Covenant & Conversation

VAYETSE • ויצא

FROM THE TEACHINGS AND WRITINGS OF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS זצ"ל

Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

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

The Character of Jacob

What kind of man was Jacob? This is the question that cries out to us in episode after episode of his life.

The first time we hear a description of him he is called *ish tam*: a simple, quiet, plain, straightforward man. But that is exactly what he seems not to be. We see him taking Esau's birthright in exchange for a bowl of soup. We see him taking Esau's blessing, in borrowed clothes, taking advantage of their father's blindness.

These are troubling episodes. We can read them midrashically. The Midrash makes Jacob all-good and Esau all-bad. It rereads the biblical text to make it consistent with the highest standards of the moral life. There is much to be said for this approach.

Alternatively, we could say that in these cases the end justifies the means. In the case of the birthright, Jacob might have been testing Esau to see if he really cared about it. Since he gave it away so readily, Jacob might be right in concluding that it should go to one who valued it. In the case of the blessing, Jacob was obeying his mother, who had received a Divine oracle saying that "the older shall serve the younger."

Yet the text remains disturbing. Isaac says to Esau, "Your brother came deceitfully and took your blessing." Esau says, "Isn't he rightly named Jacob [supplanter]? He has supplanted me these two times: He took my birthright, and now he's taken my blessing!" Such accusations are not levelled against any other biblical hero.

Nor does the story end there. In this week's parsha a similar deceit is practiced on him. After his wedding night, he discovers that he has married Leah, not, as he thought, his beloved Rachel. He complains to Laban:

> "What is this you have done to me? Was it not for Rachel that I served you? Why then have you deceived me?"
>
> *Gen. 29:25*

Laban replies:

> "It is not done in our place to give the younger before the firstborn."
>
> *Gen. 29:26*

It's hard not to see this as precise measure-for-measure retribution. The younger Jacob pretended to be the older Esau. Now the elder Leah has been disguised as the younger Rachel. A fundamental principle of biblical morality is at work here: As you do, so shall be done to you.

Yet the web of deception continues. After Rachel has given birth to Joseph, Jacob wants to return home. He has been with Laban long enough. Laban urges him to stay and tells him to name his price. Jacob then embarks on an extraordinary course of action. He tells Laban he wants no wages at all. Let Laban remove every spotted or streaked lamb from the flock, and every streaked or spotted goat. Jacob will then keep, as his hire, any new born spotted or streaked animals.

It is an offer that speaks simultaneously to Laban's greed and his ignorance. He seems to be getting Jacob's labour for almost nothing. He is demanding no wages. And the chance of unspotted animals giving birth to spotted offspring seems remote.

Jacob knows better. In charge of the flocks, he goes through an elaborate procedure involving peeled branches of poplar, almond, and plane trees, which he places with their drinking water. The result is that they do in fact produce streaked and spotted offspring.

How this happened has intrigued not only the commentators (who mostly assume that it was a miracle, God's way of assuring Jacob's welfare) but also scientists. Some argue that Jacob must have had an understanding of genetics. Two unspotted sheep can produce spotted offspring. Jacob had doubtless noticed this in his many years of tending Laban's flocks.

Others have suggested that prenatal nutrition can have an epigenetic effect – that is, it can cause a certain gene to be expressed which might not have been otherwise. Had the peeled branches of poplar, almond, and plane trees been added to the water the sheep drank, they might have affected the Agouti gene that determines the colour of fur in sheep and mice.[1]

However it happened, the result was dramatic. Jacob became rich:

> In this way the man grew exceedingly prosperous and came to own large flocks, and maidservants and menservants, and camels and donkeys.
>
> *Gen. 30:43*

Inevitably, Laban and his sons felt cheated. Jacob sensed their displeasure, and – having taken counsel with his wives and being advised to leave by God Himself – departs while Laban is away sheep-shearing. Laban eventually discovers that Jacob has left, and pursues him for seven days, catching up with him in the mountains of Gilead.

The text is fraught with accusation and counteraccusation. Laban and Jacob both feel cheated. They both believe that the flocks and herds are rightfully theirs. They both regard themselves as the victim of the other's deceitfulness. The end result is that Jacob finds himself forced to run away from Laban as he was earlier forced to run away from Esau, in both cases in fear of his life.

So the question returns. What kind of man was Jacob? He seems anything but an *ish tam*, a straightforward man. And surely this is not the way for a religious role model to behave – in such a way that first his father, then his brother, then his father-in-law, accuse him of deceit. What kind of story is the Torah telling us in the way it narrates the life of Jacob?

One way of approaching an answer is to look at a specific character – often a hare, or in African-American tradition, "Brer Rabbit" – in the folktales of oppressed people. Henry Louis Gates, the American literary critic, has argued that such figures represent "the creative way the slave community responded to the oppressor's failure to address them as human beings created in the image of God." They have "a fragile body but a deceptively strong mind." Using their intelligence to outwit their stronger opponents, they are able to deconstruct and subvert, in small ways, the hierarchy of dominance favouring the rich and the strong. They represent the momentary freedom of the unfree, a protest against the random injustices of the world.[2]

That, it seems to me, is what Jacob represents in this, the early phase of his life. He enters the world as the younger of two twins. His brother is strong, ruddy, hairy, a skilful hunter, a man of the open country, whereas Jacob is quiet, a scholar. Then he must confront the fact that his father loves his brother more than him. Then he finds himself at the mercy of Laban, a possessive, exploitative, and deceptive figure who takes advantage of his vulnerability. Jacob is the man who – as almost all of us do at some time or other – finds that life is unfair.

What Jacob shows, by his sheer quick-wittedness, is that the strength of the strong can also be their weakness. So it is when Esau comes in exhausted from the hunt, famished, that he is willing to impulsively trade his birthright for some soup. So it is when the blind Isaac is prepared to bless the son who will bring him venison to eat. So it is when Laban hears the prospect of getting Jacob's labour for free. Every strength has its Achilles' heel, its weakness, and this can be used by the weak to gain victory over the strong.

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[1] Joshua Backon, "Jacob and the Spotted Sheep: The Role of Prenatal Nutrition on Epigenetics of Fur Colour," Jewish Bible Quarterly, Vol. 36, No. 4, 2008.

[2] Henry Louis Gates, *Black Literature and Literary Theory*, New York, Methuen, 1984, pp. 81-104.

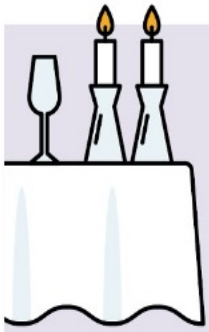
Jacob represents the refusal of the weak to accept the hierarchy created by the strong. His acts are a form of defiance, an insistence on the dignity of the weak (vis-a-vis Esau), the less loved (by Isaac), and the refugee (in Laban's house). In this sense he is one element of what, historically, it has been like to be a Jew.

But the Jacob we see in these chapters is not the figure whom, ultimately, we are called on to emulate. We can see why. Jacob wins his battles with Esau and Laban but at the cost of eventually having to flee in fear of his life. Quick-wittedness is merely a temporary solution.

It is only later, after his wrestling match with the angel, that he receives a new name – that is, a new identity – as Israel, "because you have struggled with God and with men and have overcome." As Israel he is unafraid to contend with people face-to-face. He no longer needs to outwit them by clever but ultimately futile stratagems. His children will eventually become the people whose dignity lies in the unbreakable covenant they make with God.

Yet we can see something of Jacob's early life in one of the most remarkable features of Jewish history. For almost two thousand years Jews were looked down on as pariahs, yet they refused to internalise that image, just as Jacob refused to accept the hierarchies of power or affection that condemned him to be a mere second-best. Jews throughout history, like Jacob, have relied not on physical strength or material wealth but on qualities of the mind.

In the end, though, Jacob must become Israel. For it is not the quick-witted victor but the hero of moral courage who stands tall in the eyes of humanity and God.



Around the Shabbat Table

1. Can you think of a time in your life when your belief system was challenged, and you needed to advocate for your values or principles?
2. What other times in Bereishit the greater Tanach have name changes and the importance of names come up?
3. What helps guide you when you are confronted with a morally complex decision? In what ways can you relate your experience to Yaakov's story?

- These questions come from this week's **Family Edition** to Rabbi Sacks' Covenant & Conversation. For an interactive, multi-generational study, check out the full edition at **www.RabbiSacks.org/covenant-conversation-family-edition/vayetse/the-character-of-yaakov/**