



# Covenant & Conversation



Jonathan Sacks  
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

VAYESHEV · וַיֵּשֶׁב

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

COVENANT & CONVERSATION SUMMARY

## Refusing Comfort, Keeping Hope

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

A new deception takes place. After Yosef was sold into slavery, his brothers dipped his coat in blood. They bring it to their father, saying, “*Try to identify it.*” Yaakov replies, “*It is my son’s robe.*” Yaakov accepts his sons’ story that a wild beast has devoured Yosef. Then, “*Yaakov tore his clothes, put on sackcloth, and mourned his son for a long time. All his sons and daughters tried to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted...*” (Bereishit 37:35)

In Judaism, there are limits to grief. There are actually specific periods of time set out for mourning: *shiva* (the first week), *shloshim* (the first 30 days), a year, but endless mourning is not permitted. Yet Yaakov refused to be comforted. Why?

A Midrash gives a remarkable explanation. “*One can be comforted for one who is dead, but not for one who is still living,*” it says. In other words, **Yaakov refused to be comforted because he had not yet given up hope that Yosef was still alive.**

This, tragically, is the fate of those who have lost members of their family (the parents of soldiers missing in action, for example), but don’t yet have any proof that they are dead. They cannot go through the normal stages of mourning because they cannot abandon the possibility that the missing person might still be rescued. Their continuing anguish is a form of loyalty; to give up, to mourn, to be reconciled to loss is a kind of betrayal. In such cases, grief lacks closure. **To refuse to be comforted is to refuse to give up hope.**

But on what basis did Yaakov continue to hope? Had he not seen the blood-stained coat and said, “*A wild beast has devoured him*”? The answer is, he saw the coat, but not the body of Yosef. He absolves his sons of guilt when he sees the blood on the coat. Yet even as he accepts the legal proof, he does not truly believe it. His heart refuses what

his eyes see. His refusal to be comforted shows that, deep down, he still hopes Yosef has somehow survived. That hope, as we know, was justified: father and son would one day be reunited.

This phrase, “*refusing to be comforted,*” echoes through Jewish history. Centuries later, the prophet Yirmiyahu hears it again:

“*A voice is heard in Ramah, Rachel weeping for her children, refusing to be comforted, because her children are no more... They will return from the land of the enemy. There is hope for your future, says the Lord.*” (Yirmiyahu 31:15–17)

Yirmiyahu’s message is clear: the Jewish people will return to Israel, because they refused to give up hope.

So it was in Bavel, when the exiles cried:

“*By the rivers of Bavel we sat and wept... If I forget you, O Jerusalem, may my right hand forget its skill.*” (Tehillim 137)

It is said that Napoleon once heard Jews mourning for Jerusalem on Tisha B’Av and, learning that they had been mourning for over 1,700 years, said: “A people who can mourn so long for their city will one day have it restored to them.”

Jews are the people who refused to be comforted because they never gave up hope. Yaakov did eventually see Yosef again. Rachel’s children did return to their land. Jerusalem is once again the Jewish home. All the evidence may suggest otherwise; it may seem that loss is final. But Jews never believed the evidence, because they had something stronger - faith, trust, and an unbreakable hope.

**It is not too much to say that Jewish survival was sustained in that hope. And that hope came from a simple – or perhaps not so simple – phrase in the life of Yaakov. He refused to be comforted. And so – while we live in a world still scarred by violence, poverty and injustice – must we.**

## Around the Shabbat Table



1. Have you ever held onto hope for something even when it seemed unlikely?
2. What helped you keep believing?
3. Yaakov’s hope shaped the future of his whole family. Can you think of another time when one person’s hope inspired others?

## Takeaway Thoughts

True hope is not about pretending everything is fine or ignoring facts. But it is having the strength to keep believing that light can return, even when the world insists it cannot.



# Exploring the Parsha

WITH SARA LAMM

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



## The Parsha in a Nutshell

Yaakov settles in Chevron with his family. He has 12 sons, but only one favourite. By the time Yosef, firstborn son of his beloved Rachel, is 17, this favouritism causes great tension in the family. Yosef has been given a special coat. He is also sharing his dreams where there are repeated visions of him rising above his brothers. In one dream, Yosef's sheaf of corn is great than all the other eleven, and in another, the brothers are all stars, and the sun, the moon and stars all bow down to Yosef.

All this deepens the jealousy that his older brothers feel towards him. They plot against Yosef and throw him in a pit. Reuven hopes to save him

later, but before he can do so, Yosef is sold to passing traders and becomes a slave. Then the brothers take Yosef's coat, smear it with animal blood, and try to convince Yaakov that Yosef has been killed in an attack by a wild animal. Yaakov is heartbroken.

The parsha then tells the story of Yehuda, and his eventual marriage to Tamar, leading to the birth of Peretz and Zerach.

Meanwhile, Yosef is taken to Egypt, fated to be a slave. But he rises in power in Potiphar's house. When he resists Potiphar's wife, he is put in jail. He meets two other prisoners, one the former butler of Pharaoh, and he correctly interprets their dreams.



## Parsha Activity

### Turn that Frown Upside-Down!

It's time to play a game that requires you to find the silver lining in every scenario, no matter what. Take turns pitching situations that would normally make someone in the room glum. Then ask that person to smile at the news, and say why it might actually be good news, or what they would hope could change this into a great outcome. For example: Bad news: there's no chocolate left in the country. Good news: We end up inventing a new kind of delicious but healthier snack, made of vegetables, and grow super-strong (and no more cavities!)



## The School Garden

Officially, it was called "The School Garden" but unofficially everyone called it "The Desert", if they mentioned it at all. Because nothing grew there. It was just a small patch of land behind the school, with dry, cracked soil and a couple of thorny bushes in the corner. Year after year, it remained empty and ignored. Nothing flourished, or ever grew out of "The Desert", and most of the students treated it like a joke.

Technically, the Year 6 class always had the privilege of taking care of it, but when Shoshana's class reached Year 6, and were reminded about the garden, they mostly yawned or rolled their eyes. They just didn't see the point in caring about "The

Garden." "Nothing will ever grow in that dirt," they said. But Shoshana wasn't the kind of girl who ignored an opportunity. Now that she was in Year 6, perhaps she could save the earth - or at least one small patch of it, to begin with.

Shoshana chose one small corner and watered it every morning. Kids told her she was wasting her time, but she kept tending that little patch because something in her felt it was worth trying. But nothing changed. The soil was less dry, but it was still empty of greenery. And yet, Shoshana kept tending to it. Planting seeds. Adding fertiliser. Researching how to bring forth a garden.

Then one morning she saw it. A tiny green shoot. By the end of the



term, the garden was blooming, with sunflowers almost as tall as the fence, and bluebells and daisies all over the bright green grass. Everyone admired the flowers and the benches near the garden were now a favourite spot during break-times.

When her teacher asked how she had known it could become such a wonderful garden, Shoshana answered, "I didn't know. I just didn't want to stop believing it could."



# 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.

**"... but he refused to be comforted."**

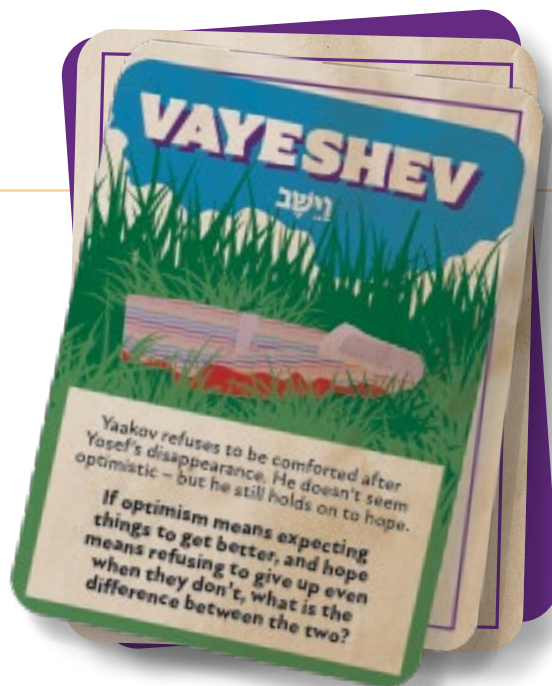
- Bereishit 37:35

Yaakov refuses to be comforted after Yosef's disappearance. He doesn't seem optimistic – but he still holds on to hope.

**QUESTION:** If optimism means expecting things to get better, and hope means refusing to give up even when they don't, what is the difference between the two?

*Rabbi Sacks on Bereishit 37:35 (in the Koren Sacks Humash) offers an answer:*

"Hope is not costless in the way optimism is. It carries with it a considerable price. When the prophets saw evil in the world, they refused to be comforted; those who hope refuse to be comforted while the hoped-for outcome is not yet reached. Theodicy [or 'divine justice'] is a comfort bought too cheaply. Given their history of suffering, Jews were rarely optimists. But they never gave up hope."



## Parsha in Practice

### Value of the Week

The Midrash Rabbah, teaches that although Reuven wanted to rescue Yosef, he hesitated before acting, but he later regretted the delay. (Bereishit 37:29-30)

Reuven worried that his motives were not perfectly pure, so he hesitated before acting. After his earlier mistake with Bilhah, he hoped this act might repair things with his father. But Chassidic teachings remind us that even mixed intentions can still lead to something genuinely good.

### Practically Speaking

How will you seize the day?

Rabbi Sacks teaches that mitzvot are active. They bring God's light into the world through what we do, not through waiting to feel perfect inside.

The message for us is simple: do the good you can, even if you are not sure your intentions are flawless. When we act, even imperfectly, we create an opening for God's light to enter.

"A single life, says the Mishnah, is like a universe. Change a life, and you begin to change the universe. That is how we make a difference: one life at a time, one day at a time, one act at a time." - Rabbi Sacks



## Try it out

### YOUNG STUDENTS:

Choose one small, positive action to do this week without waiting for the perfect moment. Some examples are, helping, sharing or tidying up. Try it even if you are not completely sure you feel ready. Try to notice how doing something kind feels to you.

### ADVANCING STUDENTS:

Consider a moment in the past when you hesitated to do the right thing. This week, be aware of a moment when you feel hesitant to do the right thing. Choose to act anyway, even if your motives feel mixed. Afterwards, think about whether doing the act made a positive difference.





# 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 brothers' reactions to Yosef becoming a slave

### LAYER 1: LOOK AT THE TORAH TEXT: BEREISHIT 37:29-30

"וַיִּקְרַע, אֶת-בְּגָדָיו. וַיָּשָׁב אֶל-אֶחָיו, וַיֹּאמֶר: הִילֵד אֵינְנוּ, וְאֲנִי אָנָּה אֶנִּי-בָּא."

### LAYER 2: READ RABBI SACKS' TRANSLATION

"He tore his clothes, went back to his brothers, and said, 'The boy is gone, and I – where can I turn?'"

### LAYER 3: THINK ABOUT WHAT IT MEANS

In passuk 22 of chapter 37, Reuven convinced his brothers to throw Yosef in a pit, rather than kill him, and we learn he intended to free him later when the brothers weren't there. Now Reuven finds Yosef gone from the pit, sold, and he is shocked and dismayed!

But perhaps there is more to the story. Perhaps the brothers are just as surprised. Here's what Rabbi Sacks says: **Rashbam points out that the brothers do not calm him by telling him they have sold Yosef. They seem as surprised as he is. It follows that the brothers, having seen the Ishmaelites in the distance, decide to sell Yosef to them, but before they have the chance to do so, a second group of travellers, the Midianites, hear Yosef's cries, see the possibility of selling him to the Ishmaelites, and do so.** In other words, the brothers intend to sell Yosef, and Yosef is sold, but not by the brothers. They seek to do the deed, and the deed is done, but not by them.

### LAYER 4: LEARN FROM RABBI SACKS' COMMENTARY

Unusually, but of immense significance, the Torah is telling us something about Divine Providence. Between intention and outcome there was an intervention – the appearance of the Midianites. We are being given a rare glimpse of the workings of providence in history. Nothing in the Yosef story happens by chance – and where an event most looks like chance, that is where Divine Intervention is most evident in retrospect.

### LAYER 5: THINK ABOUT WHAT THIS MEANS

On the one hand, the story of Yosef can be read as pure chance. At the key moment, he might not have found his brothers. He might have wandered around looking for them and then returned home. The traders may not have passed by at the decisive moment, unknowingly averting his death. The entire drama of Yosef's fall and rise might never have happened. On the other hand, Divine Providence is active at every stage.

1. What if Reuven had intervened in time? What if Yosef hadn't been sold? Was it not foretold that Abraham's descendants would become slaves in Egypt? Was there another way?
2. What moment in your life so far felt like it happened out of your control, or by chance, but you now see it all happened for a reason?

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

Explore the digital archive, containing much of Rabbi Sacks' writings, broadcasts, and speeches, or support the Legacy's work, at [www.RabbiSacks.org](https://www.RabbiSacks.org), and follow The Rabbi Sacks Legacy on social media @RabbiSacks.

**With thanks to the Schimmel Family for their generous sponsorship of  
Covenant & Conversation, dedicated in loving memory of Harry (Chaim) Schimmel**