

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny

(Portion of Vayishlach)

Rabbi Abraham Twerski shares a powerful story about one of his ancestors, the great Rebbe Nachum of Chernobyl (in his book Generation to Generation).

It seems that Rebbe Nachum owned a magnificent pair of Tefillin (Phylacteries), which had actually been written by Reb Ephraim, the great scribe of the Baal Shem Tov, in the early eighteenth century. A wealthy member of the community had offered Rebbe Nachum a staggering fifty rubles for the tefillin. Yet, despite the fact that he lived in abject poverty, Rebbe Nachum had consistently refused to part with the tefillin. His wife on occasion had pleaded with him to sell the tefillin to support their family (one could buy a new, perfectly good pair of tefillin for two rubles) to no avail. Even when they had no wood for the fire or the children were starving, he refused to sell the tefillin, always somehow finding other ways to put some meager amount of food or money on the table.

One year, as Rosh Hashanah approached, it became evident that there would be a dearth of etrogim (citrus fruit grown in tropical countries and used ritually on the festival of Sukkot) that year. The mitzvah of holding an etrog occurs only once a year, and Rebbe Nachum was inconsolable over the fact he might not be able to fulfill the mitzvah that year.

On the way home from shul (from morning prayers in the synagogue) the morning before the festival was to begin, Rebbe Nachum saw a man carrying a lulav (the palm branch which is also part of the mitzvah of the four species we hold on Sukkot) and etrog. He could not believe his eyes and excitedly ran over to the man and asked how much it would cost to purchase the Lulav and Etrog.

“Rebbe it is not within your means”, explained the fellow.

“This is the only available Etrog in the entire region, and it is for the wealthiest member of the community who is paying fifty rubles for it! “

Rebbe Nachum stood there in despair and then remembered he had been offered fifty rubles for his tefillin. Reasoning that he had already fulfilled the mitzvah of tefillin that day and would not need the tefillin for another nine days (traditionally, many Jews do not wear their tefillin over the festival of Sukkot as on Shabbat) but would thus be able to fulfill the mitzvah of the etrog, he beseeched the man to wait for him, and came back a short while later with fifty rubles, having sold his beloved tefillin.

When his wife returned a short while later from having tried to gather some scraps together for the holiday, she found her husband beaming with joy. Assuming he had managed to gather a few Kopecks for the holiday, she enquired as to the source of his obvious joy, but he ignored her questions and continued to behave as though he had won the lottery. But she continued to press him and eventually he explained that he had managed to acquire a lulav and etrog for the festival.

“But that is impossible!” She declared, “even if there were an etrog available its price would be astronomical! How would you be able to afford such an etrog?”

Reluctantly, the Rebbe confessed that he had sold his tefillin in order to buy the etrog.

As he said this, his wife would later explain, all the years of deprivation suddenly passed before her eyes. She

saw the cold winters, and all the nights she had had to put the children to sleep hungry; and the thought that he had finally sold the tefillin for a fruit that would be basically worthless ten days later was too much for her.

“Where is the etrog?” she demanded. Silently her husband pointed to the cupboard. In a fit of rage she ran to the cupboard, grabbed the etrog and with great force threw it on the ground smashing it to bits.

Her husband stood silently; motionless; two streams of tears trickled down his face.

After a moment he spoke: “I have lost my precious tefillin, and now I have lost the chance to fulfill the mitzvah of lulav and etrog, but Nachum will not lose his temper.” And with a sigh, he sat down and opened his books to study....

When the great Rebbe Boruch of Medzibozh heard this story he remarked:

“I can understand why Rebbe Nachum, no matter how much he loved his wife and children, refused to part from his tefillin all those years. And I can even understand why he did sell them to purchase the etrog. But how a human being can have so much self-mastery not to say even a single angry word in such a moment? That only a rebbe Nachum could accomplish.”

Anger; one of life’s greatest challenges. Who can resist and overcome its formidable temptations?

There is a fascinating moment in this week’s portion of *Vayishlach* that demonstrates this point:

After the death of Yaakov’s beloved wife Rachel (*Bereishit* (Genesis) 35:19) the Torah tells us (ibid v. 22):

*“And Reuven went and ‘bedded’ (**vayishkav et**) Bilhah, the Handmaiden of his father, and Yisrael (i.e. Yaakov) heard; and the sons of Yaakov were twelve.”*

Although the verse seems to imply that Yaakov’s eldest son Reuven actually slept with his father’s concubine, the Talmud (tractate *Shabbat* 55b) suggests otherwise:

“R. Samuel b. Nachman said in R. Jonathan’s name: “Whoever maintains that Reuven sinned is merely making an error, for it is said, ‘Now the sons of Yaakov were twelve,’ teaching that they were all equal.” Then how do I interpret, *and he lay with Bilhah his father’s concubine?* This teaches that he transposed his father’s couch, and the verse blames him *as though* he had lain with her...”

Whatever happened in that moment, it is quite clear that Reuven crossed a line and did something terrible. In fact, many years later, on his deathbed, Yaakov seems to recall this moment and takes Reuven to task for it:

“Reuben, you are my first-born... Unstable as water, you shall excel no longer. For when you mounted your father’s bed, you brought ...” (ibid. 49:3-4)

Yet, incredibly, in the actual moment we see no such response from Yaakov. In fact, a closer look at the verse in question suggests there is something not quite right. The actual verse in Hebrew has a fascinating and yet rare occurrence:

וַיְהִי בִשְׁכֹן יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּאֶרֶץ הַהוּא נִלְךָ רְאוּבֵן וַיִּשְׁכַּב אֶת־בִּלְהָהּ פִּלְגֶשֶׁת אִמּוֹ וַיִּשְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל פ וַיְהִי בִגְיִי־יַעֲקֹב שְׁגִים עָשָׂר:

There is a very particular scribal phenomenon in the verse known as a “*piska be’emtsa passuk*” (a break in the middle of a verse). Grammatically the verse makes no sense, telling us that Yisrael (Yaakov’s second name) heard and then seemingly changing the subject to exclaim that the sons of Yaakov were twelve, a fact we already know, which seems to have no connection to the first part of the verse.

I once heard from Rav Riskin in the name of **Rav Soleveitchik** that Yaakov understood here he had to remain silent; even if what Reuven did was ‘only’ to switch the bed of his father and move it into the tent of his mother

Leah out of a love for and sensitivity to the distress and pain of his mother, it was still a highly inappropriate thing to do.

Yaakov, suggests Rav Soleveitchik, understood he was at a critical juncture in his relationship with Reuven. And that is why the verse continues by saying that the sons of Yaakov were twelve; because an angry word might have been all it would have taken to alienate Reuven forever. And because Yaakov in his righteous anger, succeeded in remaining silent, Reuven remained in the fold and Yaakov had all his twelve sons with him the next day....

It is interesting to note, in support of this idea that there is an interplay between the two names of the patriarch: Yaakov and Yisrael. Yisrael (ibid. 32:29) is the second name given to Yaakov when he succeeds in his great midnight battle. This name represents the victory of a struggle. The name Yaakov however, a name given because Yaakov was born holding the heel (the *akev*) of Esau (ibid 25:26) represents a life of great struggle. And although the verse begins using the name Yisrael (as Yaakov is finally living in peace in the land) it concludes with the name Yaakov: the sons of Yaakov were twelve, indicating a great struggle.

After all, in the face of such a painful distressing and inappropriate moment, perpetrated by his eldest son no less, how did Yaakov control his anger? Simply put, he remained *silent*.

It is a great life lesson to understand that words spoken in anger never come out right. No matter how right a person may be, if they react in anger, they will always realize later on they could have done a better job communicating.

Indeed, the **Rambam** (Maimonides), the great advocate of the balanced approach to life (see *Hilchot Deot* (the laws of character development, chapter 1), has an interesting take on anger.

Despite pointing out in chapter one that the ideal in Judaism is to lead a balanced life mid-way between the extremes of any character trait, when it comes to anger (2:3) the Rambam suggests it is an extremely negative character trait which a person should always avoid. Indeed, even in those rare occurrences where anger might be worthwhile as a tool to prevent an event from recurring (1:4; 2:3), Maimonides suggests a person should *feign* anger while internally maintaining his balanced composure. Because one cannot be balanced and angry at the same time; anger is by definition an imbalanced state of mind.

So, what should one do when feeling anger? Quite simply, one should simply be quiet. A person will almost always regret what he or she says in anger. When thinking about it later, one usually will realize they could have done a better job; so, the smartest thing to do, when angry is simply to keep quiet. And that is precisely what Yaakov does; he remains silent; with no words causing irreparable damage left to fix. And thus, Reuven remains in the family.

And what does one do in that state of silence? What thoughts would be worthwhile to have when in a state of anger?

Well, anger is really all about expectations; we get angry because we expect a better outcome; which most often, even if subconsciously, means we think we deserve better. But if we really knew that Hashem (G-d) runs the world, we would spend less time in a state of anger over what happened, and more time in a state of soul-searching as to why it happened, and what Hashem is trying to teach us, which of course would leave much less room for anger. And this, as the Torah intimates here, would result in our being much more together, and ‘the children of Israel would be twelve’, with all of us together at the table....

Wishing all a Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem,

Binny Freedman