



COVENANT & CONVERSATION

THOUGHTS ON THE WEEKLY PARSHA

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"L

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לעילוי נשמת
HaRav Ya'akov Zvi ben David Arie'el zt"l

לעילוי נשמות

פנחס בן יעקב אשר וגולדה בת ישראל דוד אייז"ל ועזריאל בן אריה לייב ומעניה בת יצחק שרטר ע"ה

Disguise

Joseph is now the ruler of Egypt. The famine he predicted has come to pass. It extends beyond Egypt to the land of Canaan. Seeking to buy food, Joseph's brothers make the journey to Egypt. They arrive at the palace of the man in charge of grain distribution:

Now Joseph was governor of the land [Egypt]; it was he who dispensed food to all its people. When Joseph's brothers arrived, they bowed down to him, their faces to the ground. Joseph recognised his brothers as soon as he saw them, but he acted like a stranger and spoke harshly to them . . . Joseph recognised his brothers, but they did not recognise him. (Gen. 42:6-8)

We owe to Robert Alter the idea of a 'type-scene', a drama enacted several times with variations; and these are particularly in evidence in the book of Bereishit. There is no universal rule as to how to decode the

significance of a type-scene. One example is boy-meets-girl-at-well, an encounter that takes place three times, between Abraham's servant and Rebecca, Jacob and Rachel, and Moses and the daughters of Jethro. Here, the setting is probably not significant (wells are where strangers met in those days, like the water-dispenser in an office). What we must attend to in these three episodes is their variations: Rebecca's activism, Jacob's show of strength, Moses' passion for justice. How people act toward strangers at a well is, in other words, a test of their character. In some cases, however, a type-scene seems to indicate a recurring theme. That is the case here. If we are to understand what is at stake in the meeting between Joseph and his brothers, we have to set it alongside three other episodes, all of which occur in Bereishit.

The first takes place in Isaac's tent. The patriarch is old and blind. He tells his elder son to go out into the field, trap an animal, and prepare a meal so that he can bless him. Surprisingly soon, Isaac hears someone enter. "Who are you?" he asks. "I am Esau, your elder son," the voice replies. Isaac is not convinced. "Come close and let me feel you, my son. Are you really Esau or not?" He reaches out and feels the rough texture of the skins covering his arms. Still unsure, he asks again, "But are

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you really my son Esau?" The other replies, "I am." So Isaac blesses him: "Ah, the smell of my son is like the smell of a field blessed by God." But it is not Esau. It is Jacob in disguise.

Scene two: Jacob has fled to his uncle Laban's house. Arriving, he meets and falls in love with Rachel, and offers to work for her father for seven years in order to marry her. The time passes quickly: the years "seemed like a few days because he loved her." The wedding day approaches. Laban makes a feast. The bride enters her tent. Late at night, Jacob follows her. Now at last he has married his beloved Rachel. When morning comes, he discovers that he has been the victim of a deception. It is not Rachel. It is Leah in disguise.

Scene three: Judah has married a Canaanite girl and is now the father of three sons. The first married a local girl, Tamar, but died mysteriously young, leaving his wife a childless widow. Following a pre-Mosaic version of the law of levirate marriage, Judah married his second son to Tamar so that she could have a child "to keep his brother's name alive." Tamar's second husband was loathe to have a son that would, in effect, belong to his late brother so he "spilled his seed," and for this he too died young. Judah is then reluctant to give Tamar his third son, so she is left an *agunah*, "chained," bound to someone she is prevented from marrying, and unable to marry anyone else.

The years pass. Judah's own wife dies. Returning home from sheep-shearing, he sees a veiled prostitute by the side of the road. He asks her to sleep with him, promising, by way of payment, a kid from the flock. She asks him for his "seal and its cord, and his staff" as security. The next day he sends a



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friend to deliver the kid, but the woman has disappeared. The locals deny all knowledge of her. Three months later, Judah hears that his daughter-in-law Tamar has become pregnant. He is incensed. Bound to his youngest son, she was not allowed to have a relationship with anyone else. She must have been guilty of adultery. “Bring her out so that she may be burnt,” he says. She is brought to be killed, but she asks one favour. She tells one of the people to take to Judah the seal, and cord, and staff. “The father of my child,” she says, “is the man to whom these things belong.” Immediately, Judah understands. Tamar, unable to marry yet honour-bound to have a child to perpetuate the memory of her first husband, has tricked her father-in-law into performing the duty he should have allowed his youngest son to do. “She is more righteous than I,” Judah admits. He thought he had slept with a prostitute. But it was Tamar in disguise.

That is the context against which the meeting between Joseph and his brothers must be understood. The man the brothers bow down to bears no resemblance to a Hebrew

shepherd. He speaks Egyptian. He is dressed in an Egyptian ruler’s robes. He wears Pharaoh’s signet ring and the gold chain of authority. They think they are in the presence of an Egyptian prince, but it is Joseph – their brother – in disguise.

Four scenes, four disguises, four failures to see behind the mask. What do they have in common? Something very striking indeed. It is only by not being recognised that Jacob, Leah, Tamar and Joseph can be recognised, in the sense of attended, taken seriously, heeded. Isaac loves Esau, not Jacob. He loves Rachel, not Leah. Judah thinks of his youngest son, not the plight of Tamar. Joseph is hated by his brothers. Only when they appear as something or someone else can they achieve what they seek – for Jacob, his father’s blessing; for Leah, a husband; for Tamar, a son; for Joseph, the non-hostile attention of his brothers. The plight of these four individuals is summed up in a single poignant phrase: “Joseph recognised his brothers, but they did not recognise him.”

Do the disguises work? In the short term, yes; but in the long term, not necessarily. Jacob suffers greatly for having taken Esau’s blessing. Leah, though she marries Jacob, never wins his love. Tamar had a child (in fact, twins) but Judah “was not intimate with her anymore.” Joseph – well, his brothers no longer hated him but they feared him. Even after his assurances that he bore them no grudge, they still thought he would take revenge on them after their father died. What we achieve in disguise is never the love we sought.

But something else happens. Jacob, Leah, Tamar and Joseph discover that, though they may never win the affection of those from whom they seek it, God is with them; and that, ultimately, is enough. A disguise is

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an act of hiding – from others, and perhaps from oneself. From God, however, we cannot, nor do we need to, hide. He hears our cry. He answers our unspoken prayer. He heeds the unheeded and brings them comfort.

In the aftermath of the four episodes, there is no healing of relationship but there is a mending of identity. That is what makes them, not secular narratives but deeply religious chronicles of psychological growth and maturation. What they tell us is simple and profound: those who stand before God need no disguises to achieve self-worth when standing before humankind. ■

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