**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT VAYESHEV**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

The Torah in Parashat Vayeshev tells the story of Tamar, Yehuda’s daughter-in-law, who was married first to Yehuda’s oldest son, and then, upon that son’s premature death, to Yehuda’s second son, who also then died. Tamar anticipated marrying Yehuda’s third son (in accordance with the custom of *yibum*), but Yehuda, fearful that she somehow was causing his sons to die, refused. Later, Tamar disguised as a prostitute and sat along the road where Yehuda was traveling. Not recognizing the woman as his daughter-in-law, Yehuda solicited her services in exchange for a young goat which he promised to deliver upon his return home. When he returned home, he sent the goat with Chira, a comrade who was introduced to us earlier, at the very beginning of this story (38:1). Chira was unable to find the woman, who had returned to her parents’ home, and so he brought the goat back to Yehuda.

In describing Yehuda’s attempt to deliver the goat to the woman, the Torah writes, “Yehuda sent the young goat with his friend, the Adulamite…” (38:20). It has been noted that the Torah here does not identify Chira by his name, but rather by his relationship to Yehuda: “*rei’eihu ha-Adulami*” (“his friend the Adulamite”). The reason, as some have suggested, is that the Torah seeks to emphasize Chira’s friendship with Yehuda because this is what enabled Yehuda to assign him such a task. Sending payment to a prostitute whose services one had solicited is not a favor which a person could ask of anybody. Only with a close, loyal friend would a person feel comfortable sharing such unflattering personal information. And thus the Torah emphasizes that Yehuda sent the payment with “*rei’eihu*” – his close, trusted comrade, whom he knew would continue liking and respecting him despite the unseemly stains on his record.

The Mishna in Avot (1:6) famously instructs, “*…kenei lekha chaver*” – that we should “acquire” a friend. Something we “acquire” remains under our ownership in all circumstances, through thick and thin, as long as we keep it safely in our possession. *Chazal* urge us to find friends who will remain loyal despite discovering our failings and weaknesses, friends to whom we can safely and comfortably divulge even embarrassing personal information. True friendship is one in which the parties are mindful of not only each other’s admirable qualities, but also their faults, and are prepared to work together to grow and improve. It is the kind of friendship that existed between Yehuda and Chira, with whom he entrusted the most unflattering aspects of his private life, and this is the kind of friendship which we are advised to “acquire” for ourselves.

(Based on [an article by Rav Yissachar Frand](http://gt.torah.org/learning/ravfrand/5776/vayeishev.html))

Sunday

Parashat Vayeshev tells the tragic story of *mekhirat Yosef* – the sale of Yosef as a slave. Yaakov was under the impression that Yosef had been killed by a wild beast, and mourned inconsolably for his son. After telling that Yaakov did not accept words of consolation offered by his children, the Torah says, “His father wept for him” (37:35). Sensitive to the seeming redundancy of this phrase, the Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 84:21), cited by Rashi, explains that it refers not to Yaakov, but rather to his father, Yitzchak. According to Midrashic tradition, Yitzchak, who was still alive at the time of Yosef’s sale (which occurred when Yaakov was 108 years old, such that Yitzchak was 168, twelve years before his passing), knew through *ru’ach ha-kodesh* (prophetic insight) that Yosef was sold as a slave by his brothers. However, realizing that God did not want this information revealed to Yaakov, Yitzchak was unable to comfort Yaakov with the knowledge that his beloved son was still alive. And thus “his father cried for him” – Yitzchak wept for the pain and anguish experienced by his beloved son, Yaakov.

Symbolically, this Midrashic image of Yitzchak weeping for Yaakov perhaps conveys an important lesson about empathy. There are times when people, like Yaakov, weep and mourn unnecessarily, due to a lack of knowledge or understanding of the situation. Children and young adults, for example, often grieve over matters which they will eventually realize hardly warrant such anguish. And even mature adults occasionally worry about or lament situations which later, in hindsight, will be recognized as benign. Just as Yitzchak empathized with Yaakov’s pain despite realizing that it resulted from misinformation, similarly, we must empathize with people’s distress even when we feel it is exaggerated or altogether unwarranted. What feels important to one person does not necessarily feel important to another person, and thus what disturbs one person’s peace of mind will not necessarily disturb another person’s peace of mind. The Midrash perhaps instructs us to try to feel our fellow’s pain even when we realize that the problem he experiences is not as severe as he thinks. Since from his current perspective the “crisis” causes him distress, we must empathize with his pain and do what we can to help alleviate it.

Monday

Rashi, in a famous passage in his Torah commentary (beginning of Parashat Vayeshev), presents the following introduction to the story of Yosef and his brothers, citing from the Midrash:

Yaakov sought to dwell in tranquility, but then the anguish of Yosef immediately pounced on him. The righteous seek to dwell in tranquility, but the Almighty says: “Is it not enough for the righteous that which is prepared for them in the next world, that they seek to live in tranquility even in this world?”

Many writers have struggled to explain why *Chazal* here seem to find fault in Yaakov’s desire – and that of other righteous people – for “tranquility.” Why should he be punished with the unimaginable grief of *mekhirat Yosef* simply for desiring what all people desire – a life of peace and serenity?

One explanation, perhaps, is that *Chazal* here speak of a very natural human tendency, namely, to anticipate perfect “tranquility” once a given problem is solved, or once a given desire is fulfilled. Esav’s threat of revenge forced Yaakov to flee to Lavan, and immediately after completing his difficult stay with Lavan and reuniting peacefully with Esav, his sons launched an assault on Shekhem, endangering the family. God intervened to protect Yaakov (35:5), and Yaakov finally arrived at his father’s home in Chevron. He now anticipated that having endured the long series of difficult challenges and hardships precipitated by his stealing his brother’s blessing, he would now, once and for all, enjoy tranquility. Instead, his family quickly came upon a new crisis, with Yosef being sold by his brothers as a slave. Drawing upon the extreme example of Yaakov’s troubled life, *Chazal* here alert us to the fact that every stage of life and every circumstance we find ourselves in poses its own unique challenges. We should not delude ourselves into thinking that once we solve our current problems we will enjoy unbridled “*shalva*” (“serenity”), because unbridled tranquility is experienced only in the next world, not in this world.

The Midrash’s intent, it would seem, is not to present a gloomy depiction of life, but rather to urge us to make the most of our present situation, with all its attendant challenges, rather than always looking ahead in anticipation of the future. Too often, we live not in the present, but rather in the future, looking ahead to the next stage, when our current struggles will end. *Chazal* implore us to try to find meaning, fulfillment and joy in whatever situation or stage we are in, rather than always looking ahead to the anticipated “*shalva*” of the future.

Tuesday

We read in Parashat Vayeshev of Yosef’s experiences as a slave in Egypt, specifically, the attempts made by the wife of his master, Potifar, to lure him into an adulterous relationship. Yosef repeatedly refused her advances, until finally he fled from the home and she falsely accused him of trying to rape her, resulting in his imprisonment.

The Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 85:2), cited by Rashi (39:1), comments that Potifar’s wife had “altruistic” motives for trying to lure Yosef into an intimate relationship. She foresaw through astrology that she and Yosef would have shared offspring, and so she felt justified in pursuing an adulterous affair with him. In truth, this prediction referred to her daughter, Osnat, who would later marry Yosef (41:45).

It has been suggested that the Midrash’s intent is to magnify the intensity of the test which Yosef confronted at this time. He not only faced strong physical temptation to sin, but also had a way of possibly justifying the sinful act in his mind. Resisting temptation is always difficult, but less so when one is firm in his conviction and has a clear sense of right and wrong. Once the act in question can somehow be justified and even seem altruistic, the inner defenses are weakened and the person becomes especially vulnerable. Yosef thus had to resist temptation despite hearing the astrological predictions that he and his seductress would share offspring, predictions that could have been perceived as justifying an intimate relationship with Potifar’s wife.

The Midrash here reminds us how easy it is to concoct justifications for even that which is unquestionably wrong. Self-discipline is difficult in its own right, but becomes even more difficult when we entertain false rationales for why improper behavior is not truly improper. *Chazal* here urge us to be honest with ourselves, avoid the tendency to justify clearly inappropriate conduct, and live with a very clear sense of what is right and what is wrong.

Wednesday

The Torah in Parashat Vayeshev describes Yosef’s success as Potifar’s servant in Egypt, to the point where Potifar entrusted Yosef with his entire home and all his possessions: “He left everything he had in Yosef’s hands, and he paid no attention to anything that was with him…” (39:6). Potifar trusted Yosef to such an extent that he was able to leave all his possessions under his care without having to supervise or oversee Yosef’s work at all.

This description forms the background to the next story, namely, the attempts made by Potifar’s wife to seduce Yosef and lure him to an adulterous relationship. The level of trust earned by Yosef would have, seemingly, magnified the challenge he faced in resisting temptation during this ordeal. Fully secure in Yosef managing all his affairs, Potifar would never suspect Yosef of violating his wife. Yosef could have easily acceded to Potifar’s wife without any fear of arousing Potifar’s suspicion. Yet, ironically, it was specifically Potifar’s trust in Yosef that drove Yosef to resist. In responding to Potifar’s wife’s and explaining why he could not sleep with her, Yosef emphasized the level of trust Potifar had in him, the fact that Potifar placed him in charge of all his affairs without having to oversee his work (39:8-9). Potifar’s trust and confidence in Yosef did not lead Yosef to feel at ease betraying him, but to the contrary, made it impossible for Yosef to even consider betraying him.

This perhaps points to a more general quality of Yosef’s character, namely, perceiving power and stature as a source of obligation, rather than a source of privilege. The trust shown to him by Potifar, in Yosef’s mind, raised the level of expectations and of the standards he was to maintain in his capacity as Potifar’s servant. He never considered misusing this trust for his personal gain.

We see this quality of Yosef later, as well, after he revealed his identity to his brothers. He reassured them that he will not seek vengeance for their crimes against him, because he recognized that God had sent him to Egypt for the purpose of leading the storage of grain which ended up saving millions of lives during the harsh years of famine. He saw his rise to power as a responsibility, not a privilege. It gave him obligations to fulfill, not personal opportunities to seize. Just as Potifar’s trust raised the bar of expectations, so did his rise to the position of Egyptian viceroy impose upon him responsibilities, and it could not misappropriated for personal interests.

Thursday

The Torah in Parashat Vayeshev tells of Yosef’s brothers initially plotting to kill him, and Reuven’s attempt to intervene. He suggested to the other brothers that instead of killing Yosef directly, they should instead him cast him into a pit in the wilderness. Reuven’s intent was to later rescue Yosef from the pit, but in the interim, the other brothers decided to lift Yosef from the pit and sell him as a slave.

The Gemara in Masekhet Makkot (10a) draws a connection between Reuven’s partially successful efforts to rescue Yosef and the *arei miklat* (“cities of refuge”) which would later be set aside in *Eretz Yisrael* for the purpose of rescuing inadvertent killers. Before *Benei Yisrael*’s entry into the Land of Israel, God commanded them to designate six such cities, and Moshe set aside three cities already during his lifetime, in the region east of the Jordan River settled by the tribes of Reuven, Gad and Menashe. The Torah names these cities in Sefer Devarim (4:43), and the first city listed was the city of Betzer, which served the tribe of Reuven. The Gemara comments that Reuven earned this distinction, of having its tribe’s city of refuge listed first, because he intervened to rescue Yosef from the other brothers.

How might we explain the link drawn by the Midrash between Reuven’s intervention on Yosef’s behalf, and the law of *ir miklat*?

One possibility, perhaps, relates to the theme of “separation” with which the *arei miklat* are associated. The Torah commands *Benei Yisrael* to “separate” or “set apart” (“*tavdil*” – Devarim 19:2) cities of refuge, and Moshe is described as having “separated” three cities for this purpose (“*az yavdil Moshe*” – Devarim 4:41). The cities of refuge were to be “separate” and “different.” Whereas inadvertent killers would elsewhere likely be met with contempt, derision and threats, in these cities of refuge they were welcomed, cared for and rehabilitated. Indeed, the *Sefer Ha-chinukh* (408) explains that the *arei miklat* were cities of *Leviyim*, because the *Leviyim* were expected to be especially kind, sensitive and compassionate, and could therefore be trusted to treat those seeking refuge with generosity and goodwill. The requirement of *ir miklat* was about “setting apart” cities as places of unique sensitivity, that would work patiently and lovingly with those who had made tragic, irresponsible mistakes, in order to help them recover and grow.

This concept, perhaps, underlies the connection drawn between Reuven’s attempt to rescue Yosef and the *arei miklat*. At a time when the brothers unanimously and passionately decided upon killing Yosef, Reuven managed to transcend the “groupthink” and reach a different decision. He withdrew from the consensus and went against the grain. He set the precedent of the “*arei miklat*” by setting himself apart, by not being afraid to think differently and oppose the group’s immoral decision. And he thus set for us the example of courage and resolve in standing up for what’s right even when this is unpopular, of “separating” from the majority when this is necessary to oppose injustice.

Friday

The Torah tells that as Yosef journeyed from Chevron to check on his brothers, as Yaakov had instructed, an unnamed man found him “wandering about in in the field” (37:15), and the man asked Yosef what he was looking for. Yosef said he was looking for his brothers who were shepherding their herds, and the man directed Yosef towards Dotan. Rashi, citing the Midrash, comments that this mysterious man was, in fact, an angel, who had apparently been sent by God to direct Yosef to his brothers.

*Rabboteinu Ba’alei Ha-Tosafot* cite those who add that when the Torah describes this angel as finding Yosef “wandering about in the field,” it means that he informed Yosef about *Benei Yisrael*’s future exiles. Yosef’s “wandering” on that occasion foreshadowed not only the upheavals and instability that he was about to begin experiencing personally, but also the upheavals and instability of the numerous Jewish exiles, the first of which – the Egyptian enslavement – was beginning to unfold at that time.

What significance might there be to this symbolism of Yosef’s “wandering about in the field,” which represented the Jews’ “wandering” in exile?

Rav Dov Weinberger, in *Shemen Ha-tov*, suggests focusing on the question which the angel posed to Yosef: “*Ma tevakesh*” – “What are you looking for?” *Rabboteinu Ba’alei Ha-Tosafot* perhaps sought to remind us that even in the throes of exile, even as we deal with the hardships and challenges of living in an unredeemed world, we must try to remain focused on our ultimate goal and purpose. Even when it might outwardly appear that we are “wandering about” aimlessly, lost and without purpose, we must ensure that we are, in truth, living with the clear aim and objective of serving our Creator. At all times, even in periods of adversity, we should ask ourselves, “*Ma tevakesh*,” and conduct our lives with a sense of direction, meaning and purpose.