



Covenant & Conversation



Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

VAYIGASH · וַיִּגַּשׁ

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

Choice and Change

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

Yosef is the hero of our story. We begin and end with him. We see him as a child beloved by his father, as an adolescent dreamer resented by his brothers, as a slave and prisoner in Egypt, and finally as a leader of the greatest empire of the ancient world. He dominates the last third of Bereishit, and from almost the beginning he seems destined for greatness.

Yet history did not turn out that way. It is another brother who ultimately leaves his mark on the Jewish people, for we bear his name. Avraham's family was known as *Ivri*, "Hebrew," and later as Yisrael. But after the division of the kingdom and the fall of the North, they became known as *Yehudim* - Jews - because the tribe of Yehuda dominated the surviving kingdom. It was Yehuda who gave his name to the people, and whose descendant was King David, from whom Mashiach will come. Why Yehuda, not Yosef? The answer is found in Vayigash.

When the Yosef story begins, it was Yehuda who proposed selling Yosef into slavery:

"Yehuda said to his brothers, 'What will we gain if we kill our brother and cover his blood? Let's sell him... After all - he is our brother, our own flesh and blood.' His brothers agreed."

At this point, Yehuda is the last person from whom we expect greatness. He is callous, he talks of not murdering Yosef only in terms of loss and gain, not caring about right and wrong, and he is calculating about selling his brother.

However, Yehuda - more than anyone else in the Torah - changes. The man we meet many years later is not what he was then. Yes, he was willing to sell his brother as a slave, but now in Vayigash, he is prepared to suffer that fate himself rather than see Binyamin enslaved. As he says to Yosef: *"My lord, let me remain in place of the boy as your slave... How can I return to my father without the boy?"*

This is a precise reversal of character. Where he was once indifferent, he is now accepting responsibility. He is willing to suffer what he once inflicted. Yehuda has passed the test Yosef designed to see whether he has changed.

This becomes a decisive moment in the history of the human spirit. Yehuda is the first penitent, the first *baal teshuvah*, in the Torah. Where did this change come from? For that we must return to chapter 38 - the story of Tamar.

Tamar had married Yehuda's two elder sons, both of whom died. Fearing for his third son, Yehuda withheld him, leaving her unable to remarry. Tamar disguised herself as a prostitute; Yehuda slept with her, and she became pregnant. When Yehuda, unaware of the disguise, ordered her to be put to death, Tamar sent him his seal, cord, and staff, saying that the father of her child was the man to whom these belonged. Yehuda now understands everything. Tamar has acted with extraordinary discretion, revealing the truth without shaming him. He admits he was wrong: *"She was more righteous than I."* This is the first time in the Torah someone acknowledges their guilt and it is the turning point of Yehuda's life. Here is born the phenomenon of *teshuvah* - that later enables Yehuda, in Vayigash, to reverse his earlier behaviour completely. Yehuda is *ish teshuvah*, the penitent man. Now we see the meaning of his name. *Lehodot* means "to thank" but also "to admit." Yehuda means "he who acknowledged his sin." Yosef is known as *HaTzaddik*, "the righteous." But Yehuda became the father of Israel's kings. Greater than natural virtue is the capacity for change.

However great an individual may be in virtue of their natural character, greater still is one who is capable of growth and change. That is the power of penitence, and it began with Yehuda.

Around the Shabbat Table



1. What do you think caused Yehuda to change?
2. Can you think of other biblical characters who underwent significant transformations? What made their change possible?
3. Do you agree with Rabbi Sacks that someone who changes is greater than someone who was always righteous?

Takeaway Thoughts

Yehuda's transformation from callous brother to selfless protector made him worthy of kingship. The power to admit our mistakes and grow from them matters far more than being perfect.



Exploring the Parsha

WITH SARA LAMM

BASED ON THE TEACHINGS OF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS 7" ז ת



The Parsha in a Nutshell

Last week's parsha, Mikketz, ended at a moment of great tension. Yosef had planted a cup in Binyamin's sack and then accused him of theft. This week's parsha picks up right where we left off. And Yehuda does something extraordinary. He steps forward.

Yehuda begs Yosef for Binyamin's freedom, volunteering to become a prisoner in his place. Witnessing this selfless act, Yosef reveals who he truly is. "I am Yosef," he announces.

The brothers feel overwhelming shame and regret, but Yosef reassures them. "It was not you who brought me here," he explains. "Hashem sent me ahead of you to save lives... Hurry back to my father and tell him!"

The brothers return to Canaan with the revelation. Yaakov travels to Egypt with his sons and their families, seventy souls altogether, reuniting with his cherished son after twenty-two years. During his journey he receives the Divine assurance: "Fear not to descend to Egypt; for I will there make of you a great nation. I will go down with you into Egypt, and I will also surely bring you up again."

Yosef accumulates Egypt's wealth by distributing food and grain during the long famine. Pharaoh grants Yaakov's family the rich land of Goshen to inhabit, and the children of Israel flourish in their new Egyptian home.



Parsha Activity

Then and Now

Go around the table. Each person shares something they used to believe, do, or think when younger that they've changed their mind about now.

Your revelation can be silly or serious, e.g. believing in the Tooth Fairy, misunderstanding a mitzva, confusing the definition of a word, or finding a new and improved way of doing something!

This is a light-hearted way to emphasise the point that we are all capable of change and growth.



Growth of a Gangster

Pryce was 22 when he was sent to prison for armed robbery. He had become a gang member at the age of 13, carrying guns, selling drugs, searching desperately for somewhere to belong. In Orange County, he felt like an outcast. His mother was Sri Lankan and his father was Jamaican, he'd never quite fit in anywhere. The gang life gave him what he craved: identity, power, respect, fear, comrades. But then he was sent to Pelican Bay State Prison for 24 long years.

It was a maximum-security prison where days stretched endlessly. A rabbi came to visit during lockdown. When offered the only chair in the room, he sat on the floor with the prisoners instead. That simple gesture

caught Pryce's attention. But the rabbi never returned.

Then Pryce met a second visiting rabbi. He found himself drawn to Judaism, and wanted to learn more from him. For six years, they studied together. His fellow inmates mocked him. They said the Jews would never accept him. They even hurt him. But Pryce kept on studying. He understood that in Judaism, there is no sense that only Jews can be good. He was finally seeing a way that he himself could also change.

After 16 years in prison, Pryce was released. He converted to Orthodox Judaism, married Ariella, and now lives in Los Angeles with their four children. His parents had never encountered Orthodox Jewish



life before, but they supported his decision to convert. "They saw me as a fully committed gangster and criminal, and now they see me living this wholesome life. They're super appreciative of Judaism and supportive of me."

He took on a new name too. Pryce became Yehudah Pryce. The man who once controlled life and death with a gun now works as a clinical social worker and davens three times daily, building his life around something greater than himself.



Cards & Conversation

“He kissed all his brothers and wept over them. Only after that could his brothers speak to him.”
- Bereishit 45:15

Yosef has finally revealed his identity to the brothers who once betrayed him. Not only that. He has embraced them.

QUESTIONS: Have you ever been hurt in the past?

How can we honour painful memories and still find a way to move forward?

Rabbi Sacks on Bereishit 45:15 (in the Koren Sacks Humash) offers an answer:

“We cannot change the past. But by changing the way we think about the past, we can change the future. Whatever situation we are in, by reframing it we can change our entire response, giving us the strength to survive, the courage to persist, and the resilience to emerge, on the far side of darkness, into the light of a new and better day.”

Cards & Conversation: Chumash Edition is a new resource. On one side of every parsha card, you'll find an interesting question to think about and discuss, based on the Torah portion. Flip it over, and you'll discover an idea from Rabbi Sacks that shines a new light on the parsha.

We are pleased to offer a weekly sample of these cards here, and you can also download the full set, request a pack of your own, and find out more by visiting rabbisacks.org/cards-and-conversation ☑



Parsha in Practice

Value of the Week

Moving Forward

(Bereishit 45:24)

When the brothers headed back to Canaan, Yosef told them: “*Al tirgezu baderech*” - don’t become agitated on the way. He knew they would feel guilty, or even be tempted to argue about whose fault it was that he had been sold into slavery. Yosef’s message is essential for us all: when trying to move forward together, focusing on blame will only slow you down. The past cannot be changed, and the future depends on whether you choose anger or progress.

“Dear God, I blame no one but myself. Forgive me. Accept my broken heart. And then give me the strength

to change.” - Rabbi Sacks on the penitential culture

Practically Speaking

How will you grow?

We often replay conflicts in our minds, assigning fault and rehearsing arguments. This happens in families, friendships, and even internally. But like Yosef’s brothers, we have a choice: we can spend our energy debating who was wrong, or we can focus on where we need to go. Blame keeps everyone stuck. Moving forward doesn’t mean pretending nothing happened. But sometimes the best thing we can do is let the argument go, not because it doesn’t matter, but because the relationship matters more.



Try it out

YOUNG STUDENTS:

Think of a time when you and a sibling or friend disagreed about something. Instead of continuing to argue about who started it, try saying: “Let’s forgive each other and move on together.” Notice how it feels to choose peace over being right.

ADVANCING STUDENTS:

Identify a recurring argument in your family or friend group. What would it look like to acknowledge everyone’s feelings without assigning blame? Try shifting one conversation from “whose fault is this?” to “how do we move forward from here, together?”



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.

Yosef tells his brothers that their past mistakes served a Divine purpose



LAYER 1: LOOK AT THE TORAH TEXT: BEREISHIT 45:5

"וְעַתָּה אַל-תֵּעָצֵבוּ, וְאַל-יִחַר בְּעֵינֵיכֶם, כִּי-מָכַרְתֶּם אֹתִי, הִנֵּה: כִּי לְמַחְיָה, שְׁלַחְנִי אֵלֵיכֶם לִפְנֵיכֶם."

LAYER 2: READ RABBI SACKS' TRANSLATION

"And now, do not be distressed or angry with yourselves that you sold me here, for God sent me ahead of you to save lives."

LAYER 3: THINK ABOUT WHAT IT MEANS

Take a moment to think about how unexpected this moment is, to the brothers, and even to us when we read it for the first time. Yosef has been thrown in a pit by his brothers, and almost killed. Then he was sold into slavery, which led to imprisonment. It would be perfectly normal for him to now confront them for how they treated him. Instead he tells them it was not they who sent him to Egypt, but Hashem. He reframes his entire story. Why does he choose to see his past this way? Perhaps it frees him from anger. Perhaps it allows reconciliation. Or perhaps he understands something profound: we cannot change what happened, but we can change what it means. So we must ask ourselves: how might reframing our own difficulties transform not just our past, but our future?

LAYER 4: LEARN FROM RABBI SACKS' COMMENTARY

Yosef has reframed his entire past. He no longer sees himself as a man wronged by his brothers. He has come to see [that all] that has happened to him was necessary so that he could achieve his purpose in life: to save an entire region from starvation during a famine, and to provide a safe haven for his family.

This single act of reframing allows Yosef to live without a burning sense of anger and injustice. It transforms the negative energies of feelings about the past into focused attention on the future. It enables him to be reconciled with his brothers. Yosef, without knowing it, has become the precursor of one of the great movements in psychotherapy in the modern world. He has shown the power of reframing.

We cannot change the past. But by changing the way we think about the past, we can change the future. Whatever situation we are in, by reframing it we can change our entire response, giving us the strength to survive, the courage to persist, and the resilience to emerge, on the far side of darkness, into the light of a new and better day.

LAYER 5: REFLECT AND RESPOND

1. If Yosef had held onto his anger at his brothers, how might the story have ended?
2. How do you understand reframing? Does it mean ignoring the pain you suffered? Does it help you to forgive?
3. How does the way we tell our own stories affect the choices we make going forward?

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

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