

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

One of the most fundamental questions about the Torah turns out to be one of the hardest to answer. What, from the call of G-d to Abraham in Genesis 12 to the death of Joseph in Genesis 50, is the basic religious principle being taught? What does the entire set of stories about Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and their wives, together with Jacob's sons and daughter, actually tell us? Abraham brought monotheism to a world that had forgotten it, but where do we see this in the actual text of the Torah itself?

Here is the problem. The first eleven chapters of Genesis teach us many fundamentals of faith: that G-d brought the universe into being and declared it good; that G-d made the human person in His image; that G-d gave us freedom and thus the ability to do not only good but also bad; that the good is rewarded, the bad punished and that we are morally responsible for our actions. Chapters 8 and 9 also tell us that G-d made a covenant with Noah and through him with all humanity.

It is equally easy to say what the rest of the Torah, from Exodus to Deuteronomy, teach us: that G-d rescued the Israelites from slavery, setting them on the road to freedom and the Promised Land; that G-d made a covenant with the people as a whole on Mount Sinai, with its 613 commands and its purpose, to establish Israel as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. In short, Genesis 1-11 is about creation. Exodus to Deuteronomy is about revelation and redemption. But what are Genesis 12-50 about?

Abraham, Isaac and Jacob all recognise G-d. But so do non-Jews like Malkizedek, Abraham's contemporary, described as "priest of G-d most high" (14:18). So even does the Pharaoh of Joseph's day, who says about him, 'Can there be another person who has G-d's spirit in him as this man does?' (41:38). G-d speaks to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, but He does likewise to Avimelech king of Gerar (Gen. 20:3-7), and to Laban (31:24). So what is special about the patriarchs?

They seem to teach no new principle of faith. Other than childbirth and rescue from danger, G-d performs no world-transforming miracles through them. They deliver no prophecies to the people of their generation. Other than an ambiguous hint when the

Torah says that Abraham took with him on his journey "the souls they had gathered" (12:5), which may refer to converts they had made, but may equally merely refer to their servants, they attracted no disciples. There is nothing explicit in the text that says they sought to persuade people of the truth of monotheism or that they did battle against idolatry. At most there is a story about how Rachel stole her father's teraphim (31:19) which may or may not have been idols.

To be sure, a persistent theme of the patriarchal stories is the two promises G-d made to each of them, [1] that they would have many descendants and [2] they would inherit the land of Canaan. But G-d also makes promises to Ishmael and Esau, and the Torah seems to go out of its way to tell us that these promises were fulfilled for them before they were fulfilled for the children of the covenant (see Gen. 25:12-18 for the account of Ishmael's children, and Gen. 36 for those of Esau). About Esau's children, for example, it says, "These are the kings who ruled in the land of Edom before any king reigned over the Israelites" (36:31).

So the question is real and puzzling. What was different about the patriarchs? What new did they bring to the world? What difference did monotheism make in their day?

There is an answer but it is an unexpected one. One theme appears no less than six (possibly even seven) times. Whenever a member of the covenantal family leaves his or her own space and enters the wider world of their contemporaries, they encounter a world of sexual free-for-all.

Three times, Abraham (Gen. 12 and 20) and Isaac (Gen. 26) are forced to leave home because of famine. Twice they go to Gerar. Once Abraham goes to Egypt. On all three occasions the husband fears he will be killed so that the local ruler can take his wife into his harem. All three times they put forward the story that their wife is actually their sister. At worst this is a lie, at best a half-truth. In all three cases the local ruler (Pharaoh, Avimelech), protests at their behaviour when



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the truth becomes known. Clearly the fear of death was real or the patriarchs would not have been party to deception.

In the fourth case, Lot in Sodom (Gen. 19), the people cluster round Lot's house demanding that he bring out his two visitors so that they can be raped. Lot offers them his virgin daughters instead. Only swift action by the visitors – angels – who smite the people with blindness, saves Lot and his family from violence.

In the fifth case (Gen. 34), Shechem, a local prince, rapes and abducts Dina when she "went out to visit some of the local girls." He holds her hostage, causing Shimon and Levi to practise deception and bloodshed in the course of rescuing her.

Then comes a marginal case (Gen. 38), the story of Judah and Tamar, more complex than the others and not part of the overall pattern. Finally there is the sixth episode, in this week's parsha, when Potiphar's wife attempts to seduce Joseph. Failing, she accuses him of rape and has him imprisoned.

In other words, there is a continuing theme in Genesis 12-50, a contrast between the people of the Abrahamic covenant and their neighbours, but it is not about idolatry, but rather about adultery, promiscuity, sexual license, seduction, rape and sexually motivated violence.

The patriarchal narrative is surprisingly close to the view of Freud, that eros is one of the two primal drives governing human behaviour (the other is thanatos, the death instinct), and the view of at least one evolutionary psychologist (David Buss, in his books *The Evolution of Desire* and *The Murderer Next Door*) that sex is the main cause of violence amongst humans.

This gives us an entirely new way of thinking about Abrahamic faith. Emunah, the Hebrew word normally translated as faith, does not mean what it is taken to mean in English: a body of dogma, a set of principles, or a cluster of beliefs often held on non-rational grounds. Emunah means faithfulness, loyalty, fidelity, honouring your commitments, doing what you said you would do and acting in such a way as to inspire trust. It has to do with relationships, first and foremost with marriage.

Sex belongs, for the Torah, within the context

of marriage, and it is marriage that comes closest to the deep resonances of the biblical idea of covenant. A covenant is a mutual act of commitment in which two persons, honouring their differences, each respecting the dignity of the other, come together in a bond of love to join their destinies and chart a future together. When the prophets want to speak of the covenantal relationship between G-d and His people, they constantly use the metaphor of marriage.

The G-d of Abraham is the G-d of love and trust who does not impose His will by force or violence, but speaks gently to us, inviting an answering response of love and trust. Genesis' argument against idolatry – all the more impressive for being told obliquely, through a series of stories and vignettes – is that it leads to a world in which the combination of unchecked sexual desire, the absence of a code of moral self-restraint, and the worship of power, leads eventually to violence and abuse.

That domestic violence and abuse still exist today, even among religious Jews, is a disgrace and source of shame. Against this stands the testimony of Genesis that faithfulness to G-d means and demands faithfulness to our marriage partners. Faith – whether between us and G-d or between us and our fellow humans – means love, loyalty and the circumcision of desire.

What the stories of the patriarchs and matriarchs tell us is that faith is not proto- or pseudo-science, an explanation of why the natural universe is as it is. It is the language of relationships and the choreography of love. It is about the importance of the moral bond, in particular as it affects our most intimate relations. Sexuality matters to Judaism, not because it is puritanical but because it represents the love that brings new life into the world.

When a society loses faith, eventually it loses the very idea of a sexual ethic, and the result in the long term is violence and the exploitation of the powerless by the powerful. Women suffer. Children suffer. There is a breakdown of trust where it matters most. So it was in the days of the patriarchs. Sadly, so it is today. Judaism, by contrast, is the sanctification of relationship, the love between husband and wife which is as close as we will ever get to understanding G-d's love for us. ©2016 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and rabbisacks.org

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"For the candle is the commandment and the Torah is light." [Prov. 6:23] As we prepare for the festival of Hanukkah – which commences at the conclusion of the upcoming Sabbath – it behooves us to revisit the significance of the lights of the hanukiah, as well as the Al Hanissim and Hallel praises that mark our eight-day celebration.

Based on the text of the prayer of Al Hanissim

(lit. “for the miracles”), which appears in the thanksgiving blessing of the Amidah and the Grace after Meals throughout the festival, it would appear that the essential miracle of Hanukkah is the military victory of a ragtag militia of Judeans over a vastly larger fighting force, the army of the Greco-Syrian Kingdom.

However, another source, first found in the late Tannaitic work Megillat Taanit and cited by the Babylonian Talmud [Shabbat 21b], emphasizes an altogether different miracle only hinted at in the Al Hanissim prayer. According to this source, which barely even mentions the military victory, the main miracle was a single cruse of oil sufficient for one day lasting for eight days.

Faced with this apparent dispute within our own tradition, which, then, is the primary miracle of the holiday? If both, why did the Almighty have to perform the second miracle of the cruse of oil at all? The military victory would have been sufficient to restore Israeli sovereignty, and the Maccabees could have waited eight days to secure new oil before lighting the menorah! Moreover, it would have been halakhically permissible to use ritually defiled oil if no other oil was available.

In order to understand the significance of each miracle, we must review a famous dispute concerning the proper manner of kindling the hanukkah: Beit Shammai maintains that we are to begin with eight lights on the first evening and descend to one on the last evening, while Beit Hillel argues that we begin with one and ascend to eight.

Rabbi Yosef Zevin, z”l, 20th century sage of Jerusalem, suggests that the basis for the disagreement is what we are kindling: *ur* (fire) or *ohr* (light). According to Beit Shammai, the main struggle and miraculous victory was against an implacable enemy who wished to destroy us. We thus had to counter fire with fire (“You shall destroy with fire the evil within you”, as the Torah states numerous times). It is the way of fire to begin with a great blaze and then diminish as it devours whatever is in its midst (hence, eight to one). This is akin to the military battle in which the victorious Judeans triumph and trounce those who would destroy ethical monotheism.

According to Beit Hillel, however, the main struggle—and miraculous victory—was the victory over the false ideology of Greco-Pagan Hellenism. The battle of ideas is won with better ideas, in this case, the light of Torah knowledge: “For the candle is the commandment and the Torah is light.” Since knowledge is cumulative, developing as text is joined to text, so, too, ideas are built upon ideas, and hence, the progression from one light to eight, an ideological and spiritual victory of Mount Sinai over Mount Olympus.

We can understand the essence of the miracles that we celebrate by considering the fact the Maccabees were fighting against not one, but two

destructive enemies. On the one hand, they were battling the Greco-Syrian military forces that were physically threatening Judean independence and freedom in our homeland. And on the other hand, they were combatting the Greco-Syrian ideology that was spiritually threatening the Torah’s message of commitment to a G-d of peace, compassionate righteousness and moral justice.

The Al Hanissim prayer and our Hallel praise emphasize the military victory that brought us independence; the kindling of the Menorah (in accordance with Beit Hillel) emphasizes the ideological, spiritual victory of a religiously committed Judea against the pagan-secular Hellenism that had dominated the entire civilized world at that time. Both victories and each miracle were crucial in order for Israel’s legacy not only to survive but to prevail. ©2016 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

Modern writers and commentators have found the biblical narratives of the book of Bereshith irresistible in their penchant for psychoanalyzing people described there in terms of modern understanding and current correctness. In so doing they do a great disservice to Jewish tradition and present a distorted picture of the message that the Bible is attempting to convey.

The narrative regarding Joseph and his brothers has engaged mankind for millennia. In it is represented all of the personality characteristics of nobility, self-justification, blindness and deception throughout history. The narrative stands by itself and needs no “deeper” exposition or analysis. It is what it is and that is how Jewish tradition has always viewed it.

The tendency to “understand” the characters of the people presented in the Torah narrative leads to all sorts of weird ideas that serve to undermine Jewish values and traditions instead of strengthening them. In all of the narratives that appear in this holy book the unseen hand of Heaven, so to speak, is present and active. And that part of the story is not subject to any psychological or personal analysis or perspective.

Rashi points this out in his opening comment to this week’s Torah reading. The plan of Yaakov is to enjoy a leisurely retirement in his later stage of life but Heaven interferes as the story of Yosef and his brothers unfolds. No matter how you will analyze the motivations of the characters in this biblical narrative, we still will not know the entire story. It is always the inscrutable hand of Heaven that governs the story and mocks our pretensions.

One of the great differences between the traditional commentators and the more modern versions of this genre is this G-d factor. Midrash, Talmud and the great medieval and later commentators

that created the framework for understanding the narrative of the Torah, also delved deeply into the personalities and motives of the people represented in the Torah narrative. However, they were always careful not only to include but also to emphasize that ultimately it was the will of Heaven that was guiding events towards Divine purposes.

The Bible is not a psychodrama or rebuke of history and psychology. It is a book of fire and holiness and one has to be careful in handling it. But modern commentators – even those who are observant and scholarly – many times insert currently faddish values and interpretations into its eternal words. Keeping this in mind in dealing with the great narrative regarding Joseph and his brothers, one of the key narratives in the entire Torah, we should do so with caution and tradition.

To do otherwise, is a great disservice to the text of the story itself and to the value system that Jewish tradition has assigned to it. The dispute between Joseph and his brothers has heavenly and historic consequences and still hovers over Jewish life today. To treat it as a matter of sibling rivalry is a misunderstanding of the entire purpose of the Torah narrative. ©2016 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

Chanukah celebrates the miracle of the Hasmonean victory over the Syrian Greeks. What is forgotten is that their dynasty did not last. Why not?

Ramban suggests that the disintegration of Hasmonean rule was due to their usurping too much power. (See Kiddushin 66a) By birth, the Hasmoneans came from the tribe of Levi, and could become priests. In the end, however, Judah Aristobulus, the grandson of Judah Maccabee assumed a second role; that of king. Here the Hasmoneans overstepped their bounds as kingship is confined to the tribe of Judah. (Genesis 49:10)

There is much logic to the idea that priest and king remain separate. Kingship deals with the politics of running the state, taking into account aspects of civil administration and international relations. Priesthood on the other hand, focuses on spirituality; on how to connect to G-d. Of course, the teachings of the priest give shape and direction to the state. Still, it can be suggested that kingship and priesthood should remain apart, in order to separate religion and politics.

The distinct responsibility of king and priest is part of a larger system of Jewish checks and balances. The prophet for example, served as the teacher of

ethical consciousness rooted in G-d's word; and the Sanhedrin was the judicial/legislative branch of government.

Not coincidentally, in the same week in which we begin celebrating Chanukah, we begin reading the Biblical narrative of Yosef (Joseph) and his brothers. Yosef dreams that he will rule over the family. Yehuda (Judah) leads the brothers in removing this threat by selling Yosef. In this sense, each seek to become the sole heir of Yaacov (Jacob). (See Sforno, Genesis 37:18)

Indeed, up to this point in the book of Genesis, the Torah deals with the message of choice—that is, individuals were picked and others were excluded. For example, of the children of Adam, only Seth, from whom Noah came, survived. Of the children of Noah, Shem is singled out, as Avraham (Abraham) the first patriarch, comes from him. Yitzhak (Isaac) is chosen over Yishmael (Ishmael), and it is Yaacov, and not Esav, (Esau) who continued the covenantal mission.

The Joseph story breaks this pattern in that, in the end, all of Yaacov's children were included. No wonder, Yosef and Yehuda and for that matter, all of the brothers are blessed by Yaacov. Indeed, their descendants form the tribes of Israel, each included in the community of Israel while having distinct roles to fulfill.

One of the challenges of Chanukah is to learn from the mistake made by the Hasmoneans; to understand that attempts to usurp the roles of others are counter-productive. Crucial to the continuity of Judaism is for each of us to make space for the other and recognize the respective roles every individual plays—as reflected by Yaacov's sons and ultimately the tribes of Israel. ©2016 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

RABBI SHLOMO RESSLER

Weekly Dvar

Parshat Vayeshev relates a seemingly disturbing series of events. After telling us that Yosef snatched on his brothers, it says that Yaakov loved Yosef more than all the other brothers and that's why he made him a striped shirt. Then it says of the brothers could no longer tolerate Yosef, and didn't believe his dreams of them bowing to him. First, why did Yaakov love one son more than the others? Second, why couldn't the brothers tolerate Yosef only after his father made him the striped shirt? Lastly, why did Yosef insist on telling his brothers his dreams, when he must have sensed that they didn't want to hear them? Rav Kaminetsky explains that Yaakov had taught Yosef all that he'd learned in the Yeshiva (school) of Shem and Eiver where he studied, and where Yitzchok and Avraham studied as well. The main

strength of that school was that they taught Torah that could survive in adverse environments. Avraham used it to deal with the rest of the world, Yitzchok used it to deal with Yishmael, and Yaakov used it to deal with Lavan and Esav. Now Yaakov was teaching it to Yosef, and the brothers were worried. Were they as bad as Esav or Lavan? Why would Yaakov have to teach Yosef that Torah? Little did they know that Yosef would need it to deal with Egypt, and all the trials he would face there.

Yaakov loved Yosef more because he learned more, and wanted the other brothers to be jealous -- that's why he made him the shirt -- so that they'd want to learn it too. But instead they became jealous for the wrong reasons. It was then that Yosef tried to tell them not to be jealous, that he had to learn for his own sake because he'd have to be a leader in a foreign land (as the dreams with stalks suggested, since there were no stalks where they lived). Unfortunately, the brothers had let themselves be blinded by hate, and couldn't see the truth, as obvious as it may have been.

There's an important lesson in all of this: jealousy can be used in a good way, as Yaakov tried to do. However, if we're not careful, we could miss the whole point, and end up doing things we shouldn't. The first test is to ask ourselves if we want something because we need it, or simply because someone else has it. We should be jealous of things we can learn and grow from, like Torah knowledge, good character traits, and even courage and persistence. Everyone has qualities we can and should be jealous of, as long as we use it not to prove ourselves, but to improve ourselves. ©2016 Rabbi S. Ressler & LeLamed, Inc.

RABBI KALMAN PACKOUZ

Shabbat Shalom Weekly

Rabbi Avraham Pam, of blessed memory asked, "What was so special about the miracle of the oil burning for eight days? The Talmud tells us that there were ten miracles that regularly occurred in the Temple (Pirke Avos, Ethics of the Fathers 5:7). None of these are commemorated.

Rabbi Pam cites the halachah (Jewish law) that for communal rituals, the prohibition against tumah (ritual impurity) may be waived. Many commentaries, therefore, ask why was there a need for a miracle at all? It was permissible to light the Menorah even with ritually impure oil.

The P'nei Yehoshua answers that precisely because it was permissible to use impure oil that the only purpose of the miracle was to show G-d's intense love for Israel -- especially towards those who had defected to Hellenism, but returned to Torah observance with the triumph of the Macabees.

This is the message of Joseph and his brothers. Joseph did not simply forgive his brothers and suppress his resentment for their abuse of him. Rather,

he loved them and cared for them as if nothing had happened, telling them that he feels toward them as he does to Benjamin, who was not involved in his kidnapping (Rashi, Gen. 45:12).

The celebration of Hanukah is, therefore, more than the commemoration of a miracle. We are to emulate the Divine attributes (Talmud Bavli, Shabbos 133b). Just as when G-d forgives, His love for us is completely restored, so must we be able to restore the love for one another when we mend our differences.

As we watch the Hanukah candles, let us think about the light they represent: the bright light of a love that is completely restored. *Dvar Torah from Twerski on Chumash by Rabbi Abraham J. Twerski, M.D. ©2016 Rabbi K. Packouz and aish.com*

HARAV SHLOMO WOLBE ZT"L

Bais Hamussar

The Torah relates how when Yaakov retraced his steps to retrieve some forgotten vessels, he came upon Eisav's guardian angel and a skirmish ensued. Yaakov told the angel that he would not let him go before receiving his blessing. The angel replied, "Yaakov will no longer be your name, rather Yisrael, since you have struggled with the Divine and with man and have overcome" (Bereishis 32:29).

Where exactly in the angel's words lies the blessing that Yaakov demanded? Rav Wolbe explains that the greatest blessing that a person can receive is for someone to define his essence. A person's name defines his essence, and thus, by changing Yaakov's name to Yisrael, the angel was informing Yaakov of his tremendous abilities. Becoming aware of one's strengths and virtues is the greatest blessing one can ask for, since it enlightens him to the means by which he is meant to achieve his life mission.

In the very next pasuk, Yaakov asks the angel for his name, and the angel responds, "Why are you asking my name?" Rashi explains that he was informing Yaakov that he has no permanent name, since his name changes along with his assignment. A name defines one fundamental nature, and angels have no fundamental nature, since their very essence changes in accordance with the job assigned to them. As a human being, it is imperative that you discover who you are so that you can "make a name for yourself!"

The final pesukim in the parsha chronicle the numerous kings of Edom. While it seems as if the Torah is simply relating historical tidbits, it is clear from Chazal and the early commentators that remarkable secrets are cloaked in these few pesukim. The very names of the kings and their countries symbolize various ideas and concepts.

Additionally, as mentioned previously, a person's name defines his essence. The Ramchal explains each of the kings' names and Rav Wolbe

discusses one example. The name of the fourth king is Hadad ben Bedad. "Heydad" is used as an exclamation of joy, often in conjunction with unlawful behavior (see Yeshaya 16:9). Bedad is similar to the word "bedidus" e.g. loneliness. Hadad ben Badad spent his days making merry, but after the fun was over all he was left with was feelings of loneliness.

So what does this have to do with us? We can surmise that the Torah is providing us with the tool to gauge our various different pleasures. When engaging in a pleasure how can one know if it's a pleasure with a higher purpose, or simply an expression of self-indulgence? Often, one can tell after the fact. Does it leave him on a high, or does he feel down and lacking. Fun simply for the sake of fun usually does not leave a long-lasting good taste in one's mouth. However, enjoyment associated with avodas Hashem leaves a person invigorated and on a spiritual high! ©2016 Rav S. Wolbe z"l and The AishDas Society

RABBI MORDECHAI KAMENETZKY

Tainted Intent

The story of Yoseph's discord with his brothers' waxes as a factual, albeit eternal, analogy to feuding Jews. There are dreams and fantasies, jealousies and misconceptions. Unfortunately, the saga never seems to end, as even today it seems that there are those of our brethren who would sell out their kin -- all for the sake of Heaven.

The Torah relates: Yoseph's brothers go to Shechem to tend the flock of their father, Yaakov. Yoseph is sent by Yaakov to find out what they are up to. As he approaches them they declare, "Behold, the dreamer approaches." At first they plot to kill him but Reuvain and Yehuda intervene, one suggesting he be cast into a pit, and the other convincing the brothers to sell him to passing merchants.

Were the plans to rid themselves of their younger sibling premeditated, or was the sale an impromptu action based on sighting Yoseph as he approached them?

Let us analyze the story and the commentaries.

Yaakov asked his children to tend his sheep. The verse tells us that, "Now, his brothers went to pasture their father's flock in Shechem." In the Hebrew language, a prefix "es" is often used in conjunction with a noun. Here it is used in conjunction with the word sheep. Es is a word usually placed to allude to something additional. (e.g. the famous command, "In the command, "Honor your father and your mother" the Torah adds an es before the words father and mother, "Honor es your father and es your mother." The extra word es is there to include elder siblings, stepparents and the like, all who must be afforded honor.) In this case the word es in conjunction with the sheep is not only extra, it also has dots above it. Those dots intone, says Rashi, in the name of the Midrash, that the

brothers did not set out to tend only the sheep, thus solely for the purpose of honoring their father, rather they were intent on tending to themselves. They were interested in a self-serving outing, one that involved eating and drinking, without the service of their father in mind.

The question is simple. How does the Medrash know that from the extra word es and the dots above it? Maybe the extra word and the dots imply that they had an extra mission to fulfill? Maybe it implies sheep and other cattle, thus the extra es. Where does it imply that they were not fulfilling their fathers's will. rather they were fulfilling their own agenda? The Gemara (Bava Kama 50a) relates that once there lived a man known as Nechunia the Well Digger. Nechunia selflessly dug wells to provide water for the pilgrims, who traveled to Jerusalem for the three pilgrimage festivals, Pesach, Sukkos and Shavuos.

It happened once that Nechunia's daughter fell into a deep well that he had dug. People ran to the great tzadik, Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa, who was known for his miraculous ability to intercede on behalf of those in distress, and asked him to pray for the child.

It seemed that he was not the least bit concerned. During the first hour he said to them, "Don't worry, she will be all right." An hour later, when there was still no sign of the girl, Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa still seemed unperturbed. "She still is fine," he said.

During the third hour, he told those who had come to him "do not worry, she has come out of the well already." When they asked the girl, "Who brought you up?" she replied, "A ram materialized, and an old man was leading it." After hearing this, the people asked Rabbi Chanina Ben Dosa, "What made you so sure that she would be saved? Are you a prophet?" Rabbi Chanina Ben Dosa replied, "I am not a prophet, nor am I the student of a prophet. But I said to myself, it is impossible that a deep well, one that the tzadik Nechunia the Well Digger took so much pain to dig in order to quench the thirst of travelers, would be a pitfall for one of his children! I felt it would be impossible for his child to be harmed by his good deed. Therefore I knew she would be safe."

The Midrash used simple logic. If the brothers' intent was solely to honor and service their father by tending his sheep, then that mission could never have produced the consequences that brought Yaakov misery for 22 years. How is it possible that an exercise in parental honor would turn into an activity that would cause such parental grief and anguish? Therefore, those two dots that hover over the extra word contain a powerful message. Tainted acts cause tainted results. If the mission is pure, so are the results, and when we see sullied circumstances then we must assume tainted intent. However, when brothers act out of purity of purpose and with a non-tainted mission, then their intent will only bring honor to Heaven. ©2013 Rabbi M.

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RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

Throughout Jewish history, our nation has been plagued with a lack of unity. The term "Jew" itself embodies this, as it comes from the word "Yehudi," which literally means someone from the Tribe of Yehuda. However, after Israel split into two kingdoms (northern and southern), it was used to refer to those in the southern kingdom of Yehuda, and when the northern kingdom of Yisroel (usually associated with Yosef's son, Efrayim) was exiled, and the only known Children of Israel were those in the south, "Yehudi," or "Jew," became a way to identify an "Israelite." Although the differences that exist in contemporary Jewish society cannot all be traced to the differences between Yosef and his brothers, taking a closer look at how their differences developed (and could have possibly been avoided) may help us understand how we can deal with ours.

"And Yosef brought their evil speech to their father" (Beraishis 37:2). One of the primary causes of the poor relationship between Yosef and his brothers was his telling their father about the things they did that he thought were inappropriate. Rashi, based on Chazal, tells us that Yosef suspected his brothers of eating the meat of an animal before it had been slaughtered, referring to the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah as servants, and of having improper relationships. Numerous commentators explain the actions of Yosef's brothers to be based on their following the laws as they applied to Jews, even if the same actions would be forbidden for non-Jews (see <http://tinyurl.com/hxe3s34>). For example, a live calf found inside a properly slaughtered cow technically does not need to be slaughtered. Just as any other "limb" of the slaughtered mother can be eaten without any further "slaughtering," so can this calf be eaten without first being slaughtered (or killed by another method). [In order to avoid others seeing an "unslaughtered" animal being eaten without realizing that this animal is considered a limb of an already slaughtered animal, we slaughter it anyway.] Such an animal can only be eaten because it is considered to have already undergone "shechita," ritual slaughter; since the concept of "shechita" only applies to Jews, for non-Jews it is not considered a limb of its mother, and eating any part of this animal before it was dead is forbidden (it's one of the seven Noachide laws, "eiver min ha'chai"). Since the brothers considered themselves full Jews, they thought they could eat such meat, while Yosef thought they shouldn't.

Given this difference of opinion, what should Yosef have done? Was he wrong for bringing it to their father's attention, hoping that Yaakov would get them to do the right thing? Let's put aside the brothers' reaction to Yosef telling on them (perhaps had they not let this

affect their reaction to his dreams, their relationship could have been repaired, or wouldn't have spiraled so far out of control). Yosef saw his brothers doing things he thought were inappropriate, and pointing this out to them didn't get them to change their ways. Should he have let them continue to do things he thought were wrong? Is Yosef partially to blame for the enmity his brothers felt towards him because he tattled on them?

"Do not respond to a disagreement to dissuade" (Shemos 23:2). The above translation is mine; other translators, as well as the commentators, give numerous other possible ways of understanding the message the Torah is trying to convey with these words. These multiple messages are not mutually exclusive, and, as always, the depth of the Torah's divine words are designed to teach us many different things simultaneously. I would like to focus on the explanation of one of the commentators, the Chizkuni.

The Chizkuni explains these words to be directed towards an experienced, smart judge, who finds himself in a situation where his fellow judges are about to rule erroneously (Jewish courts have a minimum of three judges sitting on any case; some situations call for a court of 23 judges, and if necessary, there can be as many as 71 judges hearing a case). "Even if you consider yourself to be very sharp, [as you are] able to show a reason why the verdict should be different, and your colleagues aren't as sharp as you [as they are unable] to plumb the depths of the judgment, the verse is admonishing you not to respond with that reason to dissuade them." In other words, even if you think you are right and they are wrong, don't go overboard trying to convince them that they are wrong; let it go and allow them to be wrong. The Chizkuni doesn't mean that we should keep any dissenting opinion to ourselves, or that we shouldn't try to convince others that they are mistaken. (Unkoles actually explains the verse to mean that we should not withhold an opinion.) Rather, the Chizkuni is referring to insisting that your reasoning is correct even after it was rejected by the majority. This is evident from the continuation of his thought; after quoting the rest of the verse ("you shall follow the majority"), the Chizkuni says, "rather, you must [allow] the verdict to be handed down (lit. completed) based on [the opinion of] the majority." It is continuing to argue the point after it was already made and (incorrectly) dismissed, trying to make it again when the others are ready to make their final decision, that the Chizkuni says is going too far. According to this Rishon (early commentator), there is a Biblical mandate to back off and allow others to be wrong, even if/when you are sure that you are right.

This concept is not limited to judges trying to decide a court case; it applies to any group decision. If the majority of a committee, or board of trustees, sees things one way, no matter how wrong that decision may be, the minority must allow the majority to make it.

Putting aside the possibility that the majority may actually be right, more damage is usually done by continuing to disagree than is done by reaching a wrong decision. I would extend this concept to individuals as well. Just as G-d doesn't step in, on the spot, to correct every wrong (or prevent it from happening), letting people learn from their mistakes (and hopefully grow out of them instead), we should emulate G-d and allow others to be wrong without constantly insisting that they change their perspective. (This gets a bit complex if the mistake adversely affects others; until it becomes counterproductive, we can't allow others to be wronged, only that others can be wrong.) When someone says or does something that is incorrect, a polite conversation can (and perhaps should) take place, and as many reasons for the other perspective as there are can be calmly presented. However, as soon as there is resistance, we must move on, allowing others to remain mistaken until they are ready to consider another perspective. Whether the issue is what Nusach to daven, which days to say (or skip) Tachanun, the importance of a Jewish government in the Holy Land (even if it's secular), how much divine insight Chazal had, if G-d could have used evolution when creating the world, Torah Umadda (or "im derech erez") vs. Torah only, or one of many other issues that divide us, if we don't allow others to be wrong, we will never be able to move past the things that divide us and recognize how many more things there are that we share.

Yosef may have been sure that his brothers shouldn't do anything that wasn't permissible for non-Jews. Nevertheless, his relationship with them might have been very different had he just allowed them to make that mistake rather than doing whatever he could to try to prevent them from continuing to make it. This doesn't excuse the harshness with which his brothers responded; hopefully we can learn from the mistakes they made that divided them, and overcome any differences we still have today. ©2010 Rabbi D. Kramer

ZEV S. ITZKOWITZ

A Byte of Torah

"When [Tamar] was taken out, she sent [the security] to her father-in-law with the message, 'To the man that owns these things, by him I am pregnant.'"

Why didn't Tamar directly confront Judah and name him as the man who impregnated her? She reasoned: if he admits to his deed, then nothing will happen to me; if not, then I'll be burned, but at least I won't embarrass him. The rabbis learned a lesson from this incident - better to be thrown into a furnace than embarrass somebody in public (Rashi).

Today, in both personal and political circles, character assassination is in vogue. Not only do we publicly defame and embarrass people, but our actions reflect

poorly upon our own character as well - they imply that we, too, have something to hide (cf. Megillah 25b). Perhaps if we can learn to identify the positive in others rather than the negative, we will be able to better work together. © 1994 Z. Itzkowitz and shamash.org

SHLOMO KATZ

Hama'ayan

"So [Yaakov] sent [Yosef] from the valley of Chevron..." (37:14) Rashi comments: Is Chevron in a valley? Chevron is on a mountain! Rather, this refers to the "deep" plan relating to the tzaddik who is buried in Chevron (i.e., Avraham), to bring about what was told to Avraham, "Your descendants will be foreigners in a land which is not theirs" (i.e., Egypt).

R' Mattisyahu Solomon shlita (Mashgiach at Beth Medrash Govoha in Lakewood, N.J.) elaborates on Rashi's comment as follows:

This is a parashah in which all the major players make mistakes that not only have serious consequences, but also seem to us to be obvious errors. Yaakov openly favors one son over the others. Yosef persists in relating his dreams to his brothers despite their negative reactions. Yosef's brothers conspire to kill him and end up selling him into slavery.

How could so many intelligent people—indeed, prophets—make such blunders? The answer is that Yaakov, Yosef and his brothers were all "playing into the hands" of Hashem's master plan. This is what Rashi is telling us— every seemingly irrational event that occurred happened because of Hashem's "deep" plan.

This lesson, that Hashem stands behind the scenes pulling the strings of history, is so important that the Torah drew our attention to it by seemingly making a "mistake" (so-to-speak) and saying that Chevron is in a valley.

Another point regarding Hashem's hand in history: If we had been present when Yosef was sold into slavery, we would have thought it was an immense tragedy. Had we been present when Yaakov traveled to Egypt to be reunited with Yosef, we would have rejoiced. Yet, we would have been wrong both times. Yosef's sale to Egypt was a good thing, for it led to his becoming viceroy and saving his family from famine. On the other hand, Yaakov's journey to Egypt was an unhappy event, for it was the beginning of the long exile in that land. (Matnat Chaim: Ma'amaram p. 56)

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