



# Covenant & Conversation

VAYECHI · י'נ'ח

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

FAMILY  
EDITION

Jonathan Sacks  
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

## Generations Forget and Remember

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

Throughout Bereishit we have read of the drama of younger and older brothers. It now reaches a strange climax. As Yaakov is nearing the end of his life, Yosef brings his two sons, Menashe and Ephraim, to visit him at his bedside. It is the only scene of grandfather and grandchildren in the book. Yaakov asks Yosef to bring them close so that he can bless them. Yosef carefully places Menashe at Yaakov's right hand, and Ephraim at his left. But Yaakov crosses his arms and puts his right hand on Ephraim's head, even though he is younger. Yosef tries to move his father's hand over, pointing out that Menashe is the firstborn. But Yaakov holds firm, saying that although Menashe will become great, "his younger brother will be greater than he." **So when he blesses them, he puts Ephraim ahead of Menashe.**

It is not difficult to understand Yosef's concern. Every time Yaakov ever set the younger before the elder in the past, it resulted in tragedy. He tried to take Eisav's blessing. He favoured Rachel over her older sister Leah. And he favoured the youngest of his children, Yosef and Binyamin, over the elder brothers. The consequences were catastrophic: estrangement from Eisav, tension between the sisters, and hostility among the brothers. Yosef himself bore the scars. **Had Yaakov not learned?** Why repeat the pattern – especially when he had never met these two grandsons before? What possible reason could justify favouring the younger over the elder?

Yaakov, however, knew two things. **First, he knew that their time in Egypt would not be short.** Before leaving home, God had told him: "Do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for I will make you into a great nation there. I will go down to Egypt with you, and I will surely bring you back again." This was the beginning of the long exile God

had told Avraham about long ago.

**The second thing Yaakov knew was the names of Yosef's children.** When Yosef rose to greatness in Egypt, he married and had two sons. The Torah notes that Yosef named his firstborn Menashe, "because God has made me forget all my trouble and all my father's household." He chose the name Ephraim for his second son, "because God has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction."

This reveals Yosef's inner experience of exile. At first he felt relief. The years of slavery and imprisonment were over. He had risen to power. No one reminded him of his background. Menashe meant "forgetting." But over time, Yosef's feelings changed. Yes, he had arrived, but this people was not his; nor was its culture. His family were shepherds, but they had been spoken to by God, Creator of heaven and earth. By the time Ephraim was born, Yosef had undergone a profound change of heart. He had success, but he was still in Egypt, in exile.

Hansen's Law states: "*The second generation seeks to remember what the first generation sought to forget.*" Yosef went through this transformation quickly. By naming Ephraim, he was remembering what earlier, when Menashe was born, he had tried to forget: who he was, where he came from, where he belonged.

Yaakov's blessing had nothing to do with age and everything to do with their names. Knowing these were the first children born in exile, he signalled to all future generations the tension between the desire to forget and the promptings of memory. **The child of forgetting (Menashe) may have blessings. But greater are the blessings of a child (Ephraim) who remembers the past and future of which he is a part.**

## Around the Shabbat Table



- What are some ways people today might "forget" where they come from without meaning to?
- What traditions or stories help you remember what matters most in your family?
- How do you think the stories in Bereishit prepare the Jewish people for future generations?

## Takeaway Thoughts

Prosperity alone cannot sustain a people. Memory matters more than comfort. Remembering who we are and where we are going keeps faith and identity alive.



# Exploring the Parsha

WITH SARA LAMM

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



## The Parsha in a Nutshell

As his life draws to a close, Yaakov begins to think about his death, his family's future, and his legacy. He asks Yosef to promise that no matter what, he will make sure he is buried in the Land of Israel. He also blesses Yosef's sons, Menashe and Ephraim, raising them to the status of tribes within Israel.

Yaakov longs to reveal the future to his family, but he finds his *ruach hakodesh* has gone, and he is unable to do so. Instead, he blesses each of his sons in detail, defining their future roles. Leadership will emerge from Yehuda, priesthood from Levi,

learning from Yissachar, commerce from Zevulun, and strength from others, each according to his nature and abilities.

After Yaakov's death, Yosef fulfils his promise to his father. A great Egyptian procession accompanies Yaakov to his burial in Me'arat HaMachpelah in Chevron.

Yosef later dies in Egypt, requesting that his bones one day be carried home too. Before his passing, he leaves the nation with hope: God will surely remember them and bring them back to the land promised to their ancestors.



## Parsha Activity

### If I Were There

Choose a moment from the Torah. One person retells a story in the first person, beginning with: "If I were there, I would remember..."

Describe the scene using real details. What did you do, see, hear, smell, or feel? What emotions were present? Others can then choose to add details from the same moment, or choose a new Torah scene to 'remember'.



## Sipurei Savta

During the long months of the coronavirus lockdown, a *shul* in Ashkelon found a creative way to connect generations. Home to TALI kindergartens for over thirty years, it launched a weekly online programme for its young members called *Sipurei Savta*, Grandma's Stories.

The programme was created to keep community life alive when in-person learning was impossible. Each week, a different grandma joined the children online to read a short story, often one she chose together with her grandchild. Some used costumes, props, puppets, or sound effects, while others simply told their stories. Many of the grandmas had never used Zoom before, but they were given guidance and practice until they felt confident.

For the children, the sessions quickly became a highlight of the week. They eagerly waited to see whose grandmother would appear on screen and what story they would hear. For the grandmas, especially those experiencing quarantine alone, the programme offered connection, creativity, and joy.

The gatherings opened with greetings, a short *tefillah*, and a song, and ended with loud applause and one child proudly announcing, "Zot ha'savta sheli!" - That's my Grandma!

The programme was so successful that it continued even after the kindergarten reopened in person. And it continued to grow, later expanding to include *Sipurei Saba*, Grandpa's Stories, too.





# Cards & Conversation

**"May God make you like Ephraim and Menashe." He put Ephraim before Menashe...**

- Bereishit 48:20

In the dramatic stories in Bereishit, younger siblings are chosen over older ones, rivalries reshape families, and God sometimes seems to rewrite the script.

**QUESTION:** How much power do we really have to shape our own future, and how much is already decided for us?

*Rabbi Sacks on Bereishit 48:20 (in the Koren Sacks Humash) offers an answer:*

**"Do not believe that the future is written. There is no fate we cannot change, no prediction we cannot defy. We are not predestined to fail; neither are we preordained to succeed. We do not predict the future, because we make the future: by our choices, our willpower, our persistence, and our determination to survive."**

*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](http://rabbisacks.org/cards-and-conversation) □



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## Parsha in Practice

### Value of the Week

#### Blessings

(Bereishit 48:20)

When Yaakov blesses his grandchildren, he creates a lasting tradition. This is the *bracha* Jewish parents give their children every Friday night, all around the world.

As Rabbi Sacks explains, "When a grandparent blesses a grandchild they do so with a full heart. That is why this blessing by Yaakov... became the model of blessing across the generations..."

*To bless grandchildren and be blessed by them, to teach them and to be taught by them – these are the highest Jewish privilege, and the serene end of Yaakov's life."*

### Practically Speaking

#### How will you bless others?

A *bracha* does not need to fix a problem. It can simply let someone know they are loved and supported.

Try practising this in small ways. Offer encouragement without adding a suggestion. Praise others without comparing. Listen without jumping in to improve the moment. These small shifts create space where others can breathe, trust, and grow. Yaakov's blessings to Ephraim and Menashe remind us that people flourish when they feel safe rather than judged.

Creating that kind of space in our homes and communities may be one of the most meaningful forms of blessing we can give.



### Try it out

#### YOUNG STUDENTS:

Think about someone older who makes you feel safe and accepted. What do they do that shows love without pressure? Try telling them something you appreciate about them this week.

#### ADVANCING STUDENTS:

Relationships are not always as easy as Yaakov's relationship with his grandchildren. Choose one relationship where guidance usually comes with expectations. This week, offer encouragement without advice. Notice how it changes the tone of the relationship and how it feels to give support without control.



# 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.



**Yaakov summons his children, wishing to bless them before he dies. The text begins with a strange semi repetition...**

## LAYER 1: LOOK AT THE TORAH TEXT: BEREISHIT 49:1-2

וַיֹּאמֶר יַעֲקֹב אֶל-בָּנָיו, וַיֹּאמֶר, הָאָסֹפוּ אֶת-נִדְחָה לְכֶם, אֶת אָשֶׁר-יָקְרָא אֲתֶכֶם, בַּאֲחֶרֶת הַיּוֹם. הַקְבִּצוּ, וְשִׁמְעוּ, בְּנִי. עַקְבָּב; וְשִׁמְעוּ, אֶל-יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲבִיכֶם.

## LAYER 2: READ RABBI SACKS' TRANSLATION

'Then Yaakov called for his sons and said, "Gather together so that I can tell you what will happen to you in the days to come. Assemble and listen, Yaakov's sons. Listen to Israel, your father."

## LAYER 3: THINK ABOUT WHAT IT MEANS

By the end of Bereishit, Yosef appears to have everything: power, influence, and honour in Egypt. But now the Torah ever so gently shifts our focus. When the story turns to Shemot, we will see that all that power offers little protection to the people of Israel. What endures instead is family.

In these two passukim, Yaakov gathers all his sons together, blesses each one, and shows that even fractured relationships can still hold space for blessing and forgiveness. Genesis is not a book about gaining power, but about living with others despite disappointment, rivalry, and harm. They have forgiven each other and reconciled. Only when a family learns to stay together can it truly become a people. But why the repetition?

## LAYER 4: LEARN FROM RABBI SACKS' COMMENTARY

"Gather together so that I can tell you what will happen to you... Assemble and listen.... Listen to your father Yisrael."

The two verses seem to be saying the same thing twice, with one difference. In the first, there is a reference to "what will happen to you in the days to come" (literally, "at the end of days"). This is missing from the second. Rashi, following the Talmud, says that "Yaakov wished to reveal what would happen in the end, but the Divine Presence was removed from him" (Rashi on Bereishit 49:1; Pesachim 56a; Bereishit Rabbah 99:5). He tried to foresee the future but found he could not. Genesis is not about power...

When Yaakov wants to tell his children what will happen to them in the future, the Divine Spirit is taken away from him. Our children continue to surprise us, as we continue to surprise others. Made in the image of God, we are free. Sustained by the blessings of God, we can become greater than anyone, even ourselves, could foresee.

## LAYER 5: REFLECT AND RESPOND

1. What does it take to stay connected as a family when relationships are strained?
2. What helps a person choose forgiveness over holding on to hurt?
3. What responsibility do we have to each other simply because we belong to the same family?

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

*Jonathan Sacks*  
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

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