

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny Freedman

(Portion of Vayetze)

There are few things more depressing than getting one of those brown army envelopes in the mail, notifying you of your imminent draft for reserve duty, but this one would be a little different. A year earlier, for various reasons, I had agreed to transfer into a new reserve duty unit. It meant leaving the guys I had been serving with for over ten years and with whom I had become quite close. But after the events of the '96 tunnel riots a few high-ranking officers began to see the writing on the wall and realized we were facing a significant security challenge most people were unaware of.

When the Oslo accords were signed in 1993, part of the agreement was the creation of a Palestinian Police force over the Green line. Officially we were supposed to supply them with 5,000 guns to maintain order. But by 1998, five years later, it was estimated there were over 200,000 guns floating around the territories.

Imagine two terrorists hiding in the trees above the Tel Aviv highway with a pair of machine guns; they could easily close down the road for the better part of a day at least. Aside from the obvious terror toll, think of the traffic jam and the impact closing that road would have on Tel Aviv and Jerusalem.

*Now imagine a group of terrorists working in tandem do this on the same day; at the time, there were eight major highways in Israel; the estimate was they could close off Israel's roads and paralyze the country for a minimum of **three** days.*

Now imagine our enemies are watching this and the Syrians and Egyptian suddenly realize we cannot call up our army reserves (who would not be able to get to their bases...) for three days... and imagine if the major units are moved to the front lines and no alternative units can get to the territories for three days ... not a pretty thought.

*So, the army decided in certain sensitive areas, to create a serious unit of combat veterans who would be based where they lived and could thus jump into action without having to actually get there, as they would already **be** there. Hence, I was joining a new unit.*

What puzzled me though, was the fact that the draft notice for the first maneuvers (imun hakamah) with this unit, was called for a Thursday. I had never started a reserve stint on Thursday; Thursday is when most soldiers are at the end of their week and often going home for Shabbat.

When that Thursday arrived, I showed up as ordered and we set about organizing the maneuvers set to begin on Sunday when the men would start arriving. At about 4pm our (new) Company Commander, realizing most of the soldiers on the base were heading out for Shabbat, announced we should all be back Sunday morning at 8am. Naively, not yet getting it, I asked why we were drafted on Thursday if there was nothing to do till Sunday morning. The response I got was a sly grin from the Company Commander and a wry comment: "pretty smart, eh?" At which point I knew we were in trouble.

By the time the following week's maneuvers were over I had seen enough of this Company Commander to realize he would never succeed in building a unit up from scratch, so when we were finally dismissed, I asked the Battalion Commander (who commanded all three companies but was a serious officer and ex- paratrooper) for a private meeting. As it turned out, all three of us platoon officers shared the same sentiments as we had all been drafted from serious combat units.

Simply put we explained to the Battalion Commander we could not serve with this Company Commander; the Company Commander has to be a role model for the men, and this fellow was anything but. The next time we showed up for reserve duty that Company Commander was gone and we all got down to work....

Role models; hard to find, but critical for growth.

Sefer Bereishit (the book of Genesis) is all about our role models: Avraham, Yitzchak, Yaakov, Sarah Rivka, Rachel, Leah and more. We learn from them all our most basic values: loving kindness and justice, truth and commitment. But when it comes to the workings of a healthy family, something seems to be wrong and needs a little thought.

This week in the portion of *Vayetze*, Yaakov finds what appears to be the love of his life. Meeting Rachel at the well, she seems to take his breath away and it is clear (29:17-18) her beauty has captured him, and he loves her deeply. And then Lavan, his soon to be father-in-law, who has come to represent deception in Jewish tradition, pulls the ultimate underhanded deception and switches one daughter for another such that Yaakov suddenly finds himself married to Leah, Rachel's older, and apparently not as beautiful sister.

So, Yaakov works for another seven years and wins Rachel as well, and watching this from the side, we imagine this is going to get complicated. Until (ibid. v. 30) the Torah tells us that Yaakov loves Rachel **as well**, which would seem to indicate that Yaakov understands he has two wives, and he will find a way to love them both. And so, we think 'OK, this can work'.

But then we keep reading and something obviously does not make sense. Because the verse continues that "... *Yaakov loves Rachel as well, **more than Leah**...*"

Something here does not make sense. You can't love someone **as well** and **more than** at the same time; the syntax of the sentence makes no sense.

Which of course may well be the point: every time a verse in the Torah does not work grammatically it is usually because the Torah is trying to tell us that something is very wrong.

As an example (ibid. 4:8) the Torah tells us:

"And Cain said to Abel his brother and when they were in the field ..."

This sentence is grammatically incorrect because when Cain and Abel are in that field, something is very, very wrong....

Indeed, in the very next verse in our portion the Torah tells us (ibid. 29:31) that Hashem sees that Leah is **hated**. But the Torah never said Yaakov hated Leah; he just loves Rachel!

Perhaps because Yaakov did not in fact hate Leah, but when Leah sees how much Yaakov loves Rachel, she *feels* hated, something which becomes quite apparent when we take note of the names she gives to her first three sons:

Reuven (ibid. v.32), so named because ‘*G-d has seen my travail, perhaps now my husband will love me*’, Shimon (ibid. v.33) “*G-d has heard I am hated ...*” and Levi (ibid. v.34) “*... perhaps now my husband will accompany me...*”

And it is worth noting that the root of the problem seems to be ... love.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks notes in his writings that Judaism is essentially a religion of love: we are meant to love G-d (as in the first paragraph of the Shema) love our fellow and even to love the stranger. But love is a double-edged sword and when you love someone it is easy to give the impression, even if unintended, that you love someone else *less*.

What parent of more than one child has not had to deal with a child asking that age old question: Who do you love *more*?

Indeed, this was exactly at the root of the terrible conflict between Yaakov and Esau: way back when they were young lads the Torah tells us (ibid. 25:28):

“*And Yitzchak loved Esau because he was a hunter, and Rivkah loved Yaakov.*”

Interestingly, Yitzchak loves Esau ‘*because ...*’ ideally love should not be *because*; it should just *be*. Rivka loves Yaakov simply because he is Yaakov. And while Rivka seems to receive a prophecy that gives her a heads up that Yaakov will be chosen (ibid. v. 23), perhaps the Torah wants us to take note of this difference.

One wonders, in our portion, whether Yaakov’s challenge was that as much as he loved Rachel *because*, perhaps he needed to learn to love Leah for who she was.

Indeed, Yaakov will struggle with the impact of great and deep love his entire life; his next challenge will be his great love for his son Yosef (ibid 37:3) whom he “*...loved more than all his sons...*”.

Interestingly, the first brothers in the Torah who do *not* have conflict (Menashe and Ephraim, the sons of Yosef) will be the sons who are not loved more or less (ibid. 41:51-52) but are most certainly clear about their different roles. And isn’t it interesting that to this day, we bless our children on Friday nights invoking the names of these two brothers who, even when faced with a role reversal (ibid. 48:8-20) which might have caused strife or jealousy never seem to engage in conflict.

The Torah gives us role models who were spiritual giants but who, as well, on their own levels, were not perfect. And from their mistakes, which the Torah does not whitewash, we see that we need to love people for who they are and value their roles whatever they might be. And, equally important, whenever we love, there may be those who feel less loved, and we need, as well, to feel their pain....

Shabbat Shalom,

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