is not. **For God has faith in us even if, at times, even the best lack faith in themselves.**



## Around the Shabbat Table

1. Sometimes we call this fear of inadequacy "imposter syndrome". Have you ever experienced this?
2. Have you ever tried to run away from something, and someone prevented you?
3. Why is it important to listen to the people around you who have faith in you?



## Self-Belief

by Rabbi Johnny Solomon

Self-belief is a strange thing – because the people that you think have it in abundance often doubt themselves. And if you need proof of this, the fact that, just a year before his death, Rabbi Sacks remarked during an interview that, “I have a persistent lack of belief in myself” should be sufficient evidence that even the true greats often wrestled with this problem.

This is why Rabbi Sacks’ essay speaks so deeply to me, because it is clear that he fully understood what it meant for people to doubt themselves. At the same time, Rabbi Sacks explains that by liberating ourselves from fear we can help liberate others. In fact, I think that this is what Rabbi Sacks himself did, and as a result, he used his personal experiences to help so many other people.

In terms of my own interactions with Rabbi Sacks, I always sensed that he wanted me to achieve great things. In fact, when I invited him to speak at a conference, he gave me a book in which he’d written: “In great friendship and admiration. You have great achievements ahead of you.”

As someone who has often lacked self-belief, this message helped liberate me from my fears. And through the work that I do, I now endeavour to help others do the same.

● Rabbi Johnny Solomon is a teacher, writer, editor, and spiritual coach.



## A CLOSER LOOK

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

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

### What inspiration did you find when reading ‘Feeling the Fear’?

There are those who think that we are only given ‘one shot’ at realising our Divinely-given mission. However, what Rabbi Sacks teaches us this week through the stories of Yaacov, Moshe, and Yonah is that God is patient, that God truly wants each of us to achieve our potential, and that God is prepared to ‘nudge’ us repeatedly to make sure that we get the message.

### Which idea expressed in this week’s piece do you think is the most important message for the next generation?

Too often we don’t try to do great things because of our fear that we won’t get them right the first time. What Rabbi Sacks teaches us is that having the courage to undertake great things is what makes us great.

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

“God has faith in us all even though, at times, even the best of us lack faith in ourselves.” Sometimes we can feel that the goal we have set for ourselves is beyond us. But if we remember that we are never alone, that God is with us, and that God has faith in us, then this will boost our self-belief and help us achieve what we’ve set out to do.



## TORAH TRIVIA

Q: Humility is important, but this week we have been also talking about the importance of self-belief. The Gemara (in *Sotah 5a*) says that a *talmid chacham* (a learned individual) may possess conceit, but only a tiny amount – an eighth of an eighth. Where can we find this idea in Vayishlach?

\* Rabbi Sacks translates *katonit* as “I am unworthy” in his Chumash.

A: The Vilna Gaon explains that the eighth passuk of the eighth parsha contains the statement from Yaacov, “*katonit mikol hachassidim*” – “I have been humbled\* by all the kindness Hashem has done for me.” (Bereishit 32:11)

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