



Covenant & Conversation

Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

TOLDOT • תולדות

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

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

This year's series of essays were originally written and recorded by Rabbi Sacks זצ"ל in 5773 (2012–2013). These timeless messages are accompanied by a new [Family Edition](#) created to inspire intergenerational learning on the Parsha and Haftara.

Between Prophecy and Oracle

Rebecca, hitherto infertile, became pregnant. Suffering acute pain, "she went to inquire of the Lord" [*vatelech lidrosh et Hashem*] (Bereishit 25:22). The explanation she received was that she was carrying twins who were contending in her womb. They were destined to do so long into the future:

Two nations are inside your womb;
Two peoples are to part from you.
One people will be stronger than the other,
And the older will serve the younger
[*ve-rav ya'avod tsa'ir*].

Bereishit 25:23

Eventually the twins are born – first Esau, then (his hand grasping his brother's heel) Jacob. Mindful of the prophecy she has received, Rebecca favours the younger son, Jacob. Years later, she persuades him to cover himself in Esau's clothes and

take the blessing Isaac intended to give his elder son. One verse of that blessing was "May nations serve you; may nations bow down to you. Be lord over your brothers and may your mother's sons bow down to you." (Bereishit 27:29) The prophecy has been fulfilled. Isaac's blessing can surely mean nothing less than what was disclosed to Rebecca before either child was born, namely that "the older will serve the younger." The story has apparently reached closure, or so, at this stage, it seems.

But biblical narrative is not what it seems. Two events follow which subvert all that we had been led to expect. The first happens when Esau arrives and discovers that Jacob has cheated him out of his blessing. Moved by his anguish, Isaac gives him a benediction, one of whose clauses is:

By your sword you will live,
And your brother you will serve;
But when you break loose,
You will throw off his yoke from your neck.

Bereishit 27:40

This is not what we had anticipated. The older will not serve the younger in perpetuity.

The second scene, many years later, occurs when the brothers meet after a long estrangement. Jacob is terrified of the encounter. He had fled from home years earlier because Esau had vowed to kill him. Only after a long series of preparations and a lonely wrestling match at night is he able to face Esau with some composure. He bows down to him seven times. Seven times he calls him “my lord.” Five times he refers to himself as “your servant.” The roles have been reversed. Esau does not become the servant of Jacob. Instead, Jacob speaks of himself as the servant of Esau.

But this cannot be. The words heard by Rebecca when “she went to inquire of the Lord” suggested precisely the opposite, that “the older will serve the younger.” We are faced with cognitive dissonance.

More precisely, we have here an example of one of the most remarkable of all the Torah’s narrative devices – the power of the future to transform our

understanding of the past. This is the essence of Midrash. New situations retrospectively disclose new meanings in the text.¹ The present is never fully determined by the present. Sometimes it is only later that we understand now. This is the significance of the great revelation of God to Moses in Shemot 33:23, where God says that only His back may be seen – meaning that His Presence can be seen only when we look back at the past; it can never be known or predicted in advance. The indeterminacy of meaning at any given moment is what gives the biblical text its openness to ongoing interpretation.

We now see that this was not an idea invented by the Sages. It already exists in the Torah itself. The words Rebecca heard – as will now become clear – seemed to mean one thing at the time. It later transpires that they meant something else.

The words *ve-rav ya’avod tsair* seem simple: “the older will serve the younger.” Returning to them in the light of subsequent events, though, we discover that they are anything but clear. They contain multiple ambiguities.

The first (noted by Radak and R. Yosef ibn Kaspi) is that the word *et*, signalling the object of the verb, is missing. Normally in biblical Hebrew the subject precedes, and the object follows, the verb, but not always. In Job 14:19 for example, the

¹ Please see, for example the essay ‘*The Midrashic Imagination*’ by Michael Fishbane.

words *avanim shachaku mayim* mean “water wears away stones,” not “stones wear away water.” Thus the phrase might mean “the older shall serve the younger” but it might also mean “the younger shall serve the older”. To be sure, the latter would be poetic Hebrew rather than conventional prose style, but that is what this utterance is: a poem.

The second is that *rav* and *tsa’ir* are not opposites, a fact disguised by the English translation of *rav* as “older.” The opposite of *tsa’ir* (“younger”) is *bechir* (“older” or “firstborn”). *Rav* does not mean “older.” It means “great” or possibly “chief.” This linking together of two terms as if they were polar opposites, which they are not – the opposites would have been *bechir/tsa’ir* or *rav/me’at* – further destabilises the meaning. Who was the *rav*? The elder? The leader? The chief? The more numerous? The word might mean any of these things.

The third – not part of the text but of later tradition – is the musical notation. The normal way of notating these three words would be *mercha-tipcha-sof passuk*. This would support the reading, “the older shall serve the younger.” In fact, however, they are notated *tipcha-mercha-sof passuk* – suggesting, “the older, shall the younger serve”; in other words, “the younger shall serve the older.”

A later episode adds a yet another retrospective element of doubt. There is a

second instance in Genesis of the birth of twins, to Tamar. The passage is clearly reminiscent of the story of Esau and Jacob:

When the time came for her to give birth, there were twins in her womb. As she was in labour one child put out a hand, so the midwife took a crimson thread and tied it to his wrist, saying, “This one came out first.” But he pulled his hand back and then his brother came out. She said, “How you have burst through!” So he was named Peretz. Then his brother came out with the crimson thread on his wrist. He was named Zerah.

Bereishit 38:27-30

Who then was the elder? And what does this imply in the case of Esau and Jacob?² These multiple ambiguities are not accidental but integral to the text. The subtlety is such, that we do not notice them at first. Only later, when the narrative does not turn out as expected, are we forced to go back and notice what at first we missed: that the words Rebecca heard may mean “the older will serve the younger” or “the younger will serve the older.”

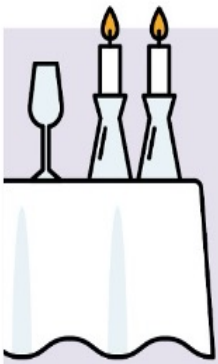
A number of things now become clear. The first is that this is a rare example in the Torah of an oracle as opposed to a prophecy (this is the probable meaning of the word *chiddot* in Bamidbar 12:8,

² See Rashi to Gen. 25:26 who suggests that Jacob was in fact the elder.

speaking about Moses: “With him I speak mouth to mouth, openly and not in *chiddot*” – usually translated as “dark speeches” or “riddles”). Oracles – a familiar form of supernatural communication in the ancient world – were normally obscure and cryptic, unlike the normal form of Israelite prophecy. This may well be the technical meaning of the phrase “she went to inquire of the Lord” which puzzled the medieval commentators.

The second – and this is fundamental to an understanding of Bereishit – is that the future is never as straightforward as we are led to believe. Abraham is promised many children but is 100 years old before Isaac is born. The patriarchs

are promised a land but do not acquire it in their lifetimes. The Jewish journey – though it has a destination – is long and has many digressions and setbacks. Will Jacob serve or be served? We do not know. Only after a long, enigmatic struggle, alone at night, does Jacob receive the name Israel meaning, “he who struggles with God and with men and prevails.” The most important message of this text is both literary and theological. The future affects our understanding of the past. We are part of a story whose last chapter has not yet been written. That rests with us, as it rested with Jacob.



Around the Shabbat Table

1. Divine promises are not guarantees; they are challenges.” What does this message mean to you?
2. “Why do you think struggle is such an important part of faith?
3. Where else in Tanach are the characters tested in their faith and commitment to God? What about in later Jewish history?

● 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 rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation-family-edition/toldot/between-prophecy-and-oracle/