

COVENANT & CONVERSATION

LIFE-CHANGING IDEAS IN THE PARSHA WITH RABBI SACKS



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THE MAURICE WOHL
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— RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Out of the Depths

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What did Jacob add to the Jewish experience? What is it that we find in him that we do not find to the same measure in Abraham and Isaac? Why is it his name – Jacob/Israel – that we carry in our identity? How was it that all his children stayed within the faith? Is there something of him in our spiritual DNA? There are many answers. I explore one here, and another next week in Vayishlach.

Jacob was the man whose deepest spiritual encounters happened when he was on a journey, alone and afraid at the dead of night, fleeing from one danger to another. In this week's parsha, we see him fleeing from Esau and about to meet Laban, a man who would cause him great grief. In next week's parsha we see him fleeing in the opposite direction, from Laban to Esau, a meeting that filled him with dread: he was "very afraid and distressed." Jacob was supremely the lonely man of faith.

Yet it is precisely at these moments of maximal fear that he had spiritual experiences that have no parallel in the lives of either Abraham or Isaac – nor even Moses. In this week's parsha he has a vision of a ladder stretching from earth to heaven, with angels ascending and descending, at the end of which he declares: "Surely God is in this place and I did not know it...How awesome is this place! This is nothing other than the house of God, and this, the gate of heaven!" (Gen. 28:16-17).

Next week, caught between his escape from Laban and his imminent encounter with Esau, he wrestles with a stranger – variously described as a man, an angel and God Himself – receives a new name, Israel, and says, naming the place of the encounter Peniel, “I have seen God face to face and my life was spared” (Gen. 32:31).

This was no small moment in the history of faith. We normally assume that the great spiritual encounters happen in the desert, or a wilderness, or a mountain top, in an ashram, a monastery, a retreat, a place where the soul is at rest, the body calm and the mind in a state of expectation. But that is not Jacob, nor is it the only or even the primary Jewish encounter. We know what it is to encounter God in fear and trembling. Through much – thankfully not all, but much – of Jewish history, our ancestors found God in dark nights and dangerous places. It is no accident that Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik called his most famous essay, *The Lonely Man of Faith*, nor that Adin Steinsaltz called one of his books about Judaism, *The Strife of the Spirit*.

“Through much of Jewish history, our ancestors found God in dark nights and dangerous places.”

Sometimes it is when we feel most alone that we discover we are not alone. We can encounter God in the midst of fear or a sense of failure. I have done so at the very points when I felt most inadequate, overwhelmed, abandoned, looked down on by others, discarded and disdained. It was then that I felt the hand of God reaching out to save me, the way a stranger did when I was on the point of drowning in an Italian sea on my honeymoon.¹ That is the gift of Jacob/Israel, the man who found God in the heart of darkness.

Jacob was the first but not the last. Recall Moses in his moment of crisis, when he said the terrifying words, “If this is what You are going to do to me, please kill me now if I have found favour in Your sight, and let me not see my misery” (Num. 11:15). That is when God allowed Moses to see the effect of his spirit on seventy elders, one of the rare cases of a spiritual leader seeing the influence he has had on others in his lifetime.

It is when Elijah was weary to the point of asking to die that God sent him the great revelation at Mount Horeb: the whirlwind, the fire, the earthquake and the still, small voice (1 Kings 19). There was a time when Jeremiah felt so low that he said: “Cursed be the day on which I was born, let not the day on which my mother gave birth to me be blessed ... Why did I come out from the womb, to see toil,

¹ I have told the story in the video *Understanding Prayer: Thanking and Thinking*. I also give an account of it in my book, *Celebrating Life*.

and sorrow, and to end my days in shame?” (Jer. 20:14, 18). It was after this that he had his most glorious hope-filled prophecies of the return of Israel from exile, and of God’s everlasting love for His people, a nation that would live as long as the sun, the moon and the stars (Jer. 31).

Perhaps no one spoke more movingly about this condition than King David in his most agitated psalms. In psalm 69 he speaks as if he were drowning:

Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck.

I sink in the miry depths, where there is no foothold. (Ps. 69:2-3)

Then there is the line as famous to Christians as to Jews: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Ps. 22:2). And the equally famous, “Out of the depths I cry to you, Lord” (Ps. 130:1).

This is the heritage of Jacob who discovered that you can find God, not just when you are peacefully tending your sheep, or joining others in prayer at the Temple or in the synagogue, but also when you are in danger, far from home, with peril in front of you and fear behind.

These two encounters, in this week’s parsha and the next, also provide us with powerful metaphors of the spiritual life. Sometimes we experience it as climbing a ladder, rung by rung. Each day, week, month or year, as we study and understand more, we come a little closer to heaven as we learn to stand above the fray, rise above our reactive emotions, and begin to sense the complexity of the human condition. That is faith as a ladder.

Then there is faith as a wrestling match, as we struggle with our doubts and hesitations, above all with the fear (it’s called the “impostor syndrome”) that we are not as big as people think we are or as God wants us to be.² Out of such experiences we, like Jacob, can emerge limping. Yet it is out of such experiences that we too can discover that we have been wrestling with an angel who forces us to a strength we did not know we had.

“Throughout history, most people at most times have taken children and a land for granted.”

The great musicians have the power to take pain and turn it

² There is, of course, the opposite phenomenon, of those who think they’ve outgrown Judaism, that they are bigger than the faith of their fathers. Sigmund Freud seems to have suffered from this condition.

into beauty.³ The spiritual experience is slightly different from the aesthetic one. What matters in spirituality is truth not beauty: existential truth as the almost-infinitesimal me meets the Infinite-Other and I find my place in the totality of things and a strength-not-my-own runs through me, lifting me to safety above the raging waters of the troubled soul.

That is the gift of Jacob, and this is his life-changing idea: that out of the depths we can reach the heights. The deepest crises of our lives can turn out to be the moments when we encounter the deepest truths and acquire our greatest strengths.

Shabbat shalom,



LIFE-CHANGING IDEA #7

The deepest crises of your life can turn out to be the moments when you encounter the deepest truths and acquire your greatest strengths.

LIFE-CHANGING IDEAS IN SEFER BEREISHIT

- **BEREISHIT:** God believes in us even if we don't always believe in ourselves. Remember this, and you will find the path from darkness to light.
- **NOACH:** Next time you meet someone radically unlike you, try seeing difference not as a threat but as an enlarging, possibility-creating gift.
- **LECH LECHA:** Follow the inner voice, as did those who came before you, continuing their journey by bringing timeless values to a rapidly-changing world.
- **VAYERA:** First separate, then connect; it is the carefully calibrated distance that allows us to grow as individuals and create stronger relationships together.
- **CHAYEI SARAH:** To survive tragedy and trauma, first build the future. Only then, remember the past.
- **TOLDOT:** You are as great as your ideals. If you truly believe in something beyond yourself, you will achieve beyond yourself.
- **VAYETSE:** The deepest crises of your life can turn out to be the moments when you encounter the deepest truths and acquire your greatest strengths.



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³ For me the supreme example is the Adagio of Schubert's String Quintet in C Major op. 163, written just two months before the composer's death.