

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"l

Covenant & Conversation

Why is Jacob the father of our people, the hero of our faith? We are "the congregation of Jacob", "the children of Israel." Yet it was Abraham who began the Jewish journey, Isaac who was willing to be sacrificed, Joseph who saved his family in the years of famine, Moses who led the people out of Egypt and gave it its laws. It was Joshua who took the people into the Promised land, David who became its greatest king, Solomon who built the Temple, and the prophets through the ages who became the voice of God.

The account of Jacob in the Torah seems to fall short of these other lives, at least if we read the text literally. He has tense relationships with his brother Esau, his wives Rachel and Leah, his father-in-law Laban, and with his three eldest children, Reuben, Simon and Levi. There are times when he seems full of fear, others when he acts -- or at least seems to act -- with less than total honesty. In reply to Pharaoh he says of himself, "The days of my life have been few and hard" (Gen. 47:9). This is less than we might expect from a hero of faith.

That is why so much of the image we have of Jacob is filtered through the lens of midrash -- the oral tradition preserved by the sages. In this tradition, Jacob is all good, Esau all bad. It had to be this way -- so argued R. Zvi Hirsch Chajes in his essay on the nature of midrashic interpretation -- because otherwise we would find it hard to draw from the biblical text a clear sense of right and wrong, good and bad. The Torah is an exceptionally subtle book, and subtle books tend to be misunderstood. So the oral tradition made it simpler: black and white instead of shades of grey.

Yet perhaps, even without midrash, we can find an answer -- and the best way of so doing is to think of the idea of a journey.

Judaism is about faith as a journey. It begins with the journey of Abraham and Sarah, leaving behind their "land, birthplace and father's house" and travelling

to an unknown destination, "the land I will show you."

The Jewish people is defined by another journey in a different age: the journey of Moses and the Israelites from Egypt across the desert to the Promised Land.

That journey becomes a litany in the parsha of Massei: "They left X and they camped in Y. They left Y and they camped in Z." To be a Jew is to move, to travel, and only rarely, if ever, to settle down. Moses warns the people of the danger of settling down and taking the status quo for granted, even in Israel itself: "When you have children and grandchildren, and have been established in the land for a long time, you might become decadent" (Deut. 4:25).

Hence the rules that Israel must always remember its past, never forget its years of slavery in Egypt, never forget on Sukkot that our ancestors once lived in temporary dwellings, never forget that it does not own the land -- it belongs to God -- and we are merely there as God's gerim ve-toshavim, "strangers and sojourners" (Lev. 25:23).

Why so? Because to be a Jew means not to be fully at home in the world. To be a Jew means to live within the tension between heaven and earth, creation and revelation, the world that is and the world we are called on to make; between exile and home, and between the universality of the human condition and the particularity of Jewish identity. Jews don't stand still except when standing before God. The universe, from galaxies to subatomic particles, is in constant motion, and so is the Jewish soul.

We are, we believe, an unstable combination of dust of the earth and breath of God, and this calls on us constantly to make decisions, choices, that will make us grow to be as big as our ideals, or, if we choose wrongly, make us shrivel into small, petulant creatures obsessed by trivia. Life as a journey means striving each day to be greater than we were the day before, individually and collectively.

If the concept of a journey is a central metaphor of Jewish life, what in this regard is the difference between Abraham, Isaac and Jacob?

Abraham's life is framed by two journeys both of which use the phrase Lech lecha, "undertake a journey", once in Genesis 12 when he was told to leave his land and father's house, the other in Gen. 22:2 at the binding of Isaac when he was told, "Take your son, the only one you love -- Isaac -- and go [lech lecha] to the region of Moriah."

This issue of Toras Aish is dedicated by
Mr. & Mrs. Itzy Weisberg
 in memory of
Mr. Hyman Weisberg z"l
 חיים ניסן בן יצחק אייזק ז"ל
 נפטר ט"ו טבת תש"כ

What is so moving about Abraham is that he goes, immediately and without question, despite the fact that both journeys are wrenching in human terms. In the first he has to leave his father. In the second he has to let go of his son. He has to say goodbye to the past and risk saying farewell to the future. Abraham is pure faith. He loves God and trusts Him absolutely. Not everyone can achieve that kind of faith. It is almost superhuman.

Isaac is the opposite. It is as if Abraham, knowing the emotional sacrifices he has had to make, knowing too the trauma Isaac must have felt at the binding, seeks to protect his son as far as lies within his power. He makes sure that Isaac does not leave the Holy Land (see Gen. 24:6 -- that is why Abraham does not let him travel to find a wife). Isaac's one journey (to the land of the Philistines, in Gen. 26) is limited and local. Isaac's life is a brief respite from the nomadic existence Abraham and Jacob both experience.

Jacob is different again. What makes him unique is that he has his most intense encounters with God -- they are the most dramatic in the whole book of Genesis -- in the midst of the journey, alone, at night, far from home, fleeing from one danger to the next, from Esau to Laban on the outward journey, from Laban to Esau on his homecoming.

In the midst of the first he has the blazing epiphany of the ladder stretching from earth to heaven, with angels ascending and descending, moving him to say on waking, "God is truly in this place but I did not know it... This must be God's house and this the gate to heaven" (28:16-17). None of the other patriarchs, not even Moses, has a vision quite like this.

On the second, in our parsha, he has the haunting, enigmatic wrestling match with the man/angel/God, which leaves him limping but permanently transformed -- the only person in the Torah to receive from God an entirely new name, Israel, which may mean, "one who has wrestled with God and man" or "one who has become a prince [sar] before God".

What is fascinating is that Jacob's meetings with angels are described by the same verb 'p-g-sh', (Gen. 28:11, and 32:2) which means "a chance encounter", as if they took Jacob by surprise, which clearly they did. Jacob's most spiritual moments are ones he did not plan. He was thinking of other things, about what he was leaving behind and what lay ahead of him. He was, as it were, "surprised by God."

Jacob is someone with whom we can identify. Not everyone can aspire to the loving faith and total trust of an Abraham, or to the seclusion of an Isaac. But Jacob is someone we understand. We can feel his fear, understand his pain at the tensions in his family, and sympathize with his deep longing for a life of quietude and peace (the sages say about the opening words of next week's parsha that "Jacob longed to live at peace, but was immediately thrust into the troubles of Joseph").

The point is not just that Jacob is the most

human of the patriarchs but rather that at the depths of his despair he is lifted to the greatest heights of spirituality. He is the man who encounters angels. He is the person surprised by God. He is the one who, at the very moments he feels most alone, discovers that he is not alone, that God is with him, that he is accompanied by angels.

Jacob's message defines Jewish existence. It is our destiny to travel. We are the restless people. Rare and brief have been our interludes of peace. But at the dark of night we have found ourselves lifted by a force of faith we did not know we had, surrounded by angels we did not know were there. If we walk in the way of Jacob, we too may find ourselves surprised by God. *Covenant and Conversation is kindly sponsored by the Schimmel Family in loving memory of Harry (Chaim) Schimmel zt"l © 2024 The Rabbi Sacks Legacy Trust rabbisacks.org*

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

“**A**nd Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck, and kissed him, and they wept.” (Genesis 33:4) Years ago, a college classmate provocatively announced that he planned to name his first son after the most maligned figure in the entire Torah: Esau. And the truth is that on the basis of a literal reading of the biblical text (p'shuto shel mikra) a case could be made to defend Esau. In fact, we're doing Jacob, his twin brother, a disservice by ignoring Esau's positive behavior. Only by presenting the best possible portrait of Esau, and then probing where the cracks lie, can we achieve an authentic portrait of Jacob.

Let's consider Esau's defense. After we are introduced to Esau as Isaac's favorite son since 'the hunt was in his [Isaac's] mouth' (Gen. 30:28), we are immediately taken to the fateful scene where Jacob is cooking lentil soup when Esau came home exhausted from the hunt. The hungry hunter asks for some food, but Jacob will only agree to give his brother food in exchange for the birthright. Who is taking advantage of whom? Is not a cunning Jacob taking advantage of an innocent Esau?

Then there is the more troubling question of the stolen blessing. Even without going into the details of how Jacob pretends to be someone he's not, Esau emerges as an honest figure deserving of our sympathy. After all, Esau's desire to personally carry out his father's will meant that he needed a long time to prepare the meat himself. Indeed, it was Esau's diligence in tending to his father that allowed enough time to pass to make it possible for his younger brother to get to Isaac's tent first. Surely, Rebecca must have realized the profound nature of Esau's commitment to his father, for she masterminded Jacob's plan.

Additionally, Esau possessed qualities that many people admire, particularly in America where the spirit of the Wild West lives on. Esau was a hunter and

was not afraid to go out into the unknown. He spoke the language of the buffalo and the Apache. He was a frontiersman: reading tracks, smelling the wind and listening with a sensitive ear. In nineteenth-century England he would have explored Africa. Had he lived in Spain, he would have been at the right side of Columbus. Esau may not be a scholar, but he is nevertheless a larger-than-life, self-made man whose exploits are the stuff of legends.

On his return from the field, Esau realizes that Jacob has already received the blessing originally meant for him. His response cannot fail to touch the reader. Poignantly, Esau begs of his father, “‘Have you but one blessing, my father? Bless me, even me also, O my father.’ And Esau lifted up his voice and wept” (Gen. 27:38).

Does this sound like someone whose name should be shunned forever? We all know the pain of arriving somewhere a moment too late, begging for the door to be reopened. But we’ve missed our chance. We walk away, disappointed and heartbroken, and in Esau’s plea for a blessing we feel his immense pain, and hear our own pain. At this moment, Esau is Everyman and we all weep with him.

Isaac does give him a blessing that ensures he eventually becomes the head of Edom, a powerful nation identified by our Sages as the progenitor of Rome; and, in the final forty-three verses of Vayishlach, we find the civilization created by Esau: its wives, children, grandchildren, chiefs and generals, are meticulously recorded by our Bible.

But it is the beginning of Vayishlach that clinches our pro-Esau case. Jacob finally returns to his ancestral home after an absence of twenty years. Understandably, Jacob is terrified of his brother’s potential reaction, and so in preparation, Jacob sends messengers ahead with exact instructions as to how to address Esau. Informed of the impending approach of Esau’s army of four hundred men, he divides his household into two camps, so that he’s prepared for the worst. But what actually happens defies Jacob’s expectations: Esau is overjoyed and thrilled to see him. The past is the past. “And Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck, and kissed him, and they wept” (Gen. 33:4). Even if Esau is the villain, shouldn’t this moment of reconciliation redeem him? And what a redemption: the two halves of Isaac coming together in an embrace of peace and love and hope. Jacob accepts a cool reconciliation, refusing Esau’s offer of their traveling together. Jacob is somehow constrained to travel a different path. At Jacob’s behest, the brothers separate once again.

The defense rests. Thus described, Esau hardly seems worthy of the official censure of Jewish history as the personification of the anti-Jew. In fact, my college friend had good reason to name his son after Esau. So, why are our Sages so critical of him?

I would suggest our analysis so far overlooks

something central in Esau’s character. Yes, there are positive characteristics of Esau to be found in many Jews across the Diaspora. Many are aggressive, self-made people who weep when they meet a long-lost Jewish brother from Ethiopia or Russia. They have respect for their parents and grandparents, tending to their physical needs and even reciting – or hiring someone to recite – the traditional mourner’s Kaddish for a full year after their death. Financial support and solidarity missions to the State of Israel, combined with their vocal commitment to Jewry and Israel, reflect a highly developed sense of Abrahamic (Jewish) identity, just like Esau seems to have. Esau feels Abrahamic identity with every fiber of his being.

But when it comes to commitment to Abrahamic (Jewish) continuity, to willingness to secure a Jewish future, many of our Jewish siblings are found to be wanting – just like Esau. Undoubtedly, one of the most important factors in keeping us ‘a people apart’, and preventing total Jewish assimilation into the majority culture, has been our unique laws of kashrut. Refusing to break bread with our non-Jewish work colleagues and neighbors has imposed a certain social distance that has been crucial for maintaining our identity. But Esau is willing to give up his birthright for a bowl of lentil soup. Hasn’t the road to modern Jewry’s assimilation been paved with the T-bone steaks and the lobsters that tease the tongues lacking the self-discipline to say no to a tasty dish? Like Esau, the overwhelming majority of Diaspora Jewry has sold its birthright for a cheeseburger.

Esau’s name means fully-made, complete. He exists in the present tense. He has no commitment to past or future. He wants the freedom of the hunt and the ability to follow the scent wherever it takes him. He is emotional about his identity, but he is not willing to make sacrifices for its continuity. Primarily, it is on the surface, as an external cloak that is only skin-deep. That’s why it doesn’t take more than a skin-covering for Jacob to enter his father’s tent and take on the character of Esau. Indeed, Esau is even called Edom, red, after the external color of the lentil soup. Esau has no depth; he is Mr. Superficial!

And what’s true for a bowl of soup is true for his choice of wives. Esau marries Hittite women. And that causes his parents to feel a ‘bitterness of spirit’ (Gen. 27:35). No wonder! The decision of many modern Jews to ‘marry out’ has reached an American average of 52%! The ‘bitterness of spirit’ continues to be felt in many families throughout the Diaspora. Even those who marry out and continue to profess a strong Jewish identity cannot commit to Jewish continuity. Perhaps Esau even mouthed the argument I’ve heard from those I’ve tried to dissuade from marrying out. ‘But she has a Jewish name! She even looks Jewish!’ He may have said, ‘Her name is Yehudit [literally, a Jewess, from Judah]; she has a wonderful fragrance [Basmat means perfume]’ (Gen. 26:34).

On the other hand, Jacob's name is a future-tense verb meaning 'he will triumph at the end.' Jacob is constantly planning for the future, anticipating what he must do to perpetuate the birthright. Similarly, if we want to continue as a people we have to realize two things from the lesson of our almost-forefather Esau: don't sell the birthright cheap, and to guarantee a Jewish future, one has to plan strategically. ©2024 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

The struggle with Eisav's angel, as described in the parsha, represents a spiritual and intellectual fight, a contest of ideas, beliefs and debate. The meeting with the physical Eisav in turn represents the struggle of the Jewish people to simply stay alive in a bigoted, cruel, and nearly fatal environment.

Yaakov does not escape unscathed from either confrontation. He is crippled physically and somewhat impoverished financially. Eisav's "evil eye" gazes upon his children and Yaakov is relieved to escape alive, even if damaged in body and purse, separating himself from Eisav physically and from his civilization and worldview.

The scenario is pretty much set for the long dance of Jewish history, with the Jews always attempting to survive in a constantly challenging and brutal society governed by Eisav. The rabbis of Midrash discussed the possibilities of coexistence and even cooperation with Eisav.

Though this debate did not result in any permanent or convincing conclusion, the opinion of Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai that Eisav's hatred of Yaakov is completely irrational and implacable seems to be borne out by history, past and present. The anti-Semitism in today's seemingly enlightened world is so pervasive as to be frightening. And we seem to be powerless to do anything about it.

As is painfully obvious to all, these struggles for continued Jewish existence are ongoing and seemingly unending. All of the foreign ideas and current fads of Western society stand almost unanimously opposed to Torah values and traditional lifestyle. The angel of Eisav changes his program from time to time, but he is always opposed to Torah and moral behavior.

He wavers from totalitarian extreme conservatism to wild liberalism but always is able to wound the Jewish psyche and body no matter what philosophy or culture he now advocates. We limp today from this attack on Jewish values and Torah study and practice.

Jewish parents in America sue school boards for anti-Semitic attitudes, policies and behavior. Yet they would not dream of sending their children to a Jewish school or giving them an intensive Jewish education. The lawsuit is the indicator of the limp inflicted upon us by Eisav's cultural angel.

All agree that Europe is currently a lost continent as far as Jews are concerned. The question most asked of travel agents by Jews today is "Can I wear a kippah on the street there?" Billions of dollars of Jewish treasure pillaged during World War II and immediately thereafter still lie in the hands of Eisav.

And yet we certainly would be satisfied if the world just let us alone but that seems to be a forlorn hope. So our struggle continues but the Lord's promise to us that we will somehow prevail remains valid and true. And that is our hope for continuing on as loyal and steadfast Jews. ©2024 *Rabbi Berel Wein - Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com. For more information on these and other products visit www.rabbiwein.com*

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

On Jacob's journey back to his home, the Torah tells us that his mother Rebecca's wet nurse, Deborah, dies (Genesis 35:8). One wonders, why was Rebecca's nurse traveling with Jacob?

When Rebecca first leaves home to marry Isaac, she is accompanied by her nurse (Genesis 24:59). And when Rebecca sends Jacob away, she tells him that after Esau calms down, she will send for him (27:45).

When Esau is ready, according to the Midrash, Rebecca sends her wet nurse Deborah to Jacob, telling him the time had come for him to return home. As he makes his way back, Deborah dies. She is buried in a place called Alon Bachut (the Oak of Weeping; Rashi, Genesis 35:8).

Nachmanides posits that Jacob cannot have been crying for Deborah – after all, she was only a wet nurse. Echoing Rashi, Nachmanides concludes that the weeping was for Rebecca, his mother. In other words, as he buries Deborah, Jacob hears the news that his mother, too, had died. For this reason, for Rebecca, Jacob sheds tears.

To this day, I remember a Torah talk given by my father, Rabbi Dr. Moshe Weiss, of blessed memory. After citing the classical commentaries, my father suggested that Jacob may indeed have cried for Deborah. After all, she was his mother's helper. In all probability, she helped raise Jacob and Esau. And so, Jacob emotionally remembers the role Deborah had played, and at her burial breaks down and cries.

Recently, yedidi Rabbi David Schwartz shared with me the position of Shadal, who writes on this narrative, "The point of the story is to teach that it is appropriate to honor nurses who work in raising the young, even after they grow up." Perhaps this teaches that the test of a leader is not only how one deals with powerful people, but how one interacts with individuals who are too often taken for granted. Jacob, the last of the patriarchs, a leader of leaders, connected

emotionally and felt indebted to the woman who helped raise him.

In the morning service, we make this point as we recite the Psalms that speak about God building Jerusalem and being the Creator Who counts the stars. In between God's national and cosmic agenda, the Psalmist says, "He [God] heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds." The all-powerful God doesn't forget the needs of individuals, the little people often overlooked (Psalms 147:2-4; I first heard this thought from Rabbi Jonathan Sacks).

My mentor and teacher Rabbi Yehuda Amital, of blessed memory, tells the story of a grandfather who hears his grandchild cry. Rushing across an adjacent room where his son is studying Talmud, he calms the child. In the sweetest way, the grandfather turns to his son and asks, "Didn't you hear your child cry?" Sheepishly his son responds, "I was so immersed in learning, I didn't hear the cry." The grandfather, softly and lovingly, says, "If while you're learning, you can't hear a child cry, your learning is not learning."

In this spirit, Jacob teaches that the key to greatness is not only bringing about change on a colossal level, but also making sure never to forget the Deborahs of this world. Names in the Bible are not just names; they are descriptions of personalities. This is especially evident as Jacob's wives give reasons for the respective names they give their children (Genesis 29, 30).

Stepping back, we too can see how these names have deeper meaning:

- Reuben may be a composite of re'u ben. Ben, in general terms, is a child – and no matter how old we are, we are all children – linked to re'u, which means not only to see, but to empathize. Reuben may mean a person who empathizes.

- Levi is associated with the word melaveh (to escort). Thus, the name describes a person who accompanies or, more broadly, is present for others.

- Dinah has tucked into her name two words: din (literally, judgment), and the letter heh, which represents the name of God. Thus, Dinah may mean one who judges others with the compassion of God.

This principle can apply to all names in the Bible:

- Moshe (Moses), which means "to draw up," speaks of one who assists others, lifting them out of the narrow straits.

- Miriam can be seen as a composite of mir-myrh, a sweet spice—and yam, the depths of the sea. Miriam is suffused with deep, deep sweetness.

And so, too, modern Hebrew names all have meaning: Ari is the light of God; Ronit is one who brings melody to the world.

In fact, even our non-Jewish names may have meaning when written out phonetically in Hebrew. The source for this theory is the Talmud, which gives meaning to the Persian names found in the Book of

Esther when written out in Hebrew (Megillah 13a; see also Yoma 83b). Here are some examples of creatively deciphering English names:

- Gloria may be a composite of gal (to reveal) and re'iyah (vision)—related to the covenantal vision. Gloria could therefore refer to one who leads a life illuminating the covenant.

- Scott sounds like Sukkot, referring to the booths or God's protection as we journeyed through the desert. Thus, Scott speaks of one who gives succor to others.

It is an awesome, holy moment when parents name a newborn child, when a convert is named, or when a Jew receives a Hebrew name later in life. Names reflect past memories, offer hopes for the future, and mystically reflect who we are.

The emphasis on the meaning of names hints that when connecting with others, whatever the circumstances—whether we encounter an Uber driver or a waiter serving our food at a wedding – we should ask the person's name. Names give value; people who are named are no longer objects but subjects.

Beyond the understanding of the name itself, names are infused with additional importance by often honoring one who came before. It is laudable to know something about the person we've been named for and to understand how our names – in their meanings and their remembrances – embody the potential of the person we can one day become. ©2024 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA. Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and Dean of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the Open Orthodox Rabbinical School, and Senior Rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale

ENCYCLOPEDIA TALMUDIT

The Sciatic Nerve

Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

In his book *Krayti Uflayti* (65:16), Rav Yonatan Eibeschitz tells a story of a renowned and learned butcher an expert at *nikur*, removing the sciatic nerve as required by the *halacha*. This butcher announced one day that the nerve customarily removed was the wrong one. Rav Yonatan comments, "I investigated the matter thoroughly and found that the nerve which he claimed was the correct one is found only in male animals and not females. I then showed him the *Smag* (*Sefer Mitzvot HaGadol*), who writes that the prohibition of eating the sciatic nerve applies to both male and female."

Rav Yonatan's conclusion, however, is perplexing. For it is clear from the final line of the *Smag* that it is referring to the obligation of people – both male and female – to follow this law. It is not discussing the gender of the animals at all!

Various possibilities have been offered to resolve this difficulty. One approach posits that Rav Yonatan meant the *Behag* (*Ba'al Halachot Gedolot*), not

the *Smag*. In fact, the *Behag* does write that the sciatic nerve is present in both males and females.

Another approach points to one of the early copies of the *Krayti Uflayti*, which was printed during the lifetime of Rav Eibeschutz, and in which there is a correction in his handwriting. It replaces the letters *samech mem gimmel* (an acronym for *Sefer Mitzvot HaGadol*) with the letters *samech hey nun*, which is an acronym for *sefer hanikur* (the procedure for *nikur*). In fact, when the *Tur* describes the procedure for *nikur* (*Yoreh Deah* 65), he mentions removing the sciatic nerve in both males and females.

An objection, however, has been raised to both of these approaches. When the *Behag* and the *Tur* mention males and females, it is possible that they are referring to nicknames for different nerves (along the lines of today's male and female electrical connectors), rather than to the gender of the animals themselves.

A different refutation of the butcher can be found in Rashi (*Chullin* 90a, s.v. *hane'echalin*). He mentions that the prohibition of eating the sciatic nerve applies to a sin offering (*korban chatat*); we know that only female animals may be used for sin offerings. This is not a conclusive proof, though, as it is possible that Rashi is referring to a communal sin offering (*chatat ha-tzibbur*). This offering is always of a male animal. Thus the question as to whether the butcher's claim could have been correct remains an open one. © 2017 Rabbi M. Weiss and *Encyclopedia Talmudit*

RABBI DAVID LEVIN

The Evil of Shechem

One of the most striking sections of Parashat Vayishlach involved Dinah, Ya'akov's daughter. The Torah tells us, "Now Dinah – the daughter of Leah, whom she had borne to Ya'akov – went out to look over the daughters of the land. Shechem, son of Chamor the Hivite, the prince of the region, saw her; he took her, lay with her, and violated her. He became deeply attached to Dinah, daughter of Ya'akov; he loved the maiden and appealed to the maiden's emotions. So Shechem said to Chamor, his father, as follows, 'Get me this girl for a wife.' Now Ya'akov heard that he had defiled his daughter Dinah, while his sons were with his cattle in the field; so Ya'akov kept silent until their arrival. Chamor, Shechem's father, went out to Ya'akov to speak to him. Ya'akov's sons arrived from the field when they heard. The men were distressed, and were fired deeply with indignation, for he had committed an outrage in Yisrael by lying with a daughter of Ya'akov – such a thing may not be done."

The first issue in this section is the fact that Dinah "went out." HaAmek Davar explains that Dinah went out from the protection and separation that her family had provided her. Ya'akov did not set up his tents in Shechem, but on the outskirts of the city, so that his family would not be living among idolaters. Still, Dinah

is described by the Torah as the daughter of Leah, an unusual construction, and by various commentators as an extrovert like her mother (Midrash, HaAmek Davar, HaRav Sorotzkin), and curious about the outside world (Rashi, HaRav Hirsch). Dinah's curiosity caused her to "go out," and this led to her being violated. The Ohr HaChaim quotes a Midrash that Shechem knew that Dinah was the daughter of Ya'akov and purposefully had the women of his community surround Ya'akov's tent, laughing and playing, to entice Dinah to join them. This indicates that his intention all along was to seduce and possess Dinah even without marriage. Only after being with her did his intention to marry her occur. Both Leah and Ya'akov are blamed for her being violated; Leah because she allowed her extrovert character to supersede the norm of modesty which was appropriate in Ya'akov's house, and Ya'akov because he mistakenly believed that he could prevent Dinah's fate by concealing her in a chest when he introduced his family to Eisav, so that she would not be compromised.

The Torah states that Shechem was the son of Chamor, who was the leader of the people of the city named after his son. When Shechem saw Dinah, the Torah tells us that he took her, lay with her, and violated her. The terms used in Hebrew indicate that he had intercourse with her and made her suffer. The Rabbis argue over whether this was a physical suffering or a combination of a physical and emotional suffering, since all agree that this action was without her consent. HaAmek Davar explains that the term, "ki timei et Dinah, that he defiled Dinah," comes from the word, "tamei, impure," an indication that this was not an act to acquire her in marriage, but an act of inappropriate lust. When Shechem saw how beautiful she was, he planned to integrate the two nations. Some say that he was more enticed by the flocks that Ya'akov had than by any marriage. Rashi explains that afterwards, Shechem tried to soothe her by telling her how rich he was and how powerful, as he desired to marry her. Shechem asked his father to speak with Ya'akov to arrange the marriage.

Chamor offered the daughters of his community to Ya'akov's sons and that Chamor's men should take Ya'akov's daughters. Rashi points out that when Chamor spoke with the sons of Ya'akov, he began by offering his daughters to them. When Chamor and Shechem spoke to their people, they began with offering the men of the city marriages with the daughters of Ya'akov. One of the problems of Chamor's approach was that he equated the lustful motivations of his people with the emotions of the sons of Ya'akov. It is significant that at no time did Chamor offer an apology for Shechem's actions. Dinah's brothers used subterfuge to avoid giving a positive answer to Chamor; they insisted that no uncircumcised male could marry into the family of Ya'akov. Chamor agreed to have all the men circumcised.

Chamor explained to his people, "Only on this

condition will the people acquiesce with us to dwell with us to become a single people: that all our males become circumcised as they themselves are circumcised. Their livestock, their possessions, and all their animals – will they not be ours? Let us only acquiesce to them and they will settle with us.” Here we see the true nature of Chamor; in the short time that Ya’akov and his sons had lived near Shechem, Chamor already had noticed how successful they were with their animals. HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin explains that he was already plotting against Ya’akov, and his son’s inappropriate behavior presented him with an opportunity to kill Ya’akov and gain his wealth.

The Torah continues, “And it came to pass on the third day, when they were in pain, that two of Ya’akov’s sons, Shimon and Levi, Dinah’s brothers, each took his sword and they came upon the city confidently, and killed every male. And Chamor and Shechem, his son, they killed with the blade of the sword; then they took Dinah from Shechem’s house and left.” HaRav Sorotzkin points out that the commentators have great difficulty explaining a justification for killing all the men. This cannot be judged like the act of an individual against his fellowman, but instead must be judged as a battle between two nations. The brothers expressed this as an act against a daughter of Yisrael, thus, an act against all of the nation.

After this, they plundered the city and took its possessions, and the women and children were taken captive. Ya’akov was angry with Shimon and Levi, not because they had punished Chamor and the men of Shechem, but because he understood that the people of Canaan knew that they would lose their land to the B’nei Yisrael, but thought that this would not happen until they returned from exile. Up to this point, they had treated the B’nei Yisrael peacefully, but now, they would be afraid of the B’nei Yisrael and this might cause them to wage war. The plundering of the city was Shimon and Levi’s response to the very plans of the men of Shechem. It was their plan to kill Ya’akov and his sons and take their possessions. Here the punishment fit the intended crime.

Israel is against collective punishment unless it is a nation against a nation. Those who commit acts against the B’nei Yisrael are not acting against an individual, but against the entire nation. They must be treated accordingly. © 2024 Rabbi D. Levin

RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

Migdal Ohr

“I am humbled... for with just my staff I crossed this Jordan, and now I have become two camps” (Beraishis 32:11) When Yaakov heard that Esav was coming to greet him with four hundred generals, he knew Esav intended to fight. In preparation for this, Yaakov divided his camp into two, so that at least some of his entourage would survive. He begins to pray.

He says to Hashem, “You are the G-d of my fathers, Who told me to return to my land and that You would be good to me. You have already done more than I deserve, for I crossed the Jordan alone and now have become two camps. And now, I ask for more, please save me from Esav.” This is a lesson on how to look at what we have in our lives, and realize that we benefit from Hashem’s grace, and not from the merits we earn. Then, too, because Hashem is so great, we need not stop asking Him for more, for His ability is endless.

But let’s examine what Yaakov said. He is now “two camps.” He didn’t have two camps out of necessity, because his group was too large to remain one. He divided it for strategic purposes. If so, why does he compare his original situation to now?

Simply understood, originally, yes, he was alone, unable to divide into two groups, and now he has that capability. This is a great gift. The ability to support one another is a basic tenet of two being better than one. He therefore thanks Hashem for the ability to be two camps even by choice.

More than that, though, he is able to praise Hashem for giving him two camps because he is seeking the positive kindness Hashem showed him. If one has a loaf of bread and divides it, but can be grateful he has two packages of bread, that is someone who has learned the power of gratitude.

Being able to see all the small acts of kindness which we experience on a constant basis takes work, and that is what our forefather Yaakov did. He worked on himself to appreciate every little act of Hashem, and to realize that it wasn’t small at all.

Hashem’s great plan for us is made up of all those “small” occurrences, and when we are able to point to different things, we can not only appreciate them more, but more properly praise Hashem.

There is another aspect to consider as well. Yaakov divided into two camps, but it wasn’t an even division. One was the camp of his family and their basic essentials, while the other was his servants, possessions, and wealth.

Yaakov was grateful to Hashem for being able to distinguish that he had two camps: one that was his family and one that was his fortune. He still had his priorities straight and didn’t become misguided by his wealth. This is indeed something to be grateful for.

While driving to a busy mall, Meir and Dovi schmoozed and discussed all sorts of things. As they approached, Meir uttered a little prayer. “Please, Hashem, let us find a good parking spot close to the door.”

Amused, Dovi said, “Meir, no offense, but I hope G-d has more important things to do than give you a parking space.” “Nope,” replied Meir, “He doesn’t. He does everything.” He then added, “Please, Hashem, show Dovi that it’s true.”

As he finished, a car pulled out of the space next

to the entrance, and Meir pulled into the close spot he'd asked for, just where G-d wanted him. (Based on a true story; names have been changed to protect the bitachon-deficient.) © 2024 Rabbi J. Gewirtz & Migdal Ohr

RABBI DOVID SIEGEL

Haftorah

This week's haftorah reveals to us the true nature of Edom, descendents of Eisav, and displays her two-sided character. It teaches us to recognize Edom's perpetual hatred for the Jewish people and never to trust her friendship. Although there may be moments when Edom displays true brotherhood we must always be wary of these situations and never establish any close association with her.

The haftorah opens with a moving description of a plot acted out against Edom, descendents of Eisav. The prophet Ovadiah says, "How was Eisav pillaged, his hidden treasures sought out? To the borders they sent you (Eisav), all of your allies enticed you: then they were able to overtake you." (1:6) These particular passages refer to an historic moment when the surrounding allies of Edom pretended to rush to her assistance in her war against a powerful neighbor. The allies accompanied Edom all the way to the end of her borders and then abandoned her, leaving her entire country unprotected. They returned inside her country and invaded the entire Edom, now in a most vulnerable state. The prophet draws our attention to this specific episode to demonstrate the unique character of Edom's "brotherhood." Historically speaking, although Edom always appeared politically as a true ally this relationship was only superficial and when the opportunity arose she would typically turn against her loyal "friends" and leave them stranded. This time, her allies gave her a taste of her own medicine and, after luring Edom into war they turned on her and pillaged her entire country.

This two faced nature of Eisav was, in fact, the undertone of our Jewish nation's sad experiences throughout the Roman Empire, largely composed of the descendents of Eisav. To demonstrate this, the prophet Ovadiah focuses on a specific aspect of the Roman era, the role the Edomites played in the destruction of the second Temple. Ovadiah says, "On the day the nations took the Jewish people captive, and entered the Jewish gates casting lots over Yerushalayim, you were also amongst them." (1:11) In truth, the war against Yerushalayim belonged to the Romans but Edom could not stand idly by and therefore gladly participated in the destruction of the walls of the Bais Hamikdash. The Malbim (ad loc.) reminds us that these descendents of Edom were actually alleged Jewish converts who were accepted during the reign of Herod. Initially these Edomites gave the impression of sincerity and were warmly welcomed by the Jewish people. But, as could have been predicted, Edom could not be trusted and when the Jews were down, these "converts" rallied

against their own Jewish "brethren" and readily assisted in destroying them.

This two faced nature expressed itself even in the earlier Babylonian exile when Eisav's descendents offered their assistance in driving the final nails into the Jewish coffin. The Prophet Ovadiah says, "And don't stand by the crossroads to finish off refugees." (1:14) The Yalkut Shimoni (549) explains that this passage refers to the cunning strategy of the Edomites during our first exile. They would station themselves a short distance behind the Babylonian army and wait in ambush for the Jewish refugees. They reasoned, "If the Jews win we'll say we're here to help them and if the Babylonians win we'll help them kill the remaining Jews." Again we are reminded of the unique "brotherhood" of Edom. Due to their two-faced character, they could easily pass for true brothers awaiting to help the Jews in their time of distress. But, in truth, this disguise only provided them a perfect opportunity to eradicate any trace of the Jewish people, should the situation arise.

Edom's pattern of "brotherhood" traces itself all the way back to Edom's predecessor, Eisav. In this week's sedra, (Torah portion) we read that Eisav ran towards his brother Yaakov to embrace him. Although Eisav had been Yaakov's arch enemy from birth, it seems that he had undergone a sincere change of attitude. Yaakov had sent an elaborate present to Eisav as a gesture of true friendship and, for the first time in their lives, a sense of friendship and brotherhood developed. The Torah relates that in response to this gift, "Eisav ran to his brother, embraced him, and "kissed" him. (Bereishis 32:4) However, Chazal note the mysterious dots which appear in the Torah above the word "kissed" and reveal that Eisav did not truly intend to kiss his brother. In actuality, he attempted to bite him, but was unsuccessful in his endeavor. His perpetual hatred was so deep that even in this true moment of friendship he could not subdue his innermost feelings and found himself compelled to express them. In explanation of this, Rashi (ad loc) quotes the classic statement of Rav Shimon Bar Yochai, "It is a set principle that Eisav hates Yaakov." This warns us never to lose sight of Eisav's inner hatred and even when true gestures of "friendship" are displayed never to overlook what lies beneath the surface.

Edom, the present day Eisav will never be our true friend and we must always be wary of her association with us. We should never become too closely related to her and must always remember her true character. This deep seeded hatred remains throughout the generations until the final day when, as Ovadiah says, "The saviors will rise from Mount Zion to judge the (inhabitants of Eisav's) mountain and then the perfect reign will belong to Hashem." (1:21) © 2012 Rabbi D. Siegel & torah.org

