

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny

(Portion of Vayeshev)

The vision of what it would mean to command men, was evaporating before my eyes. Two weeks after completing IDF Officer's course, I had been looking forward to the challenges of mission control, decisions under extreme stress, and leading by example, but these two young conscripts, one of whom had only recently completed his eight months of basic infantry and tank crew training, presented me with nothing of the sort.

They were arguing over an ammo cartridge, each claiming it to be his, and with a gear inspection coming up in the morning, this somehow became significant as neither wanted to fail the inspection.

I had made the mistake of telling my squad, on the first day I met them, that they should feel free to share with me any problem they had, no matter how small, and I was fast regretting the decision. It wasn't even a case of one claiming the other stole it, rather, the cartridge had turned up behind a kitbag when they were getting their room in order for inspection and each was claiming it as theirs since each was missing a cartridge. The red X which the owner had marked his gear with didn't help, as they both had red X's all over their gear...

Jewish law is pretty clear on the matter (tractate Baba Metzia; chapter of shnayim ochzin): if two litigants lay equal claim to an item and neither has any evidence nor possession, they split it. But it was clear to me that response would simply annoy them and seem like a cop-out.

It all seemed so petty. Here I was, an IDF Officer soon to be deployed to Lebanon, discussing a five-dollar ammo cartridge and how to resolve its ownership with two bickering soldiers who should have been embarrassed to be wasting all our time with such trivialities.

In fairness, they had not come to me, I had simply walked into their barracks and caught them in the middle of a heated argument, and now I was stuck with their expectation that I somehow resolve the issue; it was leaving a bad taste in my mouth....

This week, Yaakov is finally home, and all he wants to do is settle down. Indeed the name of the portion: *Vayeshev*, means to settle or dwell; after fleeing from Eisav and spending twenty-two years navigating the cunning manipulations of his own father-in-law eventually escaping to confront Eisav and his four hundred soldiers and then suffering the loss of his beloved wife, the love of his life, Rachel, and the apparent rape of his daughter Dina, Yaakov just wants to settle down.

He seems to have had enough. But alas, it was not to be.

Vayeshev, which begins with such promise, actually launches the darkest and bleakest period of Yaakov's life, with the loss of his beloved son Joseph, the breakup of the family and the descent of the future leadership (Yehuda) into what seems to be an abyss as Yehuda leaves the family and even intermarries with a Canaanite woman....

Indeed, the Torah tells us, after the brothers present Yaakov with Joseph's blood-soaked coat, that he "refuses to be comforted" (*Bereishit* (Genesis) 37:35) determined to go to his grave in mourning.... How did Yaakov's life take such a terrible turn? **Rashi** (ibid. 37:2) suggests a challenging explanation:

"Yaakov yearned to settle in peace (Shalva): says the Holy One: what is prepared for the righteous in the world to come is not enough for them? They crave peace in this world too? Immediately he (Yaakov) was confronted with the storm of the (story of) Yosef."

But what is so terrible about wanting to settle down? Hasn't Yaakov earned the right to take a break?

What's wrong with a little peace and quiet?

In truth, Yaakov was awarded the additional name *Yisrael* as a sign of the value of struggle:

"Your name shall no longer be Yaakov but Yisrael, for you have struggled with G-d and man and have overcome!" (ibid. 32:28)

One might suggest that the problem here is that we are not *meant* to be at peace, we are meant to constantly struggle to perfect the world and overcome evil. But then why would Yaakov assume otherwise? How could Yaakov, one of the great pillars of Judaism simply wish to retreat to a boring serene life without challenge or change?

Perhaps we need to understand the *Shalva* (peace? serenity? tranquility?) which Yaakov sought and which tradition seems to view as so problematic.

King David speaks of yearning for: *"...Shalom be'cheileich ve'Shalva be'Armenotayich"*

*"Peace in your armies and **Tranquility** (?) in your palaces"* (*Tehillim* (Psalms)122;7)

Shalva is not peace on the battlefields, it is the peace and quiet in the palace; the peace of harmony at home.

King David was not challenged by the conflict against the Philistines and Amalekites; it was the acrimony and pettiness of conflict at home, in his own palace that was his greatest pain. Indeed, it was the rebellion of his own son *Avshalom* that very nearly ended the Kingdom of David.

As King Solomon (Shlomo Ha'Melech) says in Proverbs:

"Tov pat chareivah ve'shalva ba', mi'bayit maleh zivchei riv"

"Better a dry piece of bread with (eaten in) peace (Shalva), than a house full of feasting (in) contention." (*Mishlei* 17;1)

Shalva is the peace we have free of strife and bickering, pettiness and contention. Yaakov seemed to intuit the real challenges he had at home, which were far greater (as they always are) than the battles he fought abroad. Perhaps he was weary of the bickering between his wives and the strife it led to amongst his children all of which seemed so... petty. Where were the days of glorious dreaming of ladders and angels, and cunning strategy in overcoming Lavan (his father-in-law) and Eisav? Is this what we have become, wonders Yaakov? Who gets the better coat?

Perhaps Yaakov just wants everyone to get along and let go of all their petty rivalries so he can get back to the life of the tent and Torah study and building the Jewish people in the land of Israel at long last?

So... what's wrong with that? Why then does Jewish tradition suggest that this actually brought on the terrible tragedy of the conflict of Joseph and his brothers which itself seems to have led to nearly losing Judah to Canaanite culture, and with him, the Davidic dynasty forever?

The Jewish ideal, it seems is not to focus only on the great visions and battles of life; it is precisely the ability to create meaningful and healthy relationships by learning to navigate the pettiness and conflict that seem to mire every-day life. Judaism is meant to give us the recipe precisely to *overcome* the pettiness of life, not to *flee* from it.

So often it seems, it is the pettiness of humanity that undoes its greatest dreams and accomplishments.

I recall once watching a couple get into a heated debate about which way the toilet paper goes on the roll until they were completely oblivious to the fact that all the conversation at the table had ceased, until someone finally said "You use it and throw it in the toilet, what's the difference?"

We long to simply ignore the mundane and rise above it to capture the sublime and the noble, but it is the mundanity of life that gives it its power and its pleasure, and Judaism says we can learn to build healthy relationships by learning to navigate the ordinary challenges of life, in balance. Healthy relationships are not just about how we build a business, or educate our children, but as much, about who takes out the garbage or does the dishes.

And healthy relationships are the foundation of a healthy society and the building blocks to change the world.

It is precisely when learning to navigate and overcome anger and arrogance and the petty jealousies and seemingly innocuous wants and desires of life that we achieve true harmony and a balanced world.

It is no accident that Yehuda's reaction to the pettiness and bickering strife of the story of Joseph is to "*go down from his brethren*" (ibid. 38:1). He leaves the relationships in his life, perhaps not wanting to deal with all the mundane rivalries and animosities.

He actually marries a Canaanite woman which about as far away from a relationship with his family as he can find. And the **Ramban** (ibid 38;2) points out he marries her because she is the daughter of a Canaanite businessman, so it's not even a relationship of love and meaning; it's simply a business transaction; a relationship without a relationship.

No wonder his son *Onen* sins by spilling his seed rather than have a meaningful relationship with the wife whom he has been given (Tamar). Indeed, Yehuda's third son is born when Yehuda is not *even present* so his wife names him *Shela* (ibid. 38:5), which means deception or illusion. Perhaps she felt deceived by a marriage of convenience that never became a relationship. Indeed, the verse tells us Yehuda was in *Kziv*, which means disappointment...

And what finally brings Yehuda back? How does Yehuda become the scion of royalty whose seed will one day produce the line of no less than King David? This happens because he is tricked into *a relationship* with his daughter-in law Tamar.

Tamar is the abandoned wife of Yehuda's two sons who died for their transgressions (perhaps because they were not interested in a healthy relationship?). So, according to the tradition of the time, (ibid. chap. 38) she is promised to the third son *Shela*, but Yehuda is apparently afraid to risk the life of his third son as his previous two sons married Tamar and died, so he delays the betrothal. Finally, Tamar realizes she has been abandoned so she dresses as a harlot and tricks Judah into *having relations* with her as he does not know she is his daughter in law.

In other words, he will have sex as long as there is no real relationship! But Tamar will not give up on a real relationship, finally confronting Yehuda with his own seal and signet ring (representing their relationship?) and in perhaps his greatest moment, Yehuda owns up to his mistake and takes responsibility for his actions which of course is the foundation of any healthy relationship.

And from that moment he never again abstained from knowing her! (ibid 38: 26) which the Talmud (Tractate *Sotah* 10b) explains to mean he never abstained from relations with her!

Building the world begins with building our lives which is all about building healthy relationships; to build a healthy nation we need first to build healthy relations with each other.

We need to learn to respect our differences and understand each other's petty gripes and needs and transform our bickering and arguments into a healthy dialogue and discussion.

As for those two soldiers and that contested ammo cartridge? Telling them to split it and walking away would have been the easy way out, and would have been because I was annoyed they were wasting all our time with such a ridiculous argument. But realizing it was an opportunity to get to know both of these soldiers and find out what was really going on, actually ended up being a learning lesson for me, and was the start of becoming an officer men could follow, rather than just a commander men had to obey; something I'm still working on....

Wishing all a Shabbat shalom,

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