



COVENANT & CONVERSATION

.....Family Edition.....

FINDING FAITH IN THE PARSHA WITH RABBI SACKS

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וישב תש"ף
Vayeshev 5780

The Angel who did not know he was an Angel

** KEY IDEA OF THE WEEK **

Sometimes God sends people without their knowledge to change our lives.



PARSHAT VAYESHEV IN A NUTSHELL

This week our story shifts focus from Jacob to his children and their relationship. Joseph was Jacob's favourite son, as he was the firstborn of his beloved wife Rachel. This caused tension and jealousy between Joseph and his brothers.

Joseph was a dreamer and he shared two of his dreams with the family, one about sheaves of wheat, and the other about the sun, moon, and stars all bowing down to him. This upset his brothers who thought Joseph was saying he believed he was better than them, so they plotted, faked his death, and sold him as a slave. Joseph was sent to work in Egypt. This terrible crime eventually led, many years later, to the entire family, who by then were a nation, being slaves in Egypt.

Joseph's master Potiphar was impressed by Joseph but Potiphar's wife had him thrown into prison, where he found himself interpreting the dreams of Pharaoh's troubled baker and butler. Joseph understood from the dreams that the baker would soon be killed, but the butler would get his job back. Joseph asked the butler to help him once he was free. Joseph's interpretations of the dreams came true, but the butler forgot his promise to ask Pharaoh to free Joseph.

QUESTION TO PONDER:

How would things have been different if even one of the many details of this complicated story had been changed?



THE CORE IDEA

The story of Joseph and his brothers takes place over four parshiyot. It is the longest and most detailed narrative in the Torah. Nothing is there by accident; every detail counts. Let us look at one moment, which may seem unimportant, but in fact contains one of the most beautiful ideas in the Torah.

The scene is set. Joseph is envied and hated by his brothers. They cannot even talk to one another without arguing. Now the brothers have left home to tend their sheep, and Jacob tells Joseph to go and see how they are doing. This will ultimately lead to the dramatic incident where the brothers sell Joseph as a slave, and change everything.

But it nearly didn't happen. Joseph arrived at Shechem where he expected his brothers to be, but they were not there. He might well have wandered around for a while and then, failing to find them, gone home. None of the events that take up the rest of the Torah would have happened: no

Joseph the slave, no Joseph the viceroy to Pharaoh, no storage of food during the years of plenty, no descent of Joseph's family to Egypt, no exile, no slavery, no exodus. The entire story – already revealed to Abraham in a night vision – seemed about to be derailed. Then we read the following:

"A man found [Joseph] wandering around in the fields and asked him, 'What are you looking for?' He replied, 'I'm looking for my brothers. Can you tell me where they are grazing their flocks?' 'They have moved on from here,' the man answered. 'I heard them say, 'Let's go to Dothan.'" So Joseph went after his brothers and found them near Dothan." (Bereishit 37:15-17)

There is no other moment like this in the rest of the Torah: three verses dedicated to an apparently unimportant, forgettable detail of someone having to ask directions from a stranger. Who was this unnamed man? And what message does the episode hold for future generations, for us? Rashi

says he was the angel Gabriel. Ibn Ezra says he was a passer-by. Ramban however says that “the Holy One, blessed be He, sent him a guide without his knowledge.”

I am not sure whether Ramban meant without Joseph’s knowledge or without the guide’s knowledge. I prefer to think both. The anonymous man represents an act of Divine guidance to make sure that Joseph went to where he was supposed to be, so that the rest of the drama could unfold. He may not have known he had such a role. Joseph surely did not know. To put it as simply as I can: *he was an angel*

who did not know he was an angel. He had a vital role in the story. Without him, it would not have happened. But he had no way of knowing, at the time, the importance of his role.

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. Does it make a difference to the story whether the “angel” knew about his role or not?
2. Is this encounter with the unnamed man the only time God manages events in this story to ensure a specific result?



IT ONCE HAPPENED...

No one knows the power of a smile. A smile can literally save a life. I should know. My life was saved by a smile.

That was a dark time in my life. I could no longer feel joy. There was only sadness in my heart. I could not see a reason to live. Who would even notice if one day I just disappeared? The answer, I believed, was no-one.

My pain was so deep, I couldn’t bear to sit in my empty house alone. I left in a daze. I didn’t know where I was going. I don’t know if I would have taken my own life, but I do know I couldn’t see any point in living. I hardly cared if I lived or died.

But then I met her. I don’t even know her name. Someone’s grandmother. Someone’s mother. Someone’s neighbour. Someone’s friend. But not mine. I was no-one to her. But she saw me. She saw my tears, smiled the warmest smile, and said the simplest of words: “Are you okay, love?” That was all it took. Someone saw me. Saw my pain. And reached out with a smile

and four words that changed my life. She was my angel from above.

I decided in that moment that my life was worth living. And I found a purpose for it. I wanted to be an angel for others, wherever I could find them. Because who knows the power of just a smile?!

(This story was written by an anonymous author)

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. Did the lady smile because she knew she was destined to save the storyteller that day?
2. How can you decide to be someone’s “angel”? How do you know what to do?



THINKING MORE DEEPLY

The message of the *angel who didn’t know he was an angel* is a very important one. When heaven intends something to happen, and it seems to be impossible, sometimes it sends an angel down to earth – an angel who does not know he or she is an angel – to move the story from here to there. Let me tell the story of two such angels, without whom there might not be a State of Israel today.

One was a remarkable young woman from a Sephardi family who, at the age of seventeen, married into the most famous Ashkenazi family in the world. Her name was Dorothy Pinto; her husband was James de Rothschild, son of the great Baron Edmond de Rothschild who did so much to support the settlement of the land in the days before the proclamation of the State.

A critical juncture occurred during the First World War that would eventually lead to the defeat of the Ottoman Empire and the placing of Palestine under a British mandate. Suddenly, Britain became absolutely central to the Zionist dream. A key figure in the Zionist movement, Chaim Weizmann, was in Britain, experimenting and lecturing in chemistry at

Manchester University. But Weizmann was a Russian immigrant, not a prominent member of British society. Manchester was not London. Chemistry was not politics. The most influential and well-connected Jewish family in the country was the Rothschilds. But Edmond was in France. James was a soldier on the battlefield. And not every member of the British Rothschilds was a Zionist.

At that moment, Dorothy swiftly assumed a leading role. She was only nineteen when she first met Weizmann in December 1914, and she understood very little of the political complexities involved in realising the Zionist dream. But she learned quickly. She was perceptive, resourceful, energetic, delightful and determined. She connected Weizmann with everyone he needed to know and persuade. Simon Schama, in his definitive account of *Two Rothschilds and the Land of Israel*, says that “young as she was ... she combined charm, intelligence and more than a hint of steely resolution in just the right mixture to coax commitment from the equivocal, enthusiasm from the lukewarm and sympathy from the indifferent.”

His judgement on the effect of her interventions is that “through tireless but prudent social diplomacy she had managed to open avenues of influence and persuasion at a time when they were badly needed.” The result, in 1917, was the Balfour Declaration, a milestone in the history of Zionism – and we should not forget that the Declaration itself took the form of a letter to Lord (Walter) Rothschild.

Dorothy’s husband James, in his will, left the money to build the Knesset, Israel’s parliament building. In her own will, Dorothy left the money to build a new Supreme Court Building, a project undertaken by her nephew Jacob, the current Lord Rothschild. But of all the things she did, it was those connections she made for Chaim Weizmann in the years 1914 to 1917 that were surely the most important. Without them, there might have been no Balfour Declaration and no State of Israel.

The other angelic figure, who could not have been less like Dorothy de Rothschild, was Eddie Jacobson. The son of poor Jewish immigrants, born in New York’s Lower East Side, he moved with his family to Kansas City where he met another young man called Harry Truman. They knew one another in their youth, and then grew closer in 1917 when they underwent military training together. After the end of World War I, they opened a haberdashery business together. It failed in 1922 because of the recession.

From then on, they went their separate ways, Jacobson as a travelling salesman, and Truman successively a county administrator, Senator, Vice-President, and then when F.D. Roosevelt died in office in 1945, he became President of the United States. Despite their very different life-trajectories, the two stayed friends, and Jacobson would often visit Truman, talking to him about, among other things, about the fate of European Jewry during the Holocaust.

After the war, the position of America vis-à-vis the State of Israel was deeply ambivalent. The State Department was opposed. Truman himself refused to meet Chaim Weizmann.

On 13th March 1948, Jacobson went to the White House and persuaded Truman to change his mind and meet Weizmann. Largely as a result of this, the United States became the first nation to grant diplomatic recognition to Israel on 14 May 1948.

Many years later, Truman wrote:

One of the proudest moments of my life occurred at 6:12 p.m. on Friday, May 14, 1948, when I was able to announce recognition of the new State of Israel by the government of the United States. I remain particularly gratified by the role I was fortunate to play in the birth of Israel as, in the immortal words of the Balfour Declaration, “a national home for the Jewish people.”

Two people, Dorothy de Rothschild and Eddie Jacobson, appeared on the scene of history and connected Chaim Weizmann with individuals he might otherwise not have met, among them Arthur Balfour and Harry Truman. They were like the stranger who connected Joseph and his brothers, but with infinitely more positive consequences. I think of them both as angels who did not know they were angels.

Perhaps this is true not only about the destiny of nations but also about each of us at critical junctures in our lives. **I believe that there are times when we feel lost, and then someone says or does something that lifts us or points the way to a new direction and destination.** Years later, looking back, we see how important that intervention was, even though it seemed slight at the time. That is when we know that we too encountered an angel who didn’t know he or she was an angel.

QUESTION TO PONDER:

Should we wait for an “angel” to be sent by God to redirect our lives or should we try ourselves to ensure our lives take the direction we want?



FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

“None of us has all the gifts, but each of us has some. We all count; we each have a unique contribution to make. We come before God as a people, each giving something, and each lifted by the contributions of others.”

Ten Paths to God: Identity, p. 3



AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. Why do you think the story of Joseph and his brothers is so detailed, and so full of plot-twists?
2. Can you think of a time where the direction of your life was changed by an “angel who didn’t even know they were an angel”?
3. What will your unique contribution to history be? How will you discover what history needs from you?



QUESTION TIME

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EDUCATIONAL COMPANION TO THE QUESTIONS

IN A NUTSHELL

1. This is one of the most complex stories in the Torah, with so many stages and twists and turns. Just as in life, small details can change the direction of the story completely, we believe that God is behind all the details that lead to the larger picture (in fact at the very end of the story Joseph tells his brothers exactly that) and so every detail is important. If even one were different, then the outcome of the story would have been different. Perhaps that is one of the core messages of this story.

THE CORE IDEA

1. It does not change the result. The "angel" was an agent of God, even if he didn't realise. Just as we could be carrying out the wishes of God with any single act that we do. We may never know how our acts have impacted the people we meet in our lives. But we believe that God looks after the bigger picture, and with every act, we may be playing a part in other people's lives for a significant purpose.
2. Our belief is that God manages all the details necessary to deliver His desired outcome. This story has so many moving parts and small details, each one noteworthy, to deliver the final outcome. One of the core messages of this narrative is just that – to remember that God plays a role in our lives on a daily basis even if we don't realise at the time. This is the message that Joseph gives his brothers at the final conclusion of the story (Bereishit 45:5).

IT ONCE HAPPENED...

1. Just like the man in the Joseph story, the woman may have had no idea how important her act of a simple smile could be, and she likely had no idea she had been sent to the storyteller for some purpose. She simply smiled because it was the compassionate and kind thing to do. The good intent was there but the impact could not have been predicted.
2. You cannot decide for sure. You don't know what the result of your actions will be, or what the people you come across really need. You have to live your life being the best you, living according to the values you believe God wishes from you, and leave the rest to Him. Our job is to do our best for others, making the kind and moral choice at every opportunity, and it is our hope that these acts lead to positive outcomes.

THINKING MORE DEEPLY

1. We do not believe in waiting passively for God to take control of our lives and we do not rely on heaven-sent miracles happening to us. We must take charge of our own lives and take responsibility for them. However, the message here is that sometimes people are sent to change the direction of our lives and we must ensure we are open to seeing them and the positive influence they can have (even if sometimes it doesn't feel positive at the time).

AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. Narrative in the Torah is not about historical truth. That is not to say that it is not necessarily historically accurate, but that is not the main aim of narrative in the Torah. Narrative delivers other truths. The Torah could have told the story of Joseph in a more direct, less complex way. Not all the details were necessary to arrive at the end of the story. But the Torah does not waste words. There is a message in all the details. One of the main and overarching messages is that God is behind the scenes making sure that events occur and destinations are reached according to His plan for history. This was in fact the message Joseph delivered to his brothers at the end of the story in Bereishit 45:5: "Now, do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here. There was a reason that God sent me ahead of you." God has a larger plan, and all the details in our lives happen to achieve that Divine plan.
2. We all have examples in our lives where we changed direction because of a small event or a chance meeting or conversation with someone. Try and think of examples from your own life, whether the impact was large or small. In truth, we don't know always know how important these chance events are until much later.
3. The unnamed man in the story changed history. Without even knowing the role he was playing and impact he was having. Dorothy de Rothschild and Eddie Jacobson were also key figures who changed Jewish history. This question asks each individual to consider what small impact they can make on the world, to change it for the good, to help deliver the larger plan that God has for the world. The challenge is we can't know what the larger plan is or what role God has in mind for us. So we must strive the best we can to make the world a better place, and leave the rest to God.