



# COVENANT & CONVERSATION

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

FINDING FAITH IN THE PARSHA WITH RABBI SACKS

*"With thanks to The Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation for their generous sponsorship of Covenant & Conversation. Maurice was a visionary philanthropist. Vivienne was a woman of the deepest humility. Together, they were a unique partnership of dedication and grace, for whom living was giving."*

בס"ד

ויחי תש"ף  
Vayechi 5780

**The Future  
of the Past**

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

**Family is the birthplace of freedom.  
Caring for one another, we learn to care for the common good.**



### PARSHAT VAYECHI IN A NUTSHELL

After all the family fights and arguments we have seen in the Book of Bereishit, this chapter gives a peaceful end to the story. Jacob is finally reunited with his beloved son Joseph, and meets his grandsons for the first time. This is the only time in the Torah we see a grandfather together with his grandchildren in this way. He blesses them, and then, just before he dies, he also blesses his twelve sons.

He is buried in the cave of Machpelah with his parents Isaac and Rebecca, and his grandparents Abraham and Sarah.

After their father's death, the brothers worry that Joseph will take revenge for what they did to him all those years ago. So Joseph explains to his brothers again that he forgives them.

Joseph also promises his brothers that God will eventually bring the family back to the Israel, and then he dies.

With this, the story of Abraham's family concludes, and we are ready to begin a new age – the birth of Israel as a nation – in the Book of Shemot.

### QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. Why do you think there are so many family fights in the book of Bereishit?



### THE CORE IDEA

If you want to understand what a book is about, look carefully at how it ends. Genesis ends with three deeply significant scenes.

First, Jacob blesses his grandsons, Ephraim and Manasseh. This is the blessing that Jewish parents use on Friday nights to bless their children. Lord Jacobovits, who was Chief Rabbi before me, used to ask why this is the blessing we use for our children, rather than all the other blessings in the Torah? He gave a beautiful reply. He said, all the other *brachot* are from fathers to sons – and between fathers and sons there can be tension. *Jacob's blessing of Ephraim and Manasseh is the only instance in the Torah of a grandparent blessing a grandchild.* And between grandparents and grandchildren there is no tension, only pure love.

Second, Jacob blesses his twelve sons. This time there is some lingering tension. Jacob's blessings to his eldest three sons, Reuven, Shimon and Levi, read more like curses than blessings. Yet the fact is that he is blessing all twelve together in the same room at the same time. We have not seen this before. There is no record of Abraham blessing either Ishmael or Isaac. Isaac blesses Esau and Jacob separately. The mere fact that Jacob is able to gather his sons together for this moment is unique, and important. In the next chapter – the first of the Book of Exodus – the Israelites are, for the first time, described as a people. They had to first be able to live together as a family, before they could grow into a nation.

Third, after the death of Jacob, the brothers asked Joseph to forgive them, which he does. He had also done so earlier,

but the brothers were worried that he had been waiting until their father died, as Esau at one point promised to do, before exacting vengeance. Sons do not take revenge within the family while the father is alive – that seems to have been the principle in those days. Joseph speaks directly to their fears and puts them at rest. “You intended to harm me but God intended it for good,” he says.

The Torah is telling us an unexpected message here: *the family is prior to all else*, to the land, the nation, politics, economics, the pursuit of power and the accumulation of wealth. From an external point of view, the impressive story is that Joseph reached the heights of power in Egypt. But when we turn the page and begin the Book of Exodus, we discover that the position of the Israelites in Egypt was very vulnerable indeed, and all the power Joseph had centralised

in the hands of Pharaoh would eventually be used against them.

Genesis is in fact not about power. It is about families. Because that is where life together begins, and where we learn to care and love.



## IT ONCE HAPPENED...

*In 1939 Lord Richard Attenborough (15), Sir David Attenborough (13), and their brother John (11) were living with their parents in Leicester, England and two young girls aged 10 and 12 were staying with them for a short while. Their mother had recently died and their father had been taken as a prisoner in Germany. The plan was that the girls would soon journey to the United States where they had relatives, but then war was declared and they realised that they would now be unable to cross the Atlantic. What was to be done?*

*The Attenborough parents wanted to offer the girls a home for the duration of the war, but they felt it was a decision that could only be made as a family. Richard never forgot how his parents called him and his two brothers into the study and told them the situation. They explained that the two girls, Helga and Irene, were Jewish and without a home. They had escaped to the UK on the Kindertransport, but they had no one to care for them and nowhere to go.*

*Lord Attenborough recalled his parents' words. "We want to adopt the girls. We think it is the right thing to do. But we will only do it if you agree. It will call for sacrifices. We were a family of five. Now we will be a family of seven. There will be things we won't be able to afford. There will be things you will have to*

*share. One of those will be love. You know how much we love you. But now you will have to share that love with Helga and Irene. We will have to show them special affection, because you have a family, but now they have no one at all."*

*The boys agreed. Thinking back to that day, Lord Attenborough describes it as the most important day of his life. He had been given the chance to sacrifice something for someone else. He had been invited by his parents to join them in an act of courage and generosity.*

*The Attenboroughs never lost touch with Helga and Irene, who they immediately accepted as their sisters. "They helped shape our lives, and we loved them", he said.*

## QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. What lessons and values did the Attenborough children learn when they brought Helga and Irene into the family?
2. Can you learn these lessons from your family even without a profound act of kindness such as this? How?



## THINKING MORE DEEPLY

The Torah does not imply that there is anything easy about making and sustaining a family. The patriarchs and matriarchs – Sarah, Rebecca and Rachel especially – know the agony of infertility. They know what it is to wait in hope and wait again.

Sibling rivalry is a repeated theme of the Torah. The Psalm tells us “how good and pleasant it is for brothers to dwell together.” It might have added, “and how rare.” Almost at the beginning of the human story, Cain kills Abel. There are tensions between Sarah and Hagar that led to Hagar and Ishmael being sent

away. There is rivalry between Jacob and Esau, and between Joseph and his brothers, in both cases coming close to murder.

Yet there is no reduction of the significance of the family. To the contrary, it is the main vehicle of blessing. Children figure as central to God's blessings. It is as if the Torah were telling us, with great honesty, that yes, families are challenging. The relationship between husband and wife, and between parent and child, is rarely straightforward. But we have to work at it. There is no guarantee that we will always get it right. It is by no

means clear that the parents in Genesis always got it right. But this is our most human institution.

The family is where love brings new life into the world. That in itself makes it the most spiritual of all institutions. It is also where we have our most important and lasting moral education. To quote Harvard political scientist, the late James Q. Wilson, the family is “an arena in which conflicts occur and must be managed.” People within the family “love and quarrel, share and sulk, please and disappoint.” Families, he says, “are the world in which we shape and manage our emotions.”

The Torah guides us through areas that have been identified in the 20<sup>th</sup> century as the most important arenas of conflict. Freud saw the Oedipus complex – the desire to create space for yourself by removing your father – as one of the primary drivers of human emotion. Rene Girard saw sibling rivalry as a, perhaps the, source of human violence.

I have argued in the past that the story of the binding of Isaac is directed precisely at the Oedipus complex. God does not want Abraham to kill Isaac. He wants him to relinquish ownership of Isaac. He wants to abolish one of the most widespread beliefs of the ancient world, known in Roman law as the principle of *Patria potestas*, that parents own their children. Once this has gone, and children become legal personalities in their own right, then much of the force of the Oedipus complex is removed. Children have space to be themselves.

I have argued also that the story of Jacob’s wrestling match with the angel is directed against the source of sibling rivalry, namely *mimetic desire*, the desire to have what your brother has because he has it. Jacob becomes Israel when he ceases wanting to be Esau and stands tall as himself.

So Genesis is not a hymn to the virtue of families. It is a candid, honest, fully worked through account of what it is to confront some of the main problems within families, even the best.

Genesis ends on these three important resolutions: first, that grandparents are part of the family and their blessing is

important. Second, Jacob shows it is possible to bless all your children, even if you have a fractured relationship with some of them. Third, Joseph shows it is possible to forgive your family, even if they have done you great harm.

People who look to the state, politics and power, to deliver the good, the beautiful and the true – the Hellenistic tradition – tend to regard the family and all it presupposes in terms of fidelity and responsibility as a distraction. But for people who understand, not just the importance of politics but also its limitations and dangers, relationships between husband and wife, parent and child, grandparents and grandchildren, and siblings, are the most important basis of freedom. That is an insight that runs all the way through Alexis de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*, summed up in his statement that “as long as family feeling was kept alive, the opponent of oppression was never alone.”

James Q. Wilson put it beautifully: “We learn to cope with the people of this world because we learn to cope with the members of our family. Those who flee the family flee the world; bereft of the former’s affection, tutelage, and challenges, they are unprepared for the latter’s tests, judgements, and demands.”

That, surprisingly, is what Genesis is about. Not about the creation of the world, which occupies only one chapter, but about how to handle family conflict. Once Abraham’s descendants can create strong families, they can move from Genesis to Exodus and their birth as a nation.

**I believe that family is the birthplace of freedom. Caring for one another, we learn to care for the common good.**

#### QUESTION TO PONDER:

What is the connection between freedom and the family?



#### FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

*“In the family I learn the complex choreography of love – what it means to give and take and share, to grow from obedience to responsibility, to learn, challenge, rebel, make mistakes, to forgive and be forgiven, to argue and make up, to win without triumph and know when to lose graciously. It is where we acquire emotional intelligence, that delicate negotiation between the given and the chosen, the things I will and the things resistant to my will.”*

***Celebrating Life, p.100***



#### AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. What important lessons can we learn from our families and family tensions?
2. Why does the Torah spend a whole book on Abraham and his family?
3. Why do you think family is such a central value to Judaism?



## QUESTION TIME

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## EDUCATIONAL COMPANION TO THE QUESTIONS

### IN A NUTSHELL

1. Families fight. This is the most natural thing in the world. Human beings, when forced to live in close proximity, find it challenging to manage the needs and agenda of other individuals next to their own or next to the needs of the group. The Torah presents our ancestors as realistic models for us to follow, and to do this, the Torah includes the human elements of their relationships, presenting their mistakes and faults, and the way they are overcome. These characters can have a powerful impact on us from the way they managed to love despite the tensions and fights and mistakes. That is the message for us to learn for our own lives.

### THE CORE IDEA

1. Families are made up of diverse people. Even when they share DNA, they often have wildly different personalities and needs and dreams. It is only natural when diverse people live in close proximity there will be tensions. Because of the familiarity and love and trust usually present in families, tensions come to the fore even more than outside of the family context, where we invest more emotional energy holding these tensions at bay. Because grievances are repeated, we feel frustrated, and because we feel safe with and/or accustomed to our families, we are often comfortable expressing ourselves more honestly and this will often lead to clashes.
2. Family is a core value in Judaism. It is clear to us how important a strong and nurturing family environment is for children to develop into healthy adults. And the message here is that family is the safe environment where we learn the important lessons in life such as how to manage conflict between people, while still basing relationships on love and mutual respect.

### IT ONCE HAPPENED...

1. They learned the values of kindness, self-sacrifice, responsibility, morality, courage, gratitude for what they had, and the importance of love and security, and what is really valuable in life (love and family rather than possessions and money). These lessons stayed with them for the rest of their lives.
2. While this family had a profound opportunity to learn and act on these lessons when two Jewish refugee children were brought into their home, these lessons can also be learned in any family environment. Family is the first place we experience these values and are forced to learn how to share, how to be generous, how to love and be loved, etc. These lessons, experienced and experimented within our families, are what form us into moral, compassionate human beings, and ready us to live adult lives in wider society.

### THINKING MORE DEEPLY

1. Freedom is a value based on the rights of the individual to dignity, safety, and protection from oppression. The right to think and live as we choose (providing this brings no harm to others). These ideas are experienced and absorbed for the first time when we are children growing up in a strong family unit, where each individual is respected and loved for who they are. Family is the first place we learn how to disagree with someone, and still maintain love and respect for them.

### AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. Being human means making mistakes. Being human means having personal needs that sometimes conflict with those around us. In the close living proximity of the family, this can sometimes cause tensions and lead to fights. Learning to deal with these tensions in the context of the family where the foundation of relationships is love is an ideal process. The family provides a safe environment to learn how to live with diversity and conflict. The message of family is also that despite how different we can be from each other (which can lead to tension and conflict), we are one unit – we have much more in common with each other than what separates us. This is a message for all of humanity.
2. The Torah wants to present our ancestors as humans, with flaws just like us, dealing with challenges just like us. This makes them even more powerful role models than if they were flawless and perfect. Showing the origins of the Jewish people through the families of their ancestors, even before they became a nation, is an important message – "family first". This means we learn how to be humans in the family unit before we can become members of a nation or society. This is one of the reasons why family has become a core and central value in Judaism.
3. One reason is that this is where we learn to be humans, this is where we first learn the basic values of Judaism and humanity. It is also a way to ensure the continuity of the Jewish people, something that cannot be taken for granted. Furthermore, Judaism believes in a moral vision for the world, and in the responsibility of the Jewish people to be instrumental in helping achieve this. This is the Jewish national destiny. The focus on family and children strengthens our ability to achieve this national destiny.