

COVENANT & Conversation

A STUDY OF LEADERSHIP IN THE PARSHA WITH RABBI SACKS

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Be Thyself

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I have argued in previous years of Covenant and Conversation that the episode in which the Jewish people acquired its name – when Jacob wrestled with an unnamed adversary at night and received the name Israel – is essential to an understanding of what it is to be a Jew. I argue here that it is equally critical to understanding what it is to lead.

There are several theories as to the identity of “the man” who wrestled with the patriarch that night. The Torah calls him a man. The prophet Hosea called him an angel (Hosea 12:4, 5). The sages said it was Samael, guardian angel of Esau and a force for evil (*Bereshith Rabbah* 77; Rashi; *Zohar*). Jacob himself was convinced it was God. “Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, “It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared” (Gen. 32: 31).

My argument is that we can only understand the passage against the entire background of Jacob’s life. Jacob was born holding on to Esau’s heel. He bought Esau’s birthright. He stole Esau’s blessing. When his blind father asked him who he was, he replied, “I am Esau your firstborn.” Jacob was the child who wanted to be Esau.

Why? Because Esau was the elder. Because Esau was strong, physically mature, a hunter. Above all because Esau was his father’s favourite: “Isaac, who had a taste for wild game, loved Esau, but Rebecca loved Jacob” (Gen. 25: 28). Jacob is the paradigm case of what the French literary theorist and anthropologist Rene Girard called *mimetic desire*, meaning, we want what someone else wants, because we want to *be* that someone else.¹ The result is tension between Jacob and Esau which rises to an unbearable intensity when Esau discovers that Jacob has taken the blessing Isaac had reserved for him, and vows to kill him when Isaac is no longer alive.

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¹ Rene Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, Athlone Press, 1988.

Jacob flees to Laban where he encounters more conflict and is on his way home when he hears that Esau is coming to meet him with a force of 400 men. In an unusually strong description of emotion the Torah tells us that Jacob was “very frightened and distressed,” frightened, no doubt, that Esau would try to kill him, and perhaps distressed that his brother’s animosity was not without cause.

Jacob had indeed wronged him. Isaac says to Esau, “Your brother came deceitfully and took your blessing.” Centuries later the prophet Hosea said, “The LORD has a charge to bring against Judah; he will punish Jacob according to his ways and repay him according to his deeds. In the womb he grasped his brother’s heel; as a man he struggled with God” (Hos. 12: 3-4). Jeremiah uses the name Jacob to mean someone who practises deception: “Beware of your friends; do not trust anyone in your clan; for every one of them is a deceiver [*akov Yaakov*], and every friend a slanderer” (Jer. 9: 3).

As long as Jacob sought to be Esau there was tension, conflict, rivalry. Esau felt cheated; Jacob felt fear. That night, about to meet Esau again after an absence of twenty two years *Jacob wrestles with himself and finally throws off the image of Esau that he has carried with him all these years as the person he wants to be*. This is the critical moment in Jacob’s life. From now on he is content to be himself. And it is only when we stop wanting to be someone else (in Shakespeare’s words, “desiring this man's art, and that man's scope, With what I most enjoy contented least”²) that we can be at peace with ourselves and with the world.

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This is one of the great challenges of leadership. It is all too easy for a leader to pursue popularity by being what people want him or her to be, a liberal to liberals, a conservative to conservatives, taking decisions that win temporary acclaim rather than flowing from principle and conviction. Presidential adviser David Gergen wrote about Bill Clinton that he “isn’t exactly sure who he is yet and tries to define himself by how well others like him. That leads him into all sorts of contradictions, and the view by others that he seems a constant mixture of strengths and weaknesses.”³

Leaders sometimes try to “hold the team together” by saying different things to different people, but eventually these contradictions become clear – especially in the total transparency that modern media impose – and the result is that the leader will seem to lack integrity. People will no longer trust his or her remarks. There will be a loss of confidence and authority that may take a long time to restore. The leader may find that his or her position has become untenable and may be forced to resign. Few things make a leader more unpopular than the pursuit of popularity.

² Shakespeare, *Sonnet 29*.

³ David Gergen, *Eyewitness to Power*, Simon & Schuster, 2001, 328.

Great leaders have the courage to live with unpopularity. Lincoln was reviled and ridiculed during his lifetime. In 1864 the New York Times wrote of him: “He has been denounced without end as a perjurer, a usurper, a tyrant, a subverter of the Constitution, a destroyer of the liberties of his country, a reckless desperado, a heartless trifler over the last agonies of an expiring nation.”⁴ Churchill, until he became prime minister during the Second World War, had been written off as a failure. After the war he was defeated in the 1945 General Election. He himself said that “Success is stumbling from failure to failure with no loss of enthusiasm.” John F Kennedy and Martin Luther King were assassinated. When Margaret Thatcher died, some people celebrated in the streets.

Jacob was not a leader; there was as yet no nation for him to lead. Yet the Torah goes to great lengths to give us an insight into his struggle for identity, because it was not his alone. It happens to most of us (the word *avot* used to describe Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, means not only “fathers, patriarchs” but also “archetypes”). It is not easy to overcome the desire to be someone else, to want what they have, to be what they are. Most of us have such feelings from time to time. Girard argues that this has been the main source of conflict throughout history. It can take a lifetime of wrestling before we know who we are and relinquish the desire to be who we aren’t.

More than anyone else in Genesis Jacob is surrounded by conflict: not just between himself and Esau, but between himself and Laban, between Rachel and Leah, and between his children, Joseph and his brothers. It is as if the Torah were telling us that so long as there is a conflict *within* us, there will be a conflict *around* us. We have to resolve the tension in ourselves before we can do so for others. We have to be at peace with ourself before we can be at peace with the world.

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That is what happens in this week’s parsha. After his wrestling match with the stranger, Jacob undergoes a change of personality. He gives back to Esau the blessing he took from him. The previous day he had given him back the material blessing by sending him hundreds of goats, ewes, rams, camels, cows, bulls and donkeys. Now he gives him back the blessing that said, “Be lord over your brothers, and may the sons of your mother bow down to you.” Jacob bows down seven times to Esau. He calls Esau “My lord,” and himself “your servant.” He actually uses the word “blessing,” though this fact is often obscured in translation. He says “Please take my blessing that has been brought to you” (Gen. 33: 11). The result is that the two brothers meet and part in peace.

People conflict. They have different interests, passions, desires, temperaments. Even if they didn’t, they would still conflict, as every parent knows. Children – and not just children – seek attention, and you can’t attend to everyone equally all the time. Managing the conflicts that affect every human group is the work of the leader; and if the leader is not sure of and confident in his or

⁴ John Kane, *The Politics of Moral Capital*, Cambridge University Press, 2001, 71.

her identity, the conflicts will persist. Even if the leader sees him- or herself as a peacemaker, the conflicts will still persist.

The only answer is to “know thyself,” to wrestle with yourself as Jacob did on that fateful night, throwing off the person you might like to be but are not, accepting that some people will like you and what you stand for while others will not, and that it is better to seek the respect of some than the popularity of all. This may involve a lifetime of struggle, but the outcome is an immense strength. No one is stronger than one who knows who and what he is.

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**RABBI
SACKS**

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The Office of Rabbi Sacks, PO Box 72007, London, NW6 6RW
+44 (0)20 7286 6391 • info@rabbisacks.org • www.rabbisacks.org

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