Covenant & Conversation

FROM THE TEACHINGS OF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

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Vayetse

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Leah's Tears

We sometimes forget that the phrase Keriat Ha-Torah does not simply mean "reading the Torah." In Biblical Hebrew the verb *likro* means not "to read" but "to call". The phrase *mikra'ei kodesh*, the "festivals", "Jewish holidays", or "*chaggim*" literally means "holy convocations," days on which the people were called or summoned together. Every seven years – in the command known as *hakhel* – the king was commanded to "read aloud [*tikra*] this Torah before them in their hearing [*be-aznehem*]." In the historic gathering of those who had returned from Babylon, Ezra "read [the Torah] aloud [*vayikra*] from daybreak till noon, in the presence of the men, women and others who could understand, and all the people listened attentively [literally, the ears of all the people were directed] to the book of the Torah."

Keriat Ha-Torah therefore means not reading but *proclaiming* the Torah, reading it aloud. The one who reads it has the written word in front of him, but for the rest of the gathering it is an experience not of the eye but of the ear. The Divine word is something heard rather than seen. Only with the spread of manuscripts, and then (in the fifteenth century) the invention of printing, did reading become a visual rather than auditory experience. To this day the primary experience of Keriat Ha-Torah involves listening to the reader declaim the words from the Torah scroll, rather than following them in a printed text. We miss some of the most subtle effects of Torah if we think of it as the word seen rather than the word heard.

There are many differences between sound and sight, and one has to do with time. We can see - but not hear - a sentence at a single glance. Listening, more than seeing, is a process extended through time. Halfway through a sentence, we can guess what will come next, but we cannot be sure until we actually hear the words. That is why, for example, jokes are more powerful when heard rather than read. Crucial to a joke is the element of surprise. If we can guess the punchline, the joke is simply not that good. Listening, we are kept in suspense. Reading, we can go directly to the final sentence.

To give one biblical example: when Joseph is in prison, Pharaoh's butler and baker both have dreams. The butler tells Joseph what he saw, and Joseph gives it a favourable interpretation. "Within three days Pharaoh will lift up your head and restore you to your position." Emboldened by the good news, the baker tells Joseph his own dream. Joseph's interpretation begins with the same words, "Within three days Pharaoh will lift up your head," but he then adds, "from the rest of you [*me'alecha*]; he will hang you on a tree." This is humour at its blackest. The reason for its presence in the Joseph story does not concern us here, but the point is this: the Torah is written to be read aloud, and several of its literary devices depend on this fact, one above all, namely the power of the next word to confound our expectations, based on what we have heard thus far. Sometimes the outcome is humorous, at others the opposite, but in either case the device allows us to sit up and pay attention.

One of the most striking examples occurs in this week's sedra. Jacob, in flight from Esau's anger, has travelled to the house of Laban. Upon arrival he meets Laban's younger daughter Rachel and falls in love with her. Laban proposes a deal: work for me for seven years and I will give her to you in marriage. Jacob does so, but on the wedding night Laban substitutes Leah for Rachel. The next morning, when Jacob discovers the deception, he protests, "Why did you deceive me?" Laban pointedly replies, "It is not the done thing in our place to give the younger before the elder" (a reference, intended or otherwise, to Jacob's deception of Isaac, a case of the younger taking the blessing of the elder, Esau). Laban agrees, however, that in return for a further seven years' labour, Jacob may marry Rachel. He will not have to wait until the seven years are complete, but he must, however, wait for seven days until Leah's wedding celebration is complete (an early example of a custom we still keep: the week of *sheva brachot*). The seven days pass. Jacob marries Rachel. We then read the following:

> He also [*gam*] married Rachel, and he also [*gam*] loved Rachel . . .
>
> Bereishit 29:30

The implication at this point is clear. The repeated word *gam*, "also," leads us to believe that the two sisters are equal in Jacob's eyes. The story of the deception has – or so we must suppose on the basis of what we have so far heard – a happy ending after all. Jacob has married both. He loves them both. The sibling rivalry that is so pronounced a theme of Bereishit (Cain and Abel, Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau) seems to be reaching a positive resolution. It is possible to love two siblings equally. The next word sends our expectation crashing to the ground:

> . . . more than Leah
>
> Bereishit 29:30

This is an ungrammatical construction. The words "also" and "more than" do not belong together in the same sentence. Either one loves X and also Y, or one loves X more than Y, but not both. The effect – like a sudden discord in the middle of a Mozart symphony – is strident and shocking. Jacob does not love the two sisters equally. He may love them both, but his passion is for Rachel. The next verse contains an even sharper discord:

> God saw that Leah was hated [*senuah*]. . .

This is a phrase that cannot be understood literally. The previous verse has just said that Leah was not hated but loved. The commentators and translators wrestled with this difficulty. Ramban (on his second interpretation) and Radak read the word *senuah* not as "hated" but as "[relatively] unloved." Yet though the text is semantically strange, is it psychologically lucid. Leah knew that Jacob's heart was elsewhere. She may have been loved but she felt the lesser love as a rejection. The words "God saw" mean that God felt her sense of humiliation. Laban's deception had human consequences, and they were tragic. Leah weeps inwardly for the husband she acquired through her father's wiles, whose love is for someone else.

Only now, perhaps, do we understand the significance of the Torah's first mention of Leah:

> Laban had two daughters; The elder was called Leah and the younger was called Rachel. Leah had weak (*rakot*) eyes, but Rachel was beautiful and lovely.
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> -17

The word *rakot* could mean many things: beautiful (Targum, Rashbam), weak (Ibn Ezra), or sensitive (Netziv suggests that Leah was unable to go out with the flocks because the bright sunlight hurt her eyes). The ambiguity is deliberate. Only rarely and sparingly does the Torah give us physical descriptions of its characters, and always for a reason that will eventually be disclosed (so, for example, we hear in 2 Samuel 14 about Absolom's hair; four chapters later we discover why: it became caught in a tree, which led to his death).

The meaning of the phrase "Leah's eyes were *rakot*" is (as Rashi, Radak and various midrashic traditions explain) "Leah was easily moved to tears." She was emotionally vulnerable. She had none of the resilience that might have carried her through her husband's attachment to her younger sister. She was thin-skinned, sensitive, attuned to nuance, easily hurt. She knew she was Jacob's lesser love, and it caused her pain.

The subtlety with which all this is conveyed is remarkable. The Torah has sketched Leah's portrait in a few deft strokes, each of which we will only hear if we are listening carefully. Nor has this been done for the sake of description. Rather, it has set the scene for the drama that is about to unfold – and once again we find it done with the utmost brevity

and delicacy. In fact, unless we are paying the closest attention we will not notice it at all.

What follows next is, on the face of it, a simple account of the birth of four children. Beneath the surface, however, these verses are as eloquent as any in the entire Torah:

> When God saw that Leah was unloved, He opened her womb, but Rachel remained barren. Leah became pregnant and had a son. She named him Reuben, saying: "The Lord has seen (*ra'ah*) my affliction. Now my husband will love me." She became pregnant again and had a son. She said, "The Lord has heard (*shama*) that I am unloved, so He has given me this son also," and she named him Shimon. She became pregnant again and had a son and said, "Now that I have borne him three sons, my husband will become attached (*lavah*) to me." Therefore he named the child Levi. She became pregnant again and had a son. She said, "This time I will praise (*odeh*) the Lord," so she named him Judah (Yehudah). She then ceased having children.
>
> Gen. 29:31-35

Read superficially, these verses are no more than a genealogy, a list of births, of the kind of which there are many in Bereishit. As soon as our ear is attuned to Leah's plight, however, we listen more carefully, and what we hear is heartbreaking.

Leah is pleading for attention. Each of the names of her first three children is a cry to her husband Jacob – to see, to listen, to be attached, to notice her, to love. Significantly, it is she, not Jacob, who names three of the children. (The exception is Levi. The commentators who emphasise the plain sense of the text - Rashbam and Radak - assume that Jacob is the "he" who names Levi. Rashi, whose commentary goes deeper, says, on the basis of Midrashic tradition, that it was an angel. Rashi has understood that a key fact about the four births is the absence of Jacob.)

Sadly, the lack of relationship between Jacob and Leah at the birth of her children is carried through in the years to come. Jacob's relationship with Reuben, Shimon, and Levi breaks down completely (with Reuben after the episode of Bilhah's couch, with Shimon and Levi after the incident with Shechem). On his deathbed he curses them instead of blessing them. Yet it is from Levi that Israel's spiritual leaders will eventually come (Moses, Aaron, Miriam, and eventually the *kohanim* and *levi'im*), and from Judah will come its kings (David and his descendants).

It is not only Leah's cry that Jacob does not hear. He fails equally to respond to Rachel's distress when she sees her sister having children while she has none:

> Aware that she had borne Jacob no children, Rachel became jealous of her sister. To Jacob she said, "Give me children! If not, let me die!" Jacob grew angry with Rachel, and said, "Am I in place of God, who has kept you from having children?"
>
> Gen. 30:1-2

The Sages noticed a parallel between Jacob's words here and Joseph's at the end of Bereishit when the brothers fear that once their father is dead, Joseph will take revenge. Joseph comforts them, saying, "Do not be afraid. Am I in the place of God?" Joseph uses the same words his father had said before he was born, but to opposite effect: to bring comfort. Using this contrast to maximal effect, the Sages said about Jacob's reply to Rachel:

> Said the Holy One, blessed be He [to Jacob]: "Is that the way to answer a woman in distress? By your life, your children will one day stand before her son [Joseph, who will answer them, Am I in the place of God?]."

What is going on in this intense and sometimes tragic drama between Leah and Jacob? Jacob is unlike the other patriarchs. If the word that comes to mind in relation to Abraham is *chessed*, kindness, and to Isaac *pachad*, fear, the idea that characterises Jacob is struggle.

Already in the womb he struggles with his brother. He competes with him for the birthright and the blessing. The defining scene in his life is his wrestling match at night with an unnamed adversary. Both his names – Jacob, "he who grasps by the heel," and Israel, "he who struggles with God and man and prevails" – convey a sense of conflict.

While Abraham and Isaac represent modes of being, Jacob stands for becoming. The gifts he has, he has fought for. None has come naturally. Jacob is the supreme figure of persistence. He is the man who said to the angel, "I will not let you go until you bless me." More than Abraham and Isaac, Jacob is the person who wrestles with life and refuses to let go.

The Torah describes him as an *ish tam*, sometimes translated as "a simple man", but better understood

(according to R. Samson Raphael Hirsch) as "a single-minded man". The prophet Micah associated him with truth – "You give truth to Jacob, kindness to Abraham." Jacob's life embodies the fact that truth must be fought for with single-minded determination. It rarely comes without a struggle and the pain of experience. What is the truth at stake in Jacob's life?

There are many, but one is a truth about love. One of the most striking facts about the Jacob narrative is the frequency with which the word "love" appears. It figures once in the story of Abraham (Gen. 22:2), twice in the life of Isaac (Gen. 24:67, Gen. 25:28, though there are also three references to Isaac's love of a particular kind of food: Gen. 27:4, Gen. 27:9, Gen. 27:14), but seven times in the case of Jacob (Gen. 29:18, Gen. 29:20, Gen. 29:30, Gen. 32:20; Gen. 37:3, Gen. 37:4; Gen. 44:20-22). Jacob loves more than any other figure in Bereishit.

But through painful experience, Jacob must learn a truth about love. There are times when love not only unites but also divides. It did so in his childhood, when Isaac loved Esau and Rebecca loved Jacob. It did so again when he married two sisters. It did so a third time when he loved Rachel's child Joseph more than his other sons. What Jacob learned – and what we learn, reading his story – is that love is not enough. We must also heed those who feel unloved. Without that, there will be conflict and tragedy. That requires a specific capacity – the ability to listen, in Jacob's case, to the unspoken tears of Leah and her feeling of rejection, made explicit in the names she gave her sons.

I began by pointing out that the Torah was a text intended to be read aloud and listened to. It is the single greatest expression of faith in a God we cannot see, but only hear. Judaism is supremely a religion of the ear, unlike all other ancient civilisations, which were cultures of the eye. This is more than a metaphysical fact. It is a moral one as well. In Judaism the highest spiritual gift is the ability to listen – not

only to the voice of God, but also to the cry of other people, the sigh of the poor, the weak, the lonely, the neglected and, yes, sometimes the un- or less-loved. That is one of the meanings of the great command *Shema Yisrael*, "Listen, O Israel." Jacob's other name, we recall, was Israel.

Jacob wrestles with this throughout his life. It is not that he has a moral failing. To the contrary, he is the most tenacious of all the patriarchs – and the only one whose children all become part of the covenant. It is rather that every virtue has a corresponding danger. Those who are courageous are often unaware of the fears of ordinary people. Those of penetrating intellect are often dismissive of lesser minds. Those who, like Jacob, have an unusual capacity to love must fight against the danger of failing to honour the feelings of those they do not love with equal passion. The antidote is the ability to listen. That is what Jacob learns in the course of his life – and why he, above all, is the role-model for the Jewish people – the nation commanded to listen.

How beautiful it is that this message – one of the deepest and most subtle in the Torah – is conveyed in a series of passages whose meaning does not lie on the surface of the text but discloses itself only to those who listen to what is going on beneath the words: the unspoken cry, the implicit appeal, the unheard tears, the unarticulated pain. Those who wish to learn to listen to God must learn to listen to other people – to the *kol demamah dakah*, "the still, small voice" of those who need our love.

Around the Shabbat Table



- Rabbi Sacks argues that listening is Judaism's highest spiritual gift. What does it mean truly to listen to someone, beyond simply hearing their words?
- Jacob responds to Rachel's distress with harsh words, while Joseph later uses his father's words to comfort his brothers. What does this contrast teach us?
- Through Jacob's life, we see that love is not enough unless we notice those who feel unloved. How can we recognise and respond to feelings that others struggle to express?



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FAMILY EDITION

INSPIRED BY THE TEACHINGS OF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

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Vayetse: The Ten Percent

DEVELOPED BY SHOSH HILL

parsha recap

Yaakov begins the long journey towards his mother's family in Charan. Along the way, he stops to rest, and dreams of a ladder with angels going up and down. God appears to Yaakov, repeats the blessings already given to Avraham and Yitzchak, and promises to protect him and eventually bring him back to Canaan. In response, Yaakov vows to build a house for God and to give back a tenth of everything God provides him.

- Why do you think the angels were moving both up and down, and not going in just one direction?
- What do you think it means to give a tenth of everything back to God?
- Since the blessings regarding the whole family were already given to Avraham, why did God repeat them to Yitzchak and Yaakov?

a closer look

עַשֵּׂר אֲעַשְּׂרֶנּוּ לָךְ

"I will dedicate a tenth..." (BEREISHIT 28:22)

RABBI SACKS TEACHES US:

'This promise (to give a tenth) later became the practice of giving a tenth of one's income to charity... Tzedakah is a form of prayer. To know God is to act with justice and compassion, to recognise His image in other people, and to hear the silent cry of those in need.'

RABBI SACKS QUOTES RABBI YEHUDA BEN ILAI IN THE MISHNA, AS FOLLOWS:

'There are ten strong things in the world:

- *Rock is strong, but iron breaks it.*
- *Iron is strong, but fire melts it.*
- *Fire is strong, but water extinguishes it.*
- *Water is strong, but the clouds carry it.*
- *The clouds are strong, but the wind drives them.*
- *The wind is strong, but man withstands it.*
- *Man is strong, but fear weakens him.*
- *Fear is strong, but wine removes it.*
- *Wine is strong, but sleep overcomes it.*
- *Sleep is strong, but death stands over it.*

What is stronger than death? Acts of tzedakah. For it is written, "Tzedakah delivers from death."'

Source: To Heal a Fractured World, ch. 3.

moral matters

LET'S DISCUSS!

- Why do you think Rabbi Sacks says **tzedakah is like a kind of prayer**?
- What do you think is meant by, '**to know God is to see Him in other people**'?
- Rabbi Yehuda ben Ilai lists many powerful things in the world. Why do you think he ends with **acts of tzedakah** as the **strongest**.

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