



# COVENANT & CONVERSATION

## Family Edition

יוחי תשע"ט  
Vayechi 5779

**The Future  
of the Past**

### WELCOME TO COVENANT & CONVERSATION 5779 FAMILY EDITION

*Covenant & Conversation: Family Edition* is a new and exciting initiative from The Office of Rabbi Sacks for 5779. Written as an accompaniment to Rabbi Sacks' weekly *Covenant & Conversation* essay, the *Family Edition* is aimed at connecting older children and teenagers with his ideas and thoughts on the *parsha*. To receive this via email please make sure you are subscribed to Rabbi Sacks' main mailing list at [www.RabbiSacks.org/Subscribe](http://www.RabbiSacks.org/Subscribe).



### PARSHAT VAYECHI IN A NUTSHELL

With *Vayechi*, the book of Genesis, full of conflicts within the family, comes to a peaceful end. Jacob, reunited with his beloved Joseph, sees his grandsons, the only such scene in the Torah. He blesses them. Then, on his death-bed, he blesses his twelve sons. He dies and is buried in the cave of Machpelah with his parents and grandparents. Joseph

forgives his brothers a second time, and he himself dies, having assured his brothers that God will eventually bring the family back to the Promised Land. The long patriarchal narrative is at an end and a new period – the birth of Israel as a nation – is about to begin.



### THE CORE IDEA

The brothers fear for their lives as Joseph reveals himself to them. What would stop him from taking his revenge? Joseph reassures them with these words: "Don't be afraid," said Joseph. "Am I in place of God? You intended to harm me but God intended it for good, to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives." (Gen. 50:19-20) The conclusion to this story is the original source for understanding the concept of *teshuvah* (repentance).

Another important source for understanding *teshuvah* is one of the most colourful characters of the Talmud – the third-century sage known as Reish Lakish. Reish Lakish was originally a highway robber and gladiator who later in life repented and became a great scholar. Perhaps speaking from his own experience, he is quoted as the author of several sayings about *teshuvah*, two of which are reported in the tractate of *Yoma* (86b): Reish Lakish said: Great is repentance, because through it deliberate sins are accounted as unintentional. Reish Lakish also said: Great is repentance, because through it deliberate sins are accounted as though they were merits.

Confused by the contradiction between the two statements (does *teshuvah* make sins "unintentional" or "merits"?) the Talmud solves the contradiction: the first

applies to repentance from fear (of punishment), the second to repentance from love (of God and the good).

Reish Lakish's statement about sins and merits is almost certainly inspired by the words Joseph speaks to his brothers in the closing chapter of Genesis: "You intended to harm me but God intended it for good." This is the paradigm that stands at the basis of Reish Lakish's argument. The brothers had committed a deliberate sin by selling Joseph into slavery; they (or at least Judah, the instigator of the decision to sell Joseph) had done *teshuvah*. The result is that – through divine providence ("God intended it") – their action is now reckoned "for good." Any act we perform has multiple consequences, some good, some bad. When we intend evil, the bad consequences are attributed to us because they are what we sought to achieve. The good consequences are not: they are mere by-products or unintended outcomes.

So in the case of Joseph, many positive things happened once he had been brought to Egypt. None of these consequences could be credited to his brothers, even though they would not have happened had the brothers not done as they did. However, once the brothers had undergone complete repentance, their original intent was

cancelled out. It was now possible to see the good, as well as the bad, consequences of their act – and to credit the good to them.

### QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. Do you think that the motivation behind an act is most important, or the outcome of the act?
2. Can you think of bad things that have happened to you that have ultimately also had good outcomes?
3. What heroic traits is Joseph modelling for us in this story?



### IT ONCE HAPPENED...

Reish Lakish was the leader of a gang of bandits. One day, he saw Rabbi Yochanan bathing in the River Jordan. Reish Lakish jumped into the river to chase him. Rabbi Yochanan said to Reish Lakish: Your immense strength would be better used for Torah study. Reish Lakish said to him: Your immense beauty would be better used for women. Rabbi Yochanan said to him: If you return to Torah study, I will give you my sister in marriage, who is more beautiful than I am. Reish Lakish accepted upon himself to study Torah. (**Talmud Bavli, Bava Metzia, 84a**)

When one sees Reish Lakish studying Torah in the study hall it is as though he is uprooting mountains and grinding them into each other. (**Talmud Bavli, Sanhedrin 24a**)

When Rabbi Imi was kidnapped in Sifsufa, Rabbi Yochanan despaired and proclaimed him as good as dead. Reish Lakish replied to him before we abandon hope that he has been killed I am willing to run the risk that I may be killed in order to save him. He went and rescued him from the hands of the

kidnappers, who all were eventually killed themselves. On another occasion Rabbi Yochanan was robbed in Ale-kaniah. When Reish Lakish noticed something was wrong he admitted that he had been robbed. Reish Lakish told him to show him where, and he went and found the robbers and took back all of Rabbi Yochanan's belongings. (**Talmud Yerushalmi, Teruma, 46b**)

### QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. How does Reish Lakish show in his own life that *teshuvah* can redeem previous actions, making them the source of future good?
2. What skills and resources do you have that could be used for bad or for good?



### THINKING MORE DEEPLY

The idea explored in *The Core Idea*, that through repentance, deliberate sins can be accounted as merits, is a hugely significant idea, for it means that by a change of heart we can redeem the past. However, this still sounds impossible, for we tend to take for granted the idea of the asymmetry of time: The future is open, but the past is closed. Before us lie a series of paths. Which we take depends upon our choice. Behind us lies the history of our previous decisions, none of which we can undo. We cannot go back in time. That is a logical impossibility. We can affect what is yet to be; but, in the words of the sages, "What has been, has been," and we cannot alter it. With or without repentance, the past is surely immutable. All of this is true, but it is not the whole truth. The revolutionary idea behind Joseph's and Reish Lakish's words is that there are two concepts of the past. The first is what happened. The second is the significance, the meaning, of what happened.

In ancient Israel a new concept of time was born. This did more than change the history of the West; in a sense, it

created it. Until Tanach, time was generally conceived as a series of eternal recurrences, endlessly repeating a pattern that belonged to the immutable structure of the universe. The seasons – spring, summer, autumn, winter – and the lifecycle – birth, growth, decline and death – were a reiterated sequence in which nothing fundamentally changed. This is variously called cyclical, or cosmological, or mythic time.

This conception of time produces a deeply conservative philosophy of life. It justifies the status quo. Inequalities are seen as written into the structure of the universe. All attempts to change society are destined to fail. People are what they are, and the world is what it has always been. At best this view leads to resignation, at worst to despair. There is no ultimate meaning in history.

The Jewish understanding of time that emerges from Tanach, in contrast, was utterly revolutionary. For the first time people began to conceive that God had created the universe in freedom, and that by making man in His image, He endowed

him too with freedom. That being so, he might be different tomorrow from what he was today, and if he could change himself, he could begin to change the world. Time became an arena of change. With this, the concept of history (as opposed to myth) was born.

We live life forwards, but we understand it backwards. The simplest example of this is autobiography. Reading the story of a life, we understand how early experiences shape who we become. What we become depends on our choices, and we are (almost) always free to choose this way or that. But what we become shapes the story of our life, and only in hindsight, looking back, do we see the past in context, as part of a tale whose end we now know. In life considered as a narrative, later events change the significance of earlier ones. It was the gift of Judaism to the world to discover time as a narrative.

That was what Reish Lakish knew from his own experience. He had been a highway robber. He might have stayed one. Instead he became a *ba'al teshuvah*, and the very

characteristics he had acquired in his earlier life – physical strength and courage – he later used to virtuous ends (see *It Once Happened...*). He knew he could not have done so had he had a different past, a life of study and peace. His sins became merits because in retrospect they were an essential part of the good he eventually did. What had happened (the past as past) did not change, but its significance (the past as part of a narrative of transformation) did.

That too was the profound philosophical-spiritual truth Joseph conveyed to his brothers. By your repentance – he intimated to them – you have changed the story of which you are a part. The harm you intended to do ultimately brought about good. So long as you stayed the people prepared to sell a brother into slavery, none of that good could be attributed to you, but now you have transformed yourself through *teshuvah*, and so have transformed the story of your life as well. By your change of heart you have earned the right to be included in a narrative whose ultimate outcome was benign.



## FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

This was perhaps the greatest contribution of Judaism – via the Judaic roots of Christianity – to the West. The idea that time is an arena of change, and that freedom and creativity are God’s gift to humanity, resulted in astonishing advances in science and our understanding of the world, technology and our ability to control the human environment, economics and our ability to lift people out of poverty and starvation, medicine and our ability to cure disease. It led to the abolition of slavery, the growth of a more egalitarian society, the enhanced position of women, and the emergence of democracy and liberalism...

To be a Jew is to be an agent of hope. Every ritual, every command, every syllable of the Jewish story is a protest against escapism, resignation and the blind acceptance of fate. Judaism, the religion of the free God, is a religion of

freedom. Jewish faith is written in the future tense. It is belief in a future that is not yet but could be, if we heed God’s call, obey His will and act together as a covenantal community. The name of the Jewish future is hope...

Jews were and are still called on to be the voice of hope in the conversation of humankind.

*Future Tense, p. 249-252*

### QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. Why is the idea that time is an arena of change a Jewish idea, and why is it such a radical idea?
2. How does this idea change the world we live in?



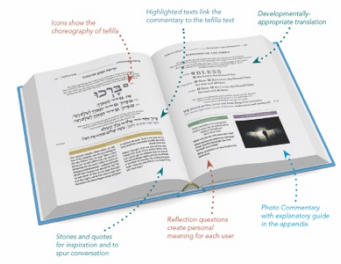
## AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. What similarities are there between the stories of Joseph and Reish Lakish?
2. What does Rabbi Sacks mean by “We live life forwards, but we understand it backwards”?
3. When you look back at periods and events in your life that seemed to be negative at the time, can you now see positive significance to them?
4. Can you think of examples of how the world has been impacted by the Jewish concept of time?
5. Why do you think the book of Genesis ends with this story (clue: the connection between *teshuvah* and freedom)?



## QUESTION TIME

Do you want to win a **Koren Aviv Weekday Siddur**? This siddur has been designed to help young people explore their relationship to their God, and the values, history and religion of their people. Email [CCFamilyEdition@rabbisacks.org](mailto:CCFamilyEdition@rabbisacks.org) with your name, age, city and your best question or observation about the *parsha* from the *Covenant & Conversation Family Edition*. **Entrants must be 18 or younger**. Each month we will select two of the best entries, and the individuals will each be sent a siddur inscribed by Rabbi Sacks! Thank you to Koren Publishers for kindly donating these wonderful siddurim.



## EDUCATIONAL COMPANION TO THE QUESTIONS

### THE CORE IDEA

1. The motivation of the act is important for the individual and their moral and spiritual growth and journey. Unintentional acts produce bad outcomes all the time in life, and the knowledge that these acts were unintended helps those impacted by them to move on. However, when it comes to the way our acts impact others, the claim that this was an unintended outcome of the act may well not be enough. In these instances, the outcome is what is important, and this must be kept in mind when decisions are made (what are the risks and potential negative outcomes of any act/decision) and especially when it comes to addressing bad things that we have caused. *Teshuvah* only helps with the person that has brought the outcome about. Asking for forgiveness, and redressing injustices that have come about from our actions is the only way to make things better for them.
2. This value in Judaism is often called *gam zu letovah* – also this is for the good – seeing the good outcomes from bad events in life. Sometimes it takes much time to be able to see how things turn out for the best.
3. Joseph models understanding, patience, forgiveness, unconditional love, and possibly most importantly a positive outlook on life and an ability to analyse his past and find always find the good, despite considerable and obvious bad.

### IT ONCE HAPPENED...

1. Reish Lakish had immense strength and skills that allowed him to be a successful robber and gladiator. Once he took the decision to dedicate himself to a life of Torah study and practice, he used those same skills for the good. For example, he used his strength and passion for learning Torah, and he used the previous skills that made him a cunning and effective fighter for the good (saving his friends and their property).
2. Every talent and skill, as well as resource, can be used for bad or for good. Encourage self-introspection to analyse what these could be in their life.

### FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

1. Ancient time was cyclical. This mythical approach to time meant that ultimately nothing changed. Life was a continuous series of repeating cycles – for example, spring, summer, autumn, winter; or birth, growth, decline and death. This approach led to stagnation and cynicism. Things will never be better, they will always stay the same. Biblical Judaism introduced to the world the concept of historical destiny – that the world can be better tomorrow than it was today. That is the essence of Judaism's message – we need to change the world for the better in order to redeem it. *Teshuvah* is an integral part of this, on an individual level. Without *teshuvah* we are doomed to live a life of condemnation and recurring evil due to our previous mistakes and sins. But if we have the chance to redeem our previous actions, then we can become better people, and there is always hope for a better future. Judaism has introduced hope and progress into the world, on both an individual and a universal level.
2. This has given the world hope and motivation for progress. This has led to all the examples of progress that Rabbi Sacks lists in *Future Tense*, and this also explains why it is so often Jews who lead the way in these fields. These ideas have given the world hope for a brighter future, and that is the core idea at the heart of the concept of a messianic future.

### AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. Both Joseph and Reish Lakish saw their past in a positive light, with important significance for how they would live their lives in the future. Joseph knew the past was part of God's plan, and despite the negative aspects of it, it led to a tremendous amount of good. Reish Lakish used his past life for future positive benefit.
2. While it is only the future that we can shape, going forward, we can also reflect on our past to understand its significance, to make a change in our minds, and use that to build a better future.
3. See *The Core Idea* question 2.
4. See paragraph 4 of *Thinking More Deeply*, and *From the Thought of Rabbi Sacks*, as well as the answer to question 1 there.
5. This is best understood from the final paragraph of the main edition of *Covenant & Conversation*: "We now see the profound overarching structure of the book of Genesis. It begins with God creating the universe in freedom. It ends with the family of Jacob on the brink of creating a new social universe of freedom which begins in slavery, but ends in the giving and receiving of the Torah, Israel's "constitution of liberty." Israel is charged with the task of changing the moral vision of mankind, but it can only do so if individual Jews, of whom the forerunners were Jacob's children, are capable of changing themselves – that ultimate assertion of freedom we call *teshuvah*. Time then becomes an arena of change in which the future redeems the past and a new concept is born – the idea we call hope."