



Covenant & Conversation



Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

TOLDOT · תולדות

BASED ON THE TEACHINGS OF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS 7"צז

Between Prophecy and Oracle

• The full essay written by Rabbi Sacks is available [on our website](#)

Rivka, who waited many years for children, finally became pregnant. Suffering intense pain, “she went to inquire of the Lord” (Bereishit 25:22) and God told her she was carrying twins who were struggling within her:

*Two nations are inside your womb;
Two peoples are to part from you.
People will overpower people,
And the older will serve the younger.*

The twins were born - first Eisav, then Yaakov, grasping his brother’s heel. Remembering the prophecy, Rivka favoured Yaakov. Years later, she helped him disguise himself as Eisav to receive the blessing Yitzchak intended for his elder son: “*May nations serve you and peoples bow down to you. Be lord over your brothers.*”

It seems the prophecy is to be fulfilled: the older will serve the younger. But the story does not end there.

When Eisav discovers Yaakov’s deception, Yitzchak blesses him too, saying: “*You will live by your sword and you will serve your brother. But when you grow restless, you will throw his yoke off your neck.*”

So the older will not serve the younger forever.

Many years later the brothers meet again. Yaakov, fearing revenge, bows down to Eisav seven times. He calls him “my lord” and refers to himself as “your servant.” The roles appear reversed. Eisav is not serving Yaakov; Yaakov seems to serve Eisav. What has happened to the words Rivka heard from God?

Here we encounter one of the Torah’s most remarkable insights: **the power of the future to transform our understanding of the past.** What we experience later can change how we read what came before. Oftentimes, only by looking back do we understand what earlier moments meant.

This idea is echoed in God’s words to Moshe, “*You will see My back but not My face*” - meaning, we can only perceive Divine purpose when we look backward, not in advance. The Torah’s meaning is open, unfolding over time.

Rivka’s prophecy seemed clear - “*the older will serve the younger*” - but, read in light of later events, its meaning becomes less certain. The Hebrew phrase *ve-rav ya’avod tsa’ir* can also be read, “the younger shall serve the older.” The words *rav* (“great” or “chief”) and *tsa’ir* (“younger”) are not true opposites, adding to the ambiguity. Even the Torah’s musical notation subtly supports the alternative reading.

A later story, also in the Books of Bereishit, reinforces this uncertainty: the birth of Tamar’s twins, Peretz and Zerach. There too it is unclear who is truly firstborn. The Torah deliberately leaves the question open. **Its message is not that prophecy is wrong, but that destiny is complex. The future is rarely straightforward.**

So it is throughout Bereishit. Avraham is promised many descendants but waits a lifetime for one child. The *avot* are promised a land but do not possess it. The covenant’s fulfilment comes slowly, through struggle and perseverance. So too with Yaakov: will he serve or be served? Only after wrestling through the night and receiving the name Israel - “one who struggles with God and with men and prevails” - does the answer begin to emerge.

The deepest message of this story is both literary and spiritual: the future reshapes our understanding of the past. **We are all part of a story whose final chapter has not yet been written. That chapter rests with us, as it once rested with Yaakov.**

Around the Shabbat Table



1. How does Yaakov and Eisav’s changing relationship challenge the idea of clear “winners” and “losers”?
2. Yaakov and Eisav both received blessings. How can God’s plan can include multiple “truths”?
3. Did Rivka do the right thing? How do we balance faith, trust, and taking action?

Takeaway Thoughts

We cannot know the future. God’s words are rarely simple and His promises unfold over time. True faith means trusting that God’s plan is on track, and our choices will shape how the story will ultimately be told.



Exploring the Parsha

WITH SARA LAMM

BASED ON THE TEACHINGS OF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS 7" זצ



The Parsha in a Nutshell

Yitzchak and Rivka wait twenty long years for children before their prayers are answered. When Rivka finally becomes pregnant, she finds that her twin babies struggle within her.

So Rivka goes to seek Hashem's guidance. God shows Rivka that two nations are within her womb, destined to fight, and that the younger will in the end prevail over the elder.

The twins are born, with Eisav emerging first, looking red and very hairy, but with Yaakov grasping his twin brother's heel. Eisav, grows into a skilled hunter and man of the field. Yaakov becomes a gentle student of Torah. The parents are split, as Yitzchak favours Eisav, while Rivka favours Yaakov. One day, Eisav returns from a hunt. Tired and weary, he sells

his birthright to Yaakov for a bowl of red lentil stew!

Later, in Gerar, Yitzchak and Rivka face trials of their own. Fearing for his life, Yitzchak introduces Rivka as his sister. He reopens Avraham's wells and digs new ones.

When Yitzchak grows old and blind, he prepares to bless Eisav. But Rivka intervenes. She guides Yaakov to disguise himself as his brother, and serve Yitzchak the type of meat normally brought by Eisav. The plan works and he receives the firstborn blessing instead. When Eisav discovers his brother's deception, Yitzchak blesses him too, foretelling a life of struggle and freedom through strength. Yaakov flees to Charan to escape Eisav's anger, and find a wife.



Parsha Activity

The Secret-Holder

Gather everyone in a circle around a small object, like a coin or pebble. One person steps outside while the others quietly decide who will hold the object in an attempt to fool the person outside.

When the absent player (the guesser) returns, everyone holds out their closed hands as if they are hiding the object. The guesser studies each face and gesture, trying to spot who is truly holding the object. After they make their guess, the real Secret-Holder opens their hands to reveal the truth, and a new round begins with a different person stepping out.



The Painting Revealed

There once was an artist who spent years painting a vast mural of her life. The walls of her little studio were covered from floor to ceiling, filled with colours, shapes, and scenes that seemed to pour straight from her heart onto plaster. As she applied each brushstroke, she felt alive with purpose, as if she were capturing something urgent and true.

But when she finally stepped back to take it all in, her breath caught. The painting she saw was chaos. Nothing was connected.

Friends came to see it and tilted their heads. "It's beautiful," they said supportively, "but what does it mean?" And that was the problem. It didn't

seem to mean anything! The artist was so disappointed. She had felt so sure, so filled with purpose, as she painted, but the finished painting had left her consumed with doubt. Maybe she had wasted her time, chasing feelings that led nowhere.

For weeks the artist avoided the studio, unable to look at what she had made. Then, one late afternoon, the sun dipped low and a beam of light slipped through the window, striking a mirror on the far wall. The mirror caught the mural's reflection, flipping it backwards, and in that instant, everything changed. The wild shapes came together into recognisable forms. Shapes that once clashed now



formed a perfect design.

The artist stood in silence, tears in her eyes. What had once looked meaningless was only waiting for the right light. Now it was clear, the painting revealed her journey through life. All along, the beauty and the meaning had been there. She just needed to see it from another angle.



Cards & Conversation

Our **Cards & Conversation** packs include one card for every parsha. On one side, you'll find an interesting question from the Torah to think about and discuss. Flip it over, and you'll discover an idea from Rabbi Sacks that shines a new light on the parsha.

"May God grant Avraham's blessing to you and your descendants..."

- Bereishit 28:4

Yaakov seeks Eisav's blessing.

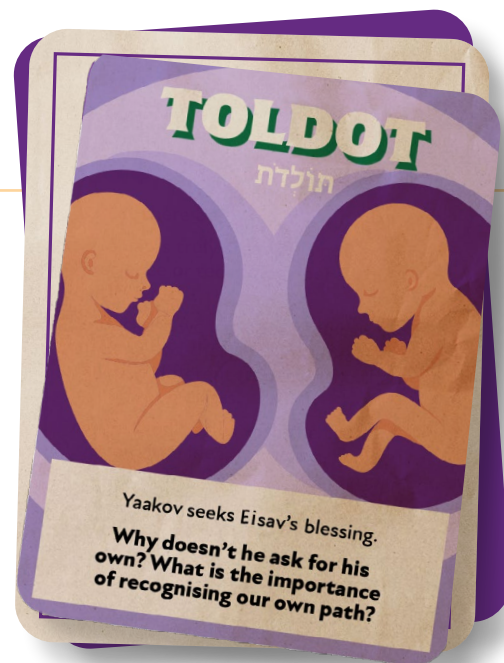
QUESTIONS: Why doesn't he ask for his own? What is the importance of recognising our own path?

Rabbi Sacks on Bereishit 28:4 (in the Koren Sacks Humash) offers an answer:

"[Unbeknownst to his sons], Yitzchak has prepared two sets of blessings, one for Eisav, the other for Yaakov. The covenantal blessings that God gave Avraham and Yitzchak... are about children and a land. This is the blessing Yitzchak intended for Yaakov all along.

"Each of us has a blessing that is our own. That is true not just of Yitzhak but also of Yishmael, not just of Yaakov but also of Eisav. The moral could not be more powerful. Never seek your brother's blessing. Be content with your own."

Find out more about **Cards & Conversation** at rabbisacks.org/cards-and-conversation



Parsha in Practice

Value of the Week

"...Go at once to Padan Aram, to the house of your mother's father Betuel, and there marry a daughter..." (Bereishit 28:1-5)

"There is no redemption of solitude deeper than to share a life with someone we love and trust, who we know will never desert us, who lifts us when we fall, and believes in us even when we fail."

- Rabbi Sacks

"Family life isn't easy or straightforward. The Bible does not hide that fact from us. The stories of Bereishit do not contain a single sentence saying, 'And they all lived happily ever after.' Families need constant work, sacrifice and mutual respect. But if you get home right,

your children will have a head start in making their own fulfilling relationships, and relationships truly are what make us human."

- Rabbi Sacks

Practically Speaking

What does the Torah teach us about Family?

In Parshat Toldot, Yitzchak sends Yaakov to Padan Aram to find a wife from his own wider family. This was not just about keeping traditions, but about continuing Avraham's mission to build a family grounded in faith, kindness, and shared values.

The Torah teaches that who we build our lives with matters deeply, because our relationships shape the kind of people we become and the legacy we leave.



Try it out

YOUNG STUDENTS:

Families are special because we help each other grow. Ask your parents or grandparents to tell you a story about when they were your age. What did they learn? What do you notice that is the same or different about their world and yours?

ADVANCING STUDENTS:

Think about what it means to belong to your family's story. Like Yaakov, you can inherit both blessings and responsibilities.

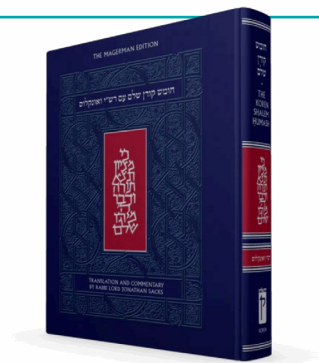
What traditions, values, or beliefs do you want to carry forward?

How might you add your own chapter to that story?



Learning in Layers

Guiding you through Torah step by step, with insights from the [Koren Sacks Humash with translation and commentary by Rabbi Sacks](#). Each step takes us a little deeper and invites 'Torah as Conversation,' just as Rabbi Sacks taught.



Examining the relationship between Yitzchak and Yaakov

LAYER 1: LOOK AT THE TORAH TEXT: BEREISHIT 25:28

"וַיֵּאָהֵב יִצְחָק אֶת-עֵשָׂו, כִּי-צִיד בְּפִיו; וּרְבֵקָה, אֲהָבָת אֶת-יַעֲקֹב."

LAYER 2: READ RABBI SACKS' TRANSLATION

"Yitzchak loved Eisav because he ate of his game, but Rivka loved Yaakov."

LAYER 3: THINK ABOUT WHAT IT MEANS

What immediate questions does this raise for you? Most people first react to the parents in this story showing favouritism, or wonder whether Yitzchak really preferred Eisav because he liked his meat.

But there are other layers to examine here too. Yitzchak loved Eisav. Eisav did not share the same values as his father, and yet he received his father's love and support. This unconditional love shows that real love means standing by someone even when they take a different path.

- How can we show our love to family or friends when we don't always agree with them?

LAYER 4: LEARN FROM RABBI SACKS' COMMENTARY

Is it conceivable that Yitzchak loves Eisav merely because he has a taste for wild game? The Sages suggests that the deeper meaning of Eisav being a "skilled hunter" is that Eisav trapped and deceived Yitzchak.

There is, though, a quite different explanation, closer to the plain sense of the text: *Yitzchak loves Eisav because Eisav is his son, and that is what fathers do.* They love their children unconditionally. That does not mean that Yitzchak cannot see the faults in Eisav's character. But it does mean that Yitzchak knows that *a father must love his son because he is his son.* Yitzchak is teaching us a fundamental lesson in parenthood.

God is first and foremost our parent, so we must invest our relationship with God with the most profound emotions. We wrestle with God as a child does with his or her parents. The relationship is sometimes tense, conflictual, 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. Unconditional love is not uncritical, but it is unbreakable. That is how we should love our children – for it is how God loves us.

LAYER 5: REFLECT AND RESPOND

Add your own questions and apply what you've learned to other examples in the Torah, and in your own life!

1. How can we reflect the kind of unconditional love God shows us, in our relationships with others?
2. Why is it important to feel loved even when we make mistakes?

- Find out more about the [Koren Sacks Humash](#) at rabbisacks.org/books/the-koren-sacks-humash

Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

The Rabbi Sacks Legacy perpetuates the timeless and universal wisdom of Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks as a teacher of Torah, a leader of leaders, and a moral voice.

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