



Covenant & Conversation

VAYETSE · וַיֵּצֵא

BASED ON THE TEACHINGS OF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ז"ל



Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

Encountering God

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

It is one of the great visions of the Torah. Yaakov, alone at night, lies down to rest. Instead of experiencing a nightmare, his dream gives him an epiphany:

He came to a certain place [vayifga bamakom] and stopped for the night because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones there, he put it under his head and lay down to sleep. He had a dream: he saw a ladder resting on the earth, with its top reaching heaven, and angels of God ascending and descending on it. There above it stood God.

Yaakov awoke from his sleep and said, "God is truly in this place, but I did not know it...How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven."

On the basis of this passage, the Sages said that Yaakov instituted Ma'ariv. The word *vayifga* can mean "he encountered" but also "he prayed" or "entreated." The Sages also understood *bamakom* ("the place") as referring to God, the "place" of the universe. Thus the three daily prayers were linked to the *avot*: Avraham to Shacharit, recited each morning, Yitzchak to Mincha in the afternoon, and Yaakov to Arvit/Ma'ariv, said at night.

Each prayer reflects the character of its founder. Avraham represents morning - the beginning, the courage to begin a spiritual journey. Yitzchak represents afternoon - the quiet strength of continuity, the steady faith of one who carries forward the covenant. Yaakov represents night - fear, flight, uncertainty, and struggle. **He is the man who wrestles with God, with others, and with himself.**

Yet there is a puzzle. Ma'ariv is not considered obligatory in the Talmud, unlike the Shacharit and Mincha prayers. Why is Yaakov's *tefillah* voluntary if he, like his father and grandfather, established a moment of worship?

The deeper explanation lies in the kind of encounter each patriarch had with God. Avraham "stood before God." Yitzchak "went out to meditate." But Yaakov "encountered"

God - *vayifga bamakom*. This was not a prayer he planned, nor an experience he sought. His thoughts were on Eisav, from whom he was escaping, and on Lavan, to whom he was going. Yet into his troubled heart came a vision of God and angels, a stairway between earth and heaven. It was a meeting brought about by God, not man.

That is why Yaakov's prayer could not be made a fixed obligation. **None of us knows when the presence of God will suddenly break into our lives. There is an element of the religious life that is beyond conscious control.** If Avraham represents our journey toward God, and Yitzchak our dialogue with God, Yaakov signifies God's encounter with us - unplanned, unscheduled, unexpected. It is the moment when the Divine Presence enters our lives without warning and leaves us transformed.

Such experiences often come at night - when we are alone, afraid, and vulnerable. It is then, when we least expect it, that our lives may be flooded with the radiance of Hashem. Suddenly we know with absolute certainty that we are not alone, that God is here and has been all along, though we failed to notice Him. That is how Yaakov found God - not by seeking, like Avraham, or through dialogue, like Yitzchak, but in the midst of fear and isolation.

Yaakov - in flight - trips and falls, and finds he has fallen into the waiting arms of God. No one who has had this experience ever forgets it. "Now I know that You were with me all the time, but I was looking elsewhere."

That was Yaakov's prayer. There are times when we speak and times when we are spoken to. **Prayer is not always predictable, a matter of fixed times and obligation. It is also an openness, a vulnerability. God can take us by surprise, waking us from our sleep, catching us as we fall.**

Around the Shabbat Table



1. What does it mean to "encounter God" instead of seeking Him? Have you ever felt something similar?
2. How can we become more aware of God's presence in our everyday life?
3. Where else in Tanach does a spiritual encounter occur at night?

Takeaway Thoughts

Sometimes faith begins when we stop striving and simply awaken to what was already there. Yaakov encounters Hashem when he is in crisis. Even in life's unsettled moments, when we feel most alone, Hashem is with us.



Exploring the Parsha

WITH SARA LAMM

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



The Parsha in a Nutshell

Yaakov is on his way to Charan. When stops to rest for the night, he dreams of a ladder reaching to the sky with *malachim* ascending and descending upon it. Hashem appears, promising Yaakov that the land beneath him will belong to his descendants. When Yaakov awakes, he sets up a monument, declaring that this place will become a house of Hashem.

In Charan, Yaakov works for his Uncle Lavan and falls in love with Lavan's younger daughter, Rachel. After labouring seven years (the trade-off to marrying Rachel) Lavan tricks Yaakov into wedding Rachel's sister Leah instead. Yaakov marries Rachel too, after agreeing to work seven more years.

Leah soon gives birth to six sons: Reuven, Shimon, Levi, Yehudah, Yissachar, and Zevulun, and a daughter, Dina. Rachel waits a long, lonely time for a child of her own, finally giving birth to Yosef. The sisters' handmaids, Bilhah and Zilpah, also have four more sons with Yaakov: They are named Dan, Naftali, Gad, and Asher.

After twenty years, Yaakov is ready to return home. Lavan tries to delay him, but Yaakov leaves secretly with his family and possessions. Lavan pursues him, but Hashem warns Lavan not to harm Yaakov. They make a *brit shalom* on Har Gal-Ed and part ways. As Yaakov continues toward Eretz Yisrael, he is greeted once again by *malachim*.



Parsha Activity

Truth or Trick

Each person takes turns sharing three statements about one of the other players around the table: two that are true and one that is a little tricky or exaggerated.

The rest of the family listens carefully and tries to guess which one is the "trick." Sometimes, even with those closest to you, things are not always what they seem!



Tefillin in the tunnels

When 20-year-old Israeli soldier Matan Angrest was captured by Hamas on October 7th, he was the only survivor from his tank crew. Wounded and taken deep into Gaza, he spent nearly two years in captivity. There was no way to know what was going to happen. These were dark days. Yet even in the darkness, Matan held tightly to his faith.

"I demanded *tefillin*, a *siddur*, and a Tanach," he recalled. "Somehow, they brought them. From that day on, I prayed three times a day: morning, afternoon, and night. It gave me strength. It protected me."

Throughout his ordeal, Matan faced both physical and emotional suffering.

His captors hurt him and tried to break his spirit with lies. But Matan refused to give up. For many months, he was held with other hostages, including Gali Berman and Keith Siegel. Together they prayed, sang, and read the Torah again and again. "Now I know every Torah portion by heart," Matan said.

Later, when he was kept alone in a dark tunnel, he continued to pray and sing. "Even in the deepest tunnels," he said, "the soul can't be taken captive."

Decades earlier, in the USSR where Natan Sharansky was imprisoned, the KGB confiscated his book of Tehillim. It took him three years, and an international campaign, to



get it given back to him. And then he began to read it. He came across this sentence from Tehillim 23, *Gam ki elech b'Gey Tzalmavet* - "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for you are with me." He later said, "I felt as if God were saying those words straight to me in prison." Both Matan and Natan understood what Yaakov first knew. In the depths of despair, God stays close.



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.

"Yaakov grew angry with Rachel, and said, 'Am I in place of God, who has kept you from having children?'"

- Bereishit 30:2

When Rachel cries out to Yaakov in pain, because she so badly wants to be a mother, he answers with anger instead of comfort.

QUESTION: Why is it sometimes hardest to really listen to the people we care about most?

Rabbi Sacks on Bereishit 30:2 (in the Koren Sacks Humash) offers this advice:

"Listen deeply to those you love and who love you. Listening is not easy. I confess I find it formidably hard. But listening alone bridges the abyss between soul and soul, self and other, I and the Divine. Jewish spirituality is the art of listening."

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



Parsha in Practice

Mitzva of the Week

"This stone I set up as a pillar will become a house of God, and all that You give me, I will dedicate a tenth to You."
(Bereishit 28:22)

That is the life-transforming secret of the name of the parsha Terumah - meaning, "a contribution." The best way of encountering God is to give.

The very act of giving flows from, or leads to, the understanding that what we give is part of what we were given. It is a way of giving thanks, an act of gratitude. That is the difference in the human mind between the presence of God and the absence of God.

God doesn't live in a house of stone. He lives in the hearts of those who give. - Rabbi Sacks

Practically Speaking

How will you give?

When Yaakov woke from his dream, he made a vow. This vow became the foundation for *ma'aser*, the mitzva of giving one tenth of our blessings to Hashem through helping others.

Rabbi Sacks teaches that when Yaakov recognises Hashem's presence, he begins to look beyond himself. Prayer and giving both move us from asking "What do I need from life?" to asking "What does life need from me?"

Yaakov's ladder connected heaven and earth. *Ma'aser* keeps that connection alive. When we share what we have, we turn gratitude into action and make holiness real in the world around us.



Try it out

YOUNG STUDENTS: Set aside one coin or small item each week to give to someone in need, or to a tzedakah box at home or at school.

When you give, think about what you are giving, and where it is going. Every act of giving counts!

ADVANCING STUDENTS: Think about what Hashem has given you: time, talent, or resources. Choose one way to give a portion back this week.

Donating regularly has great value. Clothing drives, bake sales, collecting canned goods for shelters, and other more ambitious projects are also amazing ways to step out and make a big difference.

"Where what you want to do meets what needs to be done, that is where God wants you to be." - Rabbi Sacks



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 Lavan's deception on Ya'akov's wedding night

LAYER 1: LOOK AT THE TORAH TEXT: BEREISHIT 29:25

"וַיְהִי בַבֹּקֶר, וְהִנֵּה - הוּא לָאָה; וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל-לָבָן, מֶה-זֹּאת עָשִׂיתָ לִּי - הֲלֹא בָרַחֵל עַבְדָּתִי עִמָּךְ, וְלָמָּה רָמִיתָנִי."

LAYER 2: READ RABBI SACKS' TRANSLATION

Then came morning – and it was *Leah*! Yaakov said to Lavan, “What is this you have done to me? I served you for Rachel, did I not? Why did you deceive me?”

LAYER 3: THINK ABOUT WHAT IT MEANS

Listen carefully to the text. The word Yaakov uses with Lavan, “Why did you deceive me [*rimitan*]?” is the very word Yitzchak used to describe Yaakov's behaviour in taking Eisav's blessing: “Your brother came in deceit [*mirma*]” Yaakov is now on the other side of the same story.

Perhaps the Torah is inviting us to listen closely to the words, see the parallel, and notice how our choices return to us, helping us become more honest and whole over time. Through this painful moment, Yaakov begins to understand what it means to be deceived and what it means to change.

- How can we spot the opportunities for growth and reflection when facing life's challenges?

LAYER 4: LEARN FROM RABBI SACKS' COMMENTARY

There is so much to learn from the *avot*. Everything we read about them comes to teach us both from their times of success, and their mistakes. The story of Yaakov and Lavan is more than a tale of trickery. It is about how we grow through the very experiences we once caused others to face.

Does Lavan know that this, in effect, is what Yaakov once did in another place? The irony may be unintentional. Lavan may not know, but we, the readers, do. And so surely does Yaakov himself.

If these hints are signalling how the passage should be read, then the narrative is an example, unparalleled in its drama, of the single most fundamental moral axiom of the Torah, *midda keneged midda*, measure for measure (Shabbat 105b). Those who deceive will be deceived.

LAYER 5: REFLECT AND RESPOND

1. Do you think there is a difference between Lavan's deception to Yaakov, and Yaakov's deception to his father from (in last week's parsha)? Why, or why not?
2. Why might Hashem have allowed Yaakov to experience the same kind of deception he once caused?
3. Can being treated unfairly ever help a person grow or see life differently? Does one need to experience injustice in order to have a more powerful personal growth story?

- 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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