



# COVENANT & CONVERSATION

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

FINDING FAITH IN THE PARSHA WITH RABBI SACKS

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בס"ד

ויגש תש"ף  
Vayigash 5780

**The Future  
of the Past**

## \*\* KEY IDEA OF THE WEEK \*\*

**Our actions in the future can redeem much of the pain of the past**



### PARSHAT VAYIGASH IN A NUTSHELL

Our *parsha* begins with Judah's emotional speech to the viceroy of Egypt, pleading for Benjamin to be set free. Judah even asked to switch places with Benjamin and become the prisoner instead. Then the viceroy finally revealed that he was actually their brother Joseph. The brothers were shocked by this twist in their story, and Joseph told them not worry that he might still be angry with them for selling him as a slave all those years ago. He explained that this was always God's plan, and that everything had turned out okay for him. All twelve brothers came close together and hugged.

Both Pharaoh and Joseph then gave them many presents, and the brothers returned to Jacob their father in the Land

of Canaan to tell him the news that his beloved son Joseph was still alive. Jacob gathered the entire family together, and they travelled to Egypt, seventy people in all.

Finally the family is reunited. They settle in an area called Goshen, in Egypt, and the family of Bnei Yisrael continues to grow and grow.

#### QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. How was it comforting to his brothers when Joseph told them this was always God's plan?



### THE CORE IDEA

In our *parsha*, Joseph does something unusual. When he reveals himself to his brothers, he is fully aware that they will suffer shock and then guilt as they remember how it is that their brother is in Egypt. So he *reinterprets the past*:

*"I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt! And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you. For two years now there has been famine in the land, and for the next five years there will be no ploughing and reaping. But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance. So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God. He made me father to Pharaoh, lord of his entire household and ruler of all Egypt."* (Bereishit 45:4-8)

This is very different to how Joseph explained these events to the chief butler in prison, when he said: "I was forcibly carried off from the land of the Hebrews, and even here I

have done nothing to deserve being put in a dungeon." (Bereishit 40:15)

Then, it was a story of kidnap and injustice. Now, it has become a story of Divine providence and redemption. It wasn't you, he tells his brothers, it was God. You didn't realise that you were part of a larger plan. Although it began badly, it has ended well. So do not feel guilty. And do not be afraid that I want revenge. I do not. I realise that we were all being directed by a force greater than ourselves, greater than we can fully understand.

Joseph repeats this in next week's *parsha*, when the brothers fear that he may finally take revenge after their father's death:

*"Don't be afraid. Am I in the 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." (Bereishit 50:19-20)

Joseph is helping his brothers to change their memory of the past. In doing so, he is challenging an assumption we make about time. That we can change the future but not the past. But is that entirely true? What Joseph is doing for his brothers is what he has clearly done for himself: events have changed his, and now, their understanding of the past.

Which means: we do not understand what is happening to us now until we can look back in retrospect and see how it all turned out. This means that we are not held captive by

the past. Things can happen to us, that can completely alter the way we look back and remember. *By action in the future, we can redeem the past.*

#### QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. How can our understanding of the past be changed by what happens in the future?
2. Can you think of something bad that happened to you in the past that now, looking back, you can see led to something good?



#### IT ONCE HAPPENED...

Early on the morning of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, Rabbi Leivi Sudak boarded a plane at London's Heathrow Airport to New York's JFK. It was one week before Rosh Hashanah, and his plan was to make a brief visit to the grave of the Lubavitcher Rebbe to pray for a good and sweet new year, and then take a return flight to London that evening, as he did every year. But this time, it was not to be. In the middle of the flight, his plane, along with 38 other planes, were sent in a different direction – and 6,700 bewildered passengers were re-routed to the tiny town of Gander, in Newfoundland, Canada. They later found out why: there had been airplane hijackings and attacks on the Twin Towers in New York and the Pentagon in Washington, and U.S. airspace had been shut down until further notice.

Even after landing, the passengers were stuck in their planes for over 14 hours. Rabbi Sudak found himself thinking, "Why am I here? What is the purpose of all this?"

Rabbi Sudak and his fellow stranded passengers were awestruck by the kindness and generosity displayed by the citizens of Gander. They were not a wealthy community, but upon learning of the diverted planes, they mobilised, converting every possible space into shelters, and set up communication centres so that the passengers could contact their families. Toiletries were shared around and grocery shelves emptied as residents cooked thousands of meals to feed the guests, who came from ninety-five different countries. The local school became their sleeping base, and many families hosted visitors in their private homes.

Rabbi Sudak took upon himself responsibility for any Jews who were stranded, and immediately set up a kosher kitchen, with the help of a local schoolteacher, Eithne Smith.

During his stay, Rabbi Sudak also met a local Gander resident called Ed Brake, an elderly man who hearing a Rabbi was on the island, wanted to share his story. He was Jewish but had hidden his identity for decades – Brake was born in Nazi Germany and his parents had saved him and his brother by finding a British family to care for them. (Later, when Rabbi Sudak finally reached home again, he sent Ed Brake a kippa, tallit, and siddur, and later learned from his son that before he died, he had asked to be buried with these sacred Jewish items.)

Shabbat approached and Rabbi Sudak provided Shabbat meals for all those who needed. Then word came that flights were leaving the island. Unable to travel on Shabbat, Rabbi Sudak and a Chabad mother and daughter stayed behind.

After Shabbat, Eithne Smith and her husband Carl, eager to help the trio reach a Jewish community in time, drove them more than 300 miles to catch a flight to New York. Rabbi Sudak arrived at his relatives' home in New York just 7 minutes before candle-lighting. That Rosh Hashanah was like no other, as Rabbi Sudak reflected on this experience. "It was a very momentous moment of change in my life because I had witnessed four days of absolute pure generosity."

#### QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. How do you imagine Rabbi Sudak and the other passengers must have felt at first about being diverted to Gander?
2. How did Rabbi Sudak change his perspective of this unfortunate turn of events?



#### THINKING MORE DEEPLY

A classic example of someone in our time who redeemed the past through action in the future is the late Steve Jobs. In his 2005 speech at Stanford University, now with more than 40 million YouTube views, he describes three crushing blows in his life: dropping out of college, being fired by Apple – the

company he had founded, and being diagnosed with cancer. Each one, he said, had led to something important and positive.

After dropping out of college, he was able to audit any course he wished. He attended one on calligraphy and this inspired him to build into his first computers, a range of proportionally

spaced fonts, that gave computer script an elegance that had previously been available only to professional printers. Getting fired from Apple led him to start a new computer company, NeXT, that developed capabilities he would eventually bring back to Apple, as well as acquiring Pixar Animation, the most creative of computer-animated film studios. The diagnosis of cancer led him to a new focus in life. It made him realise: “Your time is limited, so don’t waste it living someone else’s life.”

Jobs’ ability to construct these stories – what he called “connecting the dots” – was surely not unrelated to his ability to survive the blows he suffered in life. Few could have recovered from the blow of being dismissed by his own company, and fewer still could have achieved the transformation he did at Apple when he returned, creating the iPod, iPhone and iPad. He did not believe in tragic inevitabilities. Though he would not have put it in these terms, he knew that by action in the future we can redeem the past.

Professor Mordechai Rotenberg of the Hebrew University has argued that this kind of technique, of reframing the past, could be used as a therapeutic technique in rehabilitating patients suffering from a crippling sense of guilt. If we constantly regret the past, then it will constantly hold us back like a ball and chain around our legs. We cannot change the past, but we can reinterpret it by integrating it into a new and larger narrative. That is what Joseph did, and having used the technique to survive a personal life of unparalleled ups and downs, he then used it to help his brothers overcome their guilt.

We find this in Judaism throughout its history. Starting with the Prophets, who reinterpreted biblical narrative for their day. Since then, there has hardly been a generation in all of Jewish history when Jews did not reinterpret their texts in the light of the present tense experience. We are the people who tell stories, and then retell them repeatedly, each time with a slightly different emphasis, establishing a connection between then and now, rereading the past in the light of the present as best we can.

It is by telling stories that we make sense of our lives and the life of our people. And it is by allowing the present to reshape our

understanding of the past that we redeem history and make it live as a positive force in our lives.

I can personally attest to this way of looking back at events in my life, and seeing the journey differently. In 1978, I visited the Lubavitcher Rebbe to seek his advice on which career I should follow. I did the usual thing everyone did: I sent him a note with the options, A, B or C, expecting him to indicate which one I should follow. The options were to become a barrister, or an economist, or an academic philosopher, whether as a fellow of my college in Cambridge or as a professor somewhere else.

The Rebbe read out the list and said “No” to all three. My mission, he said, was to instead train rabbis at Jews’ College (now the London School of Jewish Studies) and to become a congregational Rabbi myself. So, overnight, I found myself saying goodbye to all my aspirations, to everything for which I had been trained.

The strange thing is that I ultimately fulfilled all those ambitions despite walking in the opposite direction. I became an honorary barrister (Bencher) of Inner Temple and delivered a law lecture in front of 600 barristers and the Lord Chief Justice. I delivered Britain’s two leading economics lectures, the Mais Lecture and the Hayek Lecture at the Institute of Economic Affairs. I became a fellow of my Cambridge college and a philosophy professor at several universities. I identified with the biblical Joseph because, so often, what I had dreamed of came to be at the very moment that I had given up hope. Only in retrospect did I discover that the Rebbe was not telling me to give up my career plans. He was simply charting a different route and a more beneficial one.

**I believe that the way we write the next chapter in our lives affects all the others that have come before. By action in the future, we can redeem much of the pain of the past.**

#### QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. Can you think of any examples of times in Jewish history where we have found positivity after disaster?



#### FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

*“If we search for revelation in history, we will find it, more compellingly than anywhere else, in the history of that unusual people, our ancestors... Judaism is the insistence that history does have a meaning. Therefore each one of us has significance. We are not free-floating atoms in infinite space. We are letters in the scroll.*

***A Letter in the Scroll, p. 38 and p. 42 (published in Great Britain as *Radical Then, Radical Now*, p. 36 and p. 41)***



#### AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. Why does Joseph revise the way he presents the events that led to his arrival in Egypt?
2. How can the future change the way we understand the past?
3. Can you think of any examples in your life of events that seemed bad at the time but in hindsight were meaningful?



## QUESTION TIME

Do you want to win a **Koren Aviv Weekday Siddur**? Email [CCFamilyEdition@rabbisacks.org](mailto:CCFamilyEdition@rabbisacks.org) with your name, age, city and your best question or observation about the ideas from the *Covenant & Conversation Family Edition*. **Entrants must be 18 or younger**. Thank you to Koren Publishers for kindly donating these wonderful siddurim.



## EDUCATIONAL COMPANION TO THE QUESTIONS

### IN A NUTSHELL

1. Joseph's brothers must have felt terrible guilt for many years for the way they had treated Joseph, especially when they saw their father's grief. Joseph comforted them by reassuring them that this was always God's plan, and although they were responsible for their actions, they were also fulfilling God's plan for the Joseph and the Jewish People. He told them he forgave them, so that they could forgive themselves.

### THE CORE IDEA

1. When something happens to us, we have limited information to decide if this is good or bad for our life story. We decide based on our own short-term vision and plan for our life. But at a later time, when we can reflect on how this event changed our life in the longer term, we can often decide that what originally felt like a bad occurrence was in fact for the best. This idea encourages us to be positive and have hope, and to make the best of a bad event, in order to redeem it from being bad.
2. This could be something as insignificant as missing the bus, and because of this bumping into an old friend. Or something more significant, like being rejected from a school, university, or job, which led to a different opportunity and experience that shaped your life and took it in a different direction.

### IT ONCE HAPPENED...

1. When things don't go to plan, it can be a deeply frustrating feeling. This story is a profound example of this. Rabbi Sudak had important work and preparations to do for Rosh Hashanah in London, and now, not only would he be unable to visit the grave of the Rebbe before Yom Tov, but there was a chance he would also not be able to get home in time for Rosh Hashanah. The frustration and disappointment must have been great, for him and the other 6,700 stranded passengers.
2. He managed to see this as an opportunity, to give and receive love and kindness. It became a very important and positive experience. He was inspired by seeing the people of Gander mobilise to care for thousands of unexpected guests, and he also saw this as his opportunity to care for the needs of the Jews in Gander at that time, and bring them closer to Judaism. He turned a potentially negative event into a deeply positive and meaningful one.

### THINKING MORE DEEPLY

1. Jewish history contains a long list of catastrophic events that have led to positive opportunities for national growth. From slavery in Egypt at the outset of Jewish history, through years of exile, culminating in the Holocaust, the character of the Jewish people, and the evolution of Judaism and Jewish culture, has been deeply impacted by these events. Jews have taken each tragic event and found a way to redeem it for the good and positive.

### AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

These questions are all open, to encourage thought and debate. There are no wrong answers. However, here are some thoughts to consider:

1. Joseph realised that the trauma of this period in his life was a necessary step for him, leading him to achieve the position he now held, which was part of God's plan for both Egypt and Jewish history. He stressed this to his brothers so they would not feel grief and shame at the role they played, and this would allow the brothers to be reconciled with him.
2. Bad events in life can lead to positive outcomes. When we manage to see the positive in the longer term, we can then revisit the bad event and decide they weren't so bad after all. In fact, it was an important event in our lives, leading to an ultimately positive outcome.
3. This could be something as insignificant as missing the bus, and because of this bumping into an old friend. Or something more significant, like being rejected from a school, university, or job, which led to a different opportunity and experience that shaped your life and took it in a different direction.