**S.A.L.T. – Parashat Vayeishev**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei

We read in Parashat Vayeishev the story of how Yosef was cast into a pit by his brothers and then sold as a slave, after which the Torah tells of Yehuda’s marriage and his children. The Midrash, in a well-known passage (*Bereishit Rabba* 85), comments:

The tribes [Yaakov’s sons] were occupied with the sale of Yosef, Yosef was occupied with his sackcloth and fasts, Yaakov was occupied with his sackcloth and fasts, Yehuda was occupied with marrying a woman, and the Almighty was occupied with creating the light of *Mashiach*.

The Midrash here observes that everybody was “going about their business,” occupied with their own personal affairs, without realizing that at that moment, the seeds of *Am Yisrael*’s final redemption were being planted. The story of Yehuda and his children concludes with the birth of Peretz, from whom the Davidic dynasty – and hence the *Mashiach* – would descend. Even as it appeared that the family of Yaakov was crumbling, God was “busy” laying the foundations for the nation’s ultimate redemption.

While this appears to be the intent of the Midrash, Rav Simcha Bunim of Pashischa (in *Kol Simcha*) suggests a different reading. When we examine the Midrash’s list of what the various people in this story were involved with at that time, a distinction can be discerned between Yehuda and all the others. Rav Simcha Bunim understood that when the Midrash speaks of the brothers being “occupied with the sale of Yosef,” this refers to their remorse upon seeing their father’s state of inconsolable grief and anguish. Accordingly, it emerges that all the parties involved – with the exception of Yehuda – were “occupied” at this time with tears and prayer. Yaakov and Yosef were crying out to God in anguish, and the brothers were crying out to God in repentance. Yehuda, by contrast, did not cry – he proceeded to get married and build a family. Nevertheless, Rav Simcha Bunim writes, “No person knows the thoughts concealed within a person’s heart, and the Almighty looked more at Yehuda’s actions, and from him He created the light of *Mashiach*.” Even though Yehuda appeared to have engaged in purely mundane matters, and the others were involved in spiritual processes, nevertheless, God chose Yehuda’s area of focus at this time as the mechanism through which to produce *Mashiach* and sow the seeds for the final redemption. For this reason, Rav Simcha Bunim explains, the Midrash introduces this comment by citing the verse in Sefer Yirmiyahu (29:11), “For I know the thoughts.” God knows the thoughts of all people, and He knew the pure thoughts of Yehuda as he tended to seemingly mundane affairs, from which God produced *Mashiach*.

Rav Simcha Bunim’s reading of the Midrash underscores the point that religious engagement is not limited to inherently spiritual activities such as prayer. The source of our redemption is not the prayer and tears of Yaakov and his sons, but rather the struggles of Yehuda as he tried raising a family. We serve God in all areas of life, including those which appear to have no direct connection to religious ideals. Rav Simcha Bunim teaches us that *avodat Hashem* encompasses the full range of human activity, and is as relevant and vital when we tend to our jobs and our families as it is when we pray and study.

Sunday

The question naturally arises as to where Reuven had been when Yosef was sold. *Bereishit Rabba* (84), as cited by Rashi, tells that Reuven had left to pray and weep in his ongoing quest for forgiveness for his sin with Bilha. In this context, the Midrash gives praise to Reuven for his intensive process of repentance, commenting, “The Almighty said to Reuven: Never before had somebody sinned before Me and repented – you are the first to introduce repentance!”

Many writers addressed the question of why the Midrash speaks of Reuven as the first person to sin and repent. According to tradition, Adam underwent a process of sincere repentance after partaking from the forbidden tree, and Kayin repented for murdering his brother. In what sense, then, was Reuven the first sinner to repent?

One answer, perhaps, is that Reuven’s offense, as *Chazal* understood it, was not as obviously sinful as Adam’s or Kayin’s. Although the Torah (35:22) writes that Reuven slept with Bilha, *Chazal* understood this account as a euphemistic description of Reuven moving his father’s bed out of Bilha’s tent. After the death of Rachel, Yaakov’s primary wife, Yaakov moved his bed into the tent of Bilha – Rachel’s maidservant whom Yaakov had married years earlier. Reuven saw this as an affront to the honor of his mother, Leah, and so he moved Yaakov’s bed into Leah’s tent. His sin, then, was meddling in his father’s most personal affairs, and the Torah sought to emphasize the gravity of this incident by speaking of Reuven as actually sleeping with his father’s wife. According to this account, Reuven acted with noble motives, out of a desire to defend his mother’s honor. This is quite different from Adam’s clear-cut violation of an explicit divine command, and from Kayin’s act of fratricide. Reuven committed a sin which could be explained and understood, and perhaps even justified.

This, perhaps, is the Midrash’s intent in noting the unprecedented nature of Reuven’s process of repentance. Reuven was the first to repent for a sin that was not obviously sinful, an improper act that at the time seemed warranted. This is a special form of *teshuva*, because it incorporates not merely remorse and the desire to improve, but also a process of honest self-scrutiny. When we acknowledge committing wrongs which could be and were viewed as legitimate acts, this demonstrates that we are carefully evaluating our conduct with a critical eye. Reuven’s repentance sets for us an important example of introspection and retroactive self-assessment, of the need to study ourselves and our conduct to find mistakes that are camouflaged by a disguise of innocence and noble intentions.

Monday

The Torah in Parashat Vayeishev tells of Yosef’s experiences as a servant in the home of Potifar, whose wife attempted to seduce him. We read that on one occasion, when nobody else was in the home, Yosef came “to do his work” and Potifar’s wife grabbed his garment. Yosef ran out of the home, leaving his garment in her hands.

The Gemara in Masekhet Sota (36b) cites a view among the *Amora’im* that interprets the phrase “*la’asot melakhto*” (“to do his work”) in this verse to mean that Yosef came to Potifar’s home with the intention of sleeping with his master’s wife. After having refused her daily advances for a long period of time, Yosef had finally succumbed to temptation and decided to commit the sin. It was only at the last moment that he desisted.

The Maharlbach (Rav Levi ben Chaviv), in [one of his responsa (126)](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=53913&st=&pgnum=380), brings a question he was asked concerning this view cited in the Gemara, which appears to contrast sharply with *Chazal*’s general approach when evaluating righteous Biblical figures. For the most part, *Chazal* tend to cast the words and actions of these figures in a favorable light. One striking example is Aharon’s response to the people’s demand for a new leader at Mount Sinai: he is the one who conceived of the idea to make a statue, and he personally fashioned the golden calf. Yet, *Chazal* exonerate Aharon, explaining that he intended to stall until Moshe returned. When it comes to Yosef, however, even though the Torah says clearly that he came to innocently do his work like on any other day, one *Amora* reads this to mean that he planned to commit a grave sin, refraining only at the last moment. How does this reading fit into the general tendency to cast righteous Biblical figures in a positive light?

The Maharlbach answers that this interpretation of “*la’asot melakhto*” does not, in fact, diminish from Yosef’s greatness in any way; to the contrary, it should lead us to even greater appreciation of Yosef’s self-restraint. After all, according to this view, Yosef did not sin, but rather intended and desired to sin. The need to struggle and withstand pressures and temptations does not reflect spiritual weakness. Yosef is known as “Yosef Ha-tzaddik” not because he did not need to struggle, but because he struggled successfully. And thus the Gemara’s comment is fully consistent with its pattern of underscoring the greatness of our righteous spiritual heroes. We should admire Yosef even more by recognizing the enormity of the struggle that he waged that day when he fled from Potifar’s wife. And we should gain encouragement and inspiration from the knowledge that struggle is part and parcel of the religious experience, that pious devotion to God does not come easily, and that we cannot expect to always be naturally and effortlessly drawn to being the people who we want to be.

Tuesday

The story of Yosef’s sale as a slave, which we read in Parashat Vayeishev, begins when Yaakov sends Yosef to check on his brothers, who were tending to Yaakov’s herds in Shekhem: “Go, please, and see the wellbeing of your brothers and the wellbeing of the sheep, and bring the news back to me” (37:14). Yosef heeds his father’s command, and he goes to see his brothers, who proceed to throw him into a pit, from where he is later taken (either by the brothers or others) and sold into slavery.

Yaakov’s request that Yosef bring him information about his brothers’ wellbeing might be viewed as a point of contrast with the Torah’s description earlier, in the second verse of Parashat Vayeishev: “Yosef brought negative information about them to their father.” Whereas previously Yosef reported to Yaakov about his brothers’ perceived wrongdoing, now he is told to report about their wellbeing.

The message conveyed by this contrast, perhaps, is that the antidote to gossip and tale-bearing is inquiring into other people’s wellbeing. Rather than “dig” for unflattering information about people, we should instead be “digging” for information about their condition and whether they need help that we can provide. The way we overcome the natural tendency to look for the negative side of people is to focus our attention on their needs and try to ensure they are being met.

Indeed, commenting on Yaakov’s request that Yosef report on “*shelom achikha*” (“your brothers’ wellbeing”), Rav Simcha Bunim of Pashischa explained that Yaakov instructed Yosef to search for his brothers’ “*sheleimut*” – “completion” – meaning, all their admirable qualities and achievements. In contrast to Yosef’s earlier practice of bringing back news of his brothers’ alleged failings, his father asked him to report on their “*sheleimut*” – their positive qualities. It is possible that Rav Simcha Bunim did not actually intend this reading as the actual interpretation of the verse. Rather, he perhaps meant that by focusing our attention on “*shelom achikha*,” concerning ourselves with other people’s needs and wellbeing, we can overcome our critical tendencies and look upon them favorably, seeing all their admirable qualities rather than viewing them negatively.

Wednesday

We read in Parashat Vayeshev of Yaakov’s request of Yosef to travel to Shekhem where his brothers were tending to the family’s flocks. A close examination of the text of Yaakov’s request reveals that it consists of two distinct components, separated by a response by Yosef. Yaakov first turns to Yosef and says, “Aren’t your brothers shepherding in Shekhem? Let me send you to them” (37:13). Yosef briefly responds, “*Hineini*” – “Here I am” – after which Yaakov against makes his request, but formulating it differently: “Go, please, and see the wellbeing of your brothers and the wellbeing of the sheep, and report back to me” (37:14). These two requests are not identical. In the first, Yaakov expresses his wish to send Yosef to his brothers, without mentioning any specific purpose. It is only in the second verse that Yaakov asks Yosef to report to him about his brothers’ wellbeing. How are we to understand these two different statements?

Rav Yehuda Henkin, in his [*Benei Banim* (vol. 2, *Chiba Yeteira*, p. 43)](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=21434&st=&pgnum=284&hilite=), suggests a novel reading of these verses, by noting the usual use of the word “*hineini*” in this context. Generally, the word is used in response to one’s name being called, as in the introduction to the story of *akeidat Yitzchak*, when God called Avraham’s name, and he replied “*Hineini*” (Bereishit 22:1). Another example is Moshe’s response to hearing his name called at the burning bush (Shemot 3:4). Yosef, however, replies, “*Hineini*” not to hearing his name called, but rather to Yaakov’s request that he go to his brothers. Although Rashi interprets this response as referring to Yosef’s eager and enthusiastic readiness to comply with his father’s wishes, Rav Henkin suggests the precise opposite reading – that Yosef declined Yaakov’s request, saying “I am staying here,” rather than go to Shekhem. Yaakov then expressed a different request, with which Yosef complied.

Rav Henkin explains that initially, Yaakov asked Yosef to join his brothers in shepherding the flocks, and not to simply check up on them. He asked Yosef, “Aren’t your brothers shepherding in Shekhem?” – as if to say, “Why aren’t you there with them?” The second verse in Parashat Vayeishev tells us that Yosef would shepherd together with his brothers, but it appears that this cooperation stopped due to the enmity that developed between them. Yaakov now tried to intervene, encouraging Yosef to join his brothers in tending to the herds, but Yosef refused, knowing that his brothers were no longer capable of treating him in a friendly manner (“*ve-lo yakhelu dabero le-shalom*” – 37:4). Yaakov then came up with a different plan, asking Yosef not to join his brothers, but to see how they were doing, in the hope that this brief encounter might trigger a process of reconciliation. Since this was a favor Yosef was being asked to do for his father, that did not entail working with his hostile brothers, Yosef agreed. Tragically, of course, Yaakov’s plan backfired in the worst way imaginable, and Yosef ended up being brought to Egypt as a slave.

Thursday

Yesterday, we noted the possibility that when Yaakov sent Yosef to his brothers in Shekhem, his intention was not simply to inquire about their wellbeing, but rather to mend the rift that had grown between them. Yaakov’s hope was for Yosef to join his brothers as they tended to the family’s herds, and then, at very least, to have Yosef check on them in the hope of triggering some sort of process of reconciliation. In the end, this plan failed, as the brothers began conspiring against Yosef the moment they saw him approaching, ultimately throwing him into a pit and then selling him as a slave.

This incident perhaps brings to mind *Chazal*’s famous exhortation in *Pirkei Avot* (4:18), “Do not appease your friend at the time of his anger, and do not console him at the time when his deceased [relative] lies before him.” Strong emotions such as anger and grief need time to subside, and it is thus futile, at best, and often counterproductive or even harmful, to try to alleviate these hard feelings prematurely. People experiencing rage or anguish need, more than anything else, time to process the feelings and allow their emotional wounds to heal. This is true of other feelings, as well, such as envy and enmity, the feelings which Yosef’s brothers harbored towards him. It seems that Yaakov tried to mend the rift prematurely, when the brothers’ animosity towards Yosef was still at the boiling point, and the consequences of this hasty measure were tragic.

Earlier, the Torah tells that because of the brothers’ hostility towards Yosef, “they were unable to speak to him peacefully” (37:4), which could be understood to mean that the brothers disengaged from Yosef. Unable to “speak to him peacefully,” they chose not to speak to him at all. While such a rift between brothers is distressing and unfortunate, it was the preferred state of affairs under the current circumstances, when peaceful, brotherly interaction was not possible. Yaakov attempted to break the silence, and the hatred, before it was ready to be broken. The result was a horrible, violent encounter that thrust the family into a grave crisis.

One of the lessons of this story, then, is that difficult problems cannot be solved overnight. Yaakov’s noble and understandable desire to mend the rift between his sons led him to measures that were bound to be futile under the current conditions. His mistake was intervening too soon, rather than giving the deep emotional wounds a chance to mend. Not all problems are ready for solutions at the time we want to solve them. We need to exercise – and pray for – the patience, sound judgment and common sense needed to know when to work to solve problems and when to wait until they are able to be solved.

Friday

The Torah in the beginning of Parashat Vayeishev (37:2) describes Yosef as a “*na’ar*” – “lad,” or “youth.” Ibn Ezra explains this to mean that because Yosef was younger than the other brothers (except the youngest, Binyamin), he was assigned the role of servant to the sons of Bilha and Zilpa (who are also mentioned in this verse). As Asher Weiser comments in his notes to Ibn Ezra’s commentary (in the *Torat Chayim* edition of the Chumash), Ibn Ezra likely bases this interpretation on a verse in Sefer Shemot (33:11) which describes Yehoshua as “his [Moshe’s] servant, a *na’ar*.” The word “*na’ar*” is associated with the role of servant or personal attendant, and thus Ibn Ezra claimed that the Torah here in Parashat Vayeishev speaks of Yosef’s status as his brothers’ underling.

Rashi, however, citing the Midrash, interprets the word “*na’ar*” as referring to Yosef’s immaturity, specifically, to his paying inordinate attention to his looks.

A different approach is taken by Seforno, who connects Yosef’s “youthfulness” to the Torah’s account at the end of this verse of Yosef reporting negative information about his brothers to his father. Seforno writes, “Because of his youthfulness, he sinned by bringing negative information about his brothers, as he was inexperienced and [thus] did not anticipate the end result.” Yosef was “youthful” in the sense that he immaturely reported negatively to Yaakov about his brothers, not realizing that this would fuel the flames of hostility that later developed.

While Yosef, in his youthfulness, failed to realize the consequences of his tale-bearing, the brothers, for their part, failed to realize that Yosef’s behavior was simply a function of his being a “*na’ar*,” a passing phase of immaturity. They took offense, and exception, to Yosef’s conduct, and despised him for it, instead of taking it for what it was – a “youthful” pattern of behavior that would likely pass as Yosef matured. The Torah informs us that Yosef’s tale-bearing was due to his being a “*na’ar*,” but the brothers took it far more seriously, to the point where they sought to eliminate him from the family.

Often, ruptures between friends and family members occur when people feel insulted by improper words or conduct, rather than attributing them to “youthfulness” – to simple and common character flaws. When we take these things personally, we feel hurt and pained, and then harbor resentment. One of the lessons of the story told in Parashat Vayeishev, perhaps, is to accept that the people around us sometimes act as a “*na’ar*,” and there is thus no reason to take personal offense. Just as we are not insulted when a toddler shouts at us, similarly, we should not take offense when adults act immaturely towards us. All people are flawed, and thus their hurtful words and actions do not necessarily need to be taken personally. If we learn this lesson, we can, hopefully, avoid strife and tension, and enjoy peaceful relations with the people around us.