

A Weekly Byte... from Isralight

(Vayeshev)

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality
From Rav Binny

Many years ago, I recall sitting with a newly married couple in their late thirties, who were struggling with making their marriage work after many years on the NY singles scene. Sitting with them, before I could start the conversation on a more positive note, the husband began to describe why he was upset with his wife and what she was doing wrong in his eyes. Every minute his wife would interrupt him to express what she felt her husband was doing wrong from her perspective. After a few minutes I tried to get them to speak with one another with an eye towards eventually getting them to share what each felt they themselves needed to work on, instead of directing their comments to me. But try as I might, they would not speak with each other nor even look at each other which was obviously (though I am by no means a professionally trained therapist...) a significant part of their issue: as long as people will not or cannot communicate, they will not be able to reach any form of peaceful compromise.

Indeed, this is obviously a major factor in the morass in which we find ourselves; Jews and Arabs in the Middle East; just because people sit at the same table does not mean they will produce anything of value unless they can really speak with each other.

This week's portion, *Vayeshev*, is a case in point. How did things get so bad? One minute Yaakov is dreaming of angels and ladders up to heaven, and the next minute his sons are conspiring to kill their brother Joseph and leave him to die in a pit! Where did it all go so wrong?

Clearly, Yaakov loves Joseph so much, it almost has to inevitably lead to the rest of his sons feeling slighted, and Yaakov's bestowing on his beloved son a special Technicolor coat does not help. But the verse that really suggests things are out of hand is in *Bereishit* (Genesis) 37:4:

"... and they hated him (Joseph) and could not speak to him in peace."

If brothers are so full of hate they cannot even speak to each other, something is dreadfully wrong.

There is a powerful comment by the **Ramban** (Nachmanides) concerning the verse (when Joseph finds his brothers in the field and approaches them from a distance):

"And they saw him from a distance, and before he came near, conspired to kill him."(37:18)

"It was because they only saw him from a distance that they could hate him so..."

Maimonides in his laws of character development (Hilchot Deot) points out that there is a prohibition in the Torah against hating; a person is not allowed to hate his fellow in his heart (*Lo tisna et achicha bilvavecha* ; Leviticus-Vayikra 19). To avoid feeling anger and hatred towards someone we need to be willing to get close; to see their pain; learn to view things from their perspective

But how does one do this?

In *Deot* 6:6, Maimonides suggests that when a person feels he or she has been wronged they are not allowed to bear a grudge but must find a healthy way to share they have been wronged, with an eye towards creating a space for communicating and sharing, and an eventual rapprochement.

But Maimonides begins by defining the relationship which one wants to fix as a 'chaver' ("*Ha Roeh et Chaveiro* 'one who sees his chaver) or friend. In order for the process to be productive, the two parties must be friends. Interestingly, the word for friend, 'chaver' is the same word as 'chibur' or connection. There must be a connection to work with, to facilitate peace, forgiveness, and understanding. But if two parties are not even speaking, then there is no connection to work with is there?

So how do we get that to start working?

The word *teshuva*, which we translate as 'repentance' really means to turn or go back (*lashuv*) and describes the process whereby a person can literally go back in time to become the person he or she always could have been. If a person has stolen as an example, it's not just about giving back what they stole and asking forgiveness; it's about trying to become the person who could never have stolen in the first place. So how does one do this?

The Rambam (Maimonides) in his *Hilchot Teshuvah* (Laws of Repentance) suggests three stages :

1. *Hakarot HaChet* or knowing I am making a mistake ; If a person does not even think there is anything wrong with what they are doing ('what's wrong with cursing? Or a little innocent cheating on one's taxes?) they will obviously never be able to change their mistaken behavior.
2. *Charata* or regret; just because I know something is wrong does not mean I regret it ; witness how many people know it's wrong or a mistake to share gossip or overeat, but do it anyway, all the time, without remorse, because they don't really seriously experience regret. (It is worth noting healthy regret is very different from guilt; guilt is all about I am terrible and bad; regret is all about 'I am so much better than this ...')
3. *Kabbalah le'atid* or deciding the future will be different. So often we know we are making a mistake; we regret it, but we simply cannot muster up the energy to change the future. Usually this is about considering the real consequences of our mistaken behaviors, and creating a plan, with real short and long term measurable goals, to change the future, beginning with the present. If a person realizes they are, as an example, overweight, eat too much with little or no exercise alongside a pressured life with too much focus on work and not enough balance for family and being in the moment, deciding the future will be different involves:
 - a. Deciding where I want to get to
 - b. Figuring out where I am
 - c. Creating a plan as to how to move from point a. to b.

For example, first, one would have to figure out the goal (i.e. at 6' and age 40 a healthy male should weigh 180 lbs.), then where one is at present (say, 250 lbs) and then create a plan that begins NOW to lose 70 lbs. in a reasonable amount of time, alongside systems (weekly weigh-ins, regular exercise that

works, and a change of diet) to insure and measure healthy gradual progress. This of course, is true for any mistaken behavior one wants to correct, be it physical, emotional or spiritual.

All of which brings us back to the brothers: do they realize what a mistake they are making? Do they regret their anger? Are they ready to create a systemic change in behavior? Precisely because they are not even close to taking those steps yet, Joseph will end up a slave in Egypt.

Interestingly, a closer analysis of Joseph's own journey would suggest he does go through this process as a slave in Egypt struggling perhaps with what he might have done wrong to end up in such a miserable situation eventually creating a plan when he re-encounters the brothers 22 years later, to change the course of history. Of course, this will only create the desired rapprochement when the brothers themselves are ready for the same process. It takes two parties to really make peace....

And what of our Arab cousins, with whom it seems we have lost the ability to communicate, particularly on a national level? While certainly we have our own soul searching to do, until they are ready to see and regret their own mistakes, and decide a change of behavior is in order, sadly there is nothing to talk about, and we are stuck with Joseph wallowing in the pit

Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem,

Binny Freedman