

## A Weekly Byte... from Isralight

(Vayeshev)

*Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality*  
From Rav Binny

*One of the fascinating postscripts to the tragedy of the Holocaust was the saga of the many Jewish children who were hidden during the war, especially in churches and monasteries across Europe, but whose parents did not survive to find them when the war was over.*

*Some of these children were six or seven years old, and though Jewish by birth, had for all intents and purposes grown up as Christian children with little recollection of their parents or their Jewish roots.*

*One of the individuals, who worked tirelessly to locate these lost children and bring them home to their people, was rabbi Herschel Schechter, a chaplain with the U.S. eighth army.*

*It was difficult to find these children, much less to prove that they were really Jewish, but Rabbi Schachter had an ingenious way of discovering which children amongst the multitude of refugees were really Jewish.*

*On Sunday mornings, while he was stationed in Poland, he would take a jeep and a couple of burly soldiers to guard him (the locals were less than predisposed to help a Jewish rabbi take Jewish children back into the fold....) and visit the local churches on Sunday mornings during mass.*

*Europe at the end of World War Two was teeming with refugees, including tens of thousands of children taken in by the church. Rabbi Schechter would stride up to the front of the church in full U.S. military uniform, and, staring out at the hundreds of children crowding the pews, would begin to recite, in a loud, booming voice, the Shema Yisrael. And then their eyes would give them away.*

*A few years ago, I told this story to a large audience, and an elderly gentleman came over to me afterwards and told me, with tears in his eyes, how much it meant to him that the story was still being told, because he had been one of those children. And the reason, he said, that the experience had been so powerful for him at the time, was because until that point in his life, he had never felt like he belonged, and one day, in walks this army Colonel, and starts saying words I could not understand, but I just knew I belonged.”*

We all have a need to belong, and sometimes we respond to that need in unhealthy ways; we want to fit in, and to be a part of the society we live in and the particular sub-cultures we frequent. Our natural tendency often is to perform and behave in the fashion that allows us to be accepted by our peers, almost as if to say: “look at me!” Judaism, however, has a very different perspective:

Rather than getting everyone to see me, Judaism challenges us to learn to see everybody else. And even when I am meant to look first to myself, it is only as part of the larger picture; the goal of how the development of self contributes to everyone else. So how do we succeed in achieving this desire to belong, without losing perspective on why it is worth belonging at all?

One would assume that the most natural vehicle for accomplishing this goal is the family. If there is any place in the world where I should feel like I 'belong', it should be in the family, where I should know that I am loved, and I should be able to see and appreciate everybody else. And yet, that is not always so.

I remember once, in the middle of a Friday night dinner at Isralight, one of the students began to cry. She was trying to take it all in: the beautiful table and candles, everyone sitting around with nowhere to run to and no schedule to keep, singing Shalom Aleichem, and especially the blessing over the children.

If there were a moment in the week, which I had to choose as my favorite, I would have to say it is Friday night when we have the opportunity to bless our children. Blessings are all about appreciating the gifts we have in our lives, and if we are willing to take a moment to appreciate what a gift an apple is, it goes without saying that taking such a moment with each one of our children is nothing short of magnificent.

In fact, there is a wonderful custom we follow in our home, that before you offer the traditional blessing to each of your children, you mention their name, and take a moment to appreciate all that they are for you in your life, and all that you hope they will ever be. All your hopes and dreams are encapsulated into this one moment: you step off the world, and it's just you and your child. And this follows the Eishet Chayil poem written by King Solomon long ago, part of which is itself a somewhat less obvious way to appreciate your wife. Which of course follows the song of Shalom Aleichem, part of which is an opportunity to appreciate everyone at the table. Most of all, the Friday night Shabbat table is an opportunity to say *I Love You*, which we so often take for granted, to the people whom we appreciate the most in our lives.

I guess it struck a chord with this particular girl, because tears were streaming down her face. Later, while everyone was washing their hands, I took her aside, and she said it suddenly hit her, that she couldn't remember the last time she had told anyone, including her parents, that she loved them. On Sunday afternoon, I took her into my office, gave her the phone, told her to call her parents, and stepped out of my office for lunch. She said it was one of the most meaningful experiences she had ever had.

So why is this so hard to do? In America today, we seem to be watching the family unit disappear; why is that? Why is it that so many of the experiences we share with our friends and family have become about where we go, and what we do, instead of about who we are with?

The truth is, at first glance, when we open up the Torah, we do not get such a great picture.

Beginning with Adam and Eve, the 'First Family', families in the Bible always seem to be having problems.

Adam and Eve have two sons, Cain and Abel (Kayin and Hevel), and one ends up killing the other. The next critical family, Noach, has one son cursed with the two others on a seemingly different path. Abraham, the first Jew, also has two sons, one of whom (Yishmael) has to be kicked out of the house. And then Yitzchak has two sons, Yaakov and Eisav, and here, too, one ends up as the black sheep of the family, and the other has to run away from home for fear of being killed by his own brother!

Finally, in this week's portion, *VaYeshev*, things at last seem to be headed in the right direction. All twelve of Yaakov's sons seem to be remaining in the fold, until, almost out of the blue, they are selling one of their own brothers into slavery, and it seems like the dream of a Jewish people, dedicating to creating a world of ethics and brotherhood, will never materialize. And then, somehow, it all works out, and (three weeks from now in the portion of *Va'Yechi*, the twelve sons of Yaakov gather together around Yaakov's deathbed for their blessings which will result in the birth of the Nation of Israel, made up of these twelve tribes).

What went wrong, and then, what went right? And what does this mean for each one of us, today?

Interestingly, there are two leaders who emerge from the family of Yaakov: Yosef (Joseph) and Yehudah (Judah). One wonders what happened to Re'uven, the rightful first-born heir?

Clearly the Torah deems individuals to be role models for the Jewish people because of their ethical excellence. It is not power, strength, or even wisdom that is the benchmark for Jewish leadership; it is Jewish ethics. We know next to nothing of the wisdom of Abraham; he becomes our role model because of his ethics. So if Re'uven does not become such a role model, ethically speaking, something must have gone terribly wrong. Which is strange, because a closer look at the story of the selling of Joseph seems to suggest that it is actually Re'uven who tries to do the right thing, not Yehuda.

When the brothers (Genesis 37:20) conspire to kill Joseph, it is Re'uven who comes to the rescue:

*“And Re'uven heard, and saved him (Joseph) from their hands, and said: ‘let us not kill him’.”*

*And Re'uven said to them do not spill blood! Throw him in this pit... but lay no hand on him, **intending to rescue him** from their hand, and return him to their father.”* (Ibid. 37:21-22)

And while Re'uven wants to save Joseph, it is actually Yehuda who initiates the plan to sell him as a slave to the Ishmaelites for twenty pieces of silver (37:26-28). Is there any lower point in Jewish history than this moment when the sons of Yaakov conspire to sell their own brother into slavery for profit?

Even worse is the fact that **Rashi** (38:1), quotes the *Midrash Tanchuma* that points out that it is the brothers who lower Yehudah from his leadership position, because they would have listened to him had he suggested that they bring him home.

Indeed, it is Re'even (Ibid. 37: 29) who tears his own clothes in agony when he realizes his plan to save Joseph has been foiled, and that he has been sold as a slave. Whereas Yehudah, after these events, goes from bad to worse ultimately intermarrying with a Canaanite girl (representing all that his forefathers have struggled against), separating himself from the rest of the family, perhaps in part out of a deep sense of guilt over his terrible transgression.

In fact, the words of the verse are very powerful:

**“Va’Yered Yehudah Me’et Echav.”**

**“And Yehudah *went down* from amongst his brothers...”** (Ibid. 38:1)

If you can sell your own brother into slavery, then you are headed down a very steep and slippery slope.

And yet, ultimately, it is from the tribe of Yehudah whence we derive the royal line of King David, while Re'even is relegated to a relatively marginal role. So what did Re'even do that was so terrible?

There is, perhaps, one line in the story of the selling of Joseph which is very telling, and which may be the key to unlocking this entire mystery. When Re'even returns (from where?) to discover that Joseph is gone, sold into slavery, he says:

**“HaYeled Einenu’ Va’Ani, Anah Ani Bah?”**

**“The boy is gone! And I-where can I go?”** (Ibid. 37:31)

While at first glance it appears that Re'even is upset about his brother being sold into slavery, the truth is, a close look at this verse reveals that Re'even's reaction is all about Re'even. Joseph's name does not even appear in the verse! How could Re'even, reacting to Joseph being sold as a slave, not even mention him by name? Perhaps this is the root of the problem; Joseph simply isn't there, which is how this could have occurred at all. And of course, when my brother isn't there, then in a sense, part of me isn't there either. In the end, it is specifically when I can find my brother, and feel his pain, that I really find myself.

And this is the state the brothers are in: they throw Joseph, their own brother into a pit, and then sit down to eat lunch. (37:24-25) The only way you can throw your brother into a pit and then sit down to lunch while his cries echo in your ears, is if that brother really isn't there.

It is interesting that the first time we see this is in the case of Chanoch, The Torah tells us that:

**“Chanoch walked with (alongside?) G-d.”** (Genesis 5:24)

And then we are told, **“Ve’Einenu,”** Chanoch is **“not there”** because G-d takes him. And one wonders, if Chanoch was on such a high level that he walked with G-d, where did he disappear? Why was he not the first Jew? Perhaps Chanoch was so “with” G-d, that he was incapable of being with anyone else. And if no one else is ‘there’ for you, then in a way, a part of you isn't really ‘there’ either.

This is essentially the antithesis of the phrase used to describe a person's really being there: "Hineni" "Here I am", which is Abraham's response to G-d when he is asked to offer Yitzchak up in the binding of Isaac, and it is the same word Moshe uses in response to G-d's call to redeem the Jewish people from Egypt. Because, again, if I am really with my fellow human beings, no matter where they are, then, and only then, am I really here.

Indeed, at the end of the saga of Joseph, when Joseph finally reveals himself to his brothers he says: "I am Joseph." (Genesis 45:3) It is precisely because, despite all that he went through, Joseph still feels his brothers' pain and is 'with' them, that he is really 'there' as well.

Indeed this is the essence of Hillel's famous statement in the Talmud, when asked to explain the Torah on one foot:

*"De'Alach Snei', Le'Chaverach Lo' Ta'avid, Zo' Hi' haTorah Kulah; Idach, Peirushah' Hu', Zil G'mor!"*

*"What you dislike, do not do to your friend. That is the whole Torah; the rest is commentary, now go and study it!"* (Shabbat 31a)

The essence of the Torah, then, is to have your fellow human being on your mind to such an extent that their pain is yours. This, incidentally, is what it means when we say about someone: she really has her act together' if you are together with G-d, and thus with everyone else, then you are really you!

And, it is worth noting, that it is precisely this principle, which is at the root of Yehudah's ultimate emergence as a true leader. His descent into despair is all about the fact that he really was not there, in the sense we are speaking of. Indeed, the names he gives his children are all indicative of this inner struggle: Er, which according to the Midrash means 'removed from the world', Onan, which is the state of mourning more akin to the shock a person enters into when they are first informed of the loss of a loved one, a time when a person may often feel all alone in the world, and Shela, which may be from the same root as Shal, as in Shal na'alecha' the phrase used when G-d tells Moshe to remove his shoes at the burning bush, again a language indicative of being removed and distant from the world. Even the place where Judah's marriage and the subsequent loss of his sons takes place (Genesis 38) is called K'ziv, which comes from the same root as 'denial' or falsehood, perhaps because when a person is in denial, or living a false life, it means they are not living up to who they really are.

And then, everything turns around for Yehuda. His eldest son, who is married to Tamar, is struck down for his evil ways and dies (38:7) at which point Onan, Yehudah's next son, is married off to her (to carry the name of his brother, the custom in those days), whereupon he too is struck down by G-d because he has spilled his seed in vain:

*"But Onan knew that the seed would not be his; so it was, that whenever he would consort with his brother's wife, he would let it go to waste on the ground so as not to provide offspring for his brother."* (38:9)

Again, Onan's relationship is all about Onan, and Tamar, and for that matter his dead brother Er, are not there at all.

With two dead brothers, the custom of the day is quite clear: Yehudah's remaining son Shelah is now betrothed to Tamar, and she would thus be viewed as an adulteress (for which the penalty was death) for having been with someone outside the family.

But Yehudah delays the wedding; two of his sons have married this woman, and subsequently died, and he clearly fears the consequences of Shelah's betrothal to her as well. So Tamar, betrothed to Shelah, yet not able to actually marry him due to Yehudah's delaying tactics, is now growing old, all alone, without children.

Finally, in desperation, Tamar disguises herself as a harlot (38:14), and succeeds in becoming pregnant with Yehudah himself, taking his staff signet, and wrap as a pledge against his payment for her 'services'.

Later, when the news of Tamar's pregnancy becomes known, she is brought before Yehudah, the judge in this matter. Yehudah's reaction is immediate: she must die, and she is brought before Yehudah for final judgment, at which point she casts down his staff saying to him:

*"Recognize to whom this seal and staff... belong."* (38:25)

Now, Yehudah is a powerful figure in those parts; the son of Yaakov and great grandson of Abraham, he can easily deny his wrongdoing; and Tamar, the harlot black widow will just disappear. And isn't this the natural progression of everything that has gone wrong until that point? If Tamar isn't there, and it's all about Yehudah, then she can just disappear. Except that Yehudah finally gets it. And in that moment, a king is born. Because the Torah tells us:

*"And Yehudah recognized it (the staff...) and said: she is more righteous than I."* (38:26)  
(Note: Some commentaries actually translate this statement as: *She is right; it is from me.*)

And in this moment Yehudah sees Tamar, and in essence rediscovers himself. The ultimate result of this change in Yehudah will be his willingness at the end of the story (Genesis 44: 18-34) to step forward, and place himself as a slave in lieu of his brother Binyamin (who ostensibly has been accused of stealing the Royal goblet). And in that moment, when his brother is so there, that he becomes even more important to Yehudah than Yehudah himself, Yehudah finally becomes all that Yehudah can be.

It is worth noting that the word used there, *VaYigash*, (And he steps forward) is the same word used when Abraham steps forward to argue with G-d about the fate of S'dom. Because this is what Avraham was really all about. Unlike Noach who steps into the Ark all alone, Abraham cannot sleep knowing that an entire city, even a city as evil as S'dom, is being destroyed.

And this is what relationships are really all about. The Torah tells us that when Eve is created, Adam says:

*"Bone of my bone, and flesh of my flesh..."* (Genesis 2:23)

Ultimately, marriage is about becoming one, to the extent that the Torah lays out the goal of any healthy relationship:

*“Ve’Davak Le’Ishto’ Ve’Hayu’ Le’Vasar Echad.” “And he shall cling to his wife, and they shall become one.” (2:24)*

In fact, this may be why G-d created us in a fashion that has us born of parents (Hashem could have made it natural for us to be grown out of dirt, like plants), because this means that we have been given to from the moment we are born, and we are loved even before we are born; ideally, we enter the world observing love, and we know that we come from somewhere, so there is a place we already belong. And since ultimately, we are all created by, and come from one source, in the end, we all belong to each other.

And this is the dream: that one day, we will succeed in putting aside our differences, so that we can build one world community, which begins with many smaller communities of nations, all of whom finally learn that we all belong to the same planet, with the same goal of learning to live as one.

In the end, when one nation, just like one person, believes that the pain or danger or injustice of another nation (or person) is not their issue, it is not just wrong because it is mistaken; it is wrong because it just isn't true. Maybe one day soon, we will learn to see things as they really are meant to be.

Wishing you all the blessing of belonging, along with a Shabbat Shalom, and a very happy Chanukah,

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