YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Student summaries of Sichot of the Roshei Yeshiva**

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In loving memory of Rabbi Dr. Barrett (Chaim Dov) Broyde zt"l

הוֹלֵךְ תָּמִים וּפֹעֵל צֶדֶק וְדֹבֵר אֱמֶת בִּלְבָבוֹ

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**Parashat Vayishlach**

**Sicha of HarAV MosHeh Lichtenstein**

**The Power of Silence**

Adapted by Immanuel Meyer and Elisha Oron

Translated by David Strauss

### The "whole bed" of Yaakov

*Chazal* used a unique expression regarding Yaakov's children, saying that "Yaakov's bed was whole" (*Shir ha-Shirim Rabba* 4, s.v. *kulakh yafa ra'ayati*), meaning that all his children were worthy. Why did Yaakov merit this expression? In what way was he superior to the other patriarchs? The Gemara states:

Rav Avira expounded, sometimes in the name of Rav and sometimes in the name of Rav Asi: What is meant by: "And the child [Yitzchak] grew and was weaned [*vayigamel*]" (*Bereishit* 21:8)? The Holy One, blessed be He, will make a great banquet for the righteous on the day He manifests [*yigmol*] His love to the seed of Yitzchak. After they have eaten and drunk, the cup of Grace will be offered to our father Avraham, that he should recite Grace, but he will answer them: I cannot say Grace, because Yishmael issued from me. Then Yitzchak will be asked: Take it and say Grace. But he will reply: I cannot say Grace, because Esav issued from me. Then Yaakov will be asked: Take it and say Grace. (*Pesachim* 119b)

The Gemara describes the feast of the righteous that God will prepare in the future. Who will recite Grace at this meal? Abraham will not be able to recite the blessing, because Yishmael issued from him. Yitzchak as well will not be able to recite the blessing, because Esav was among his children. Only Yaakov, who did not give rise to any improper seed, will be able to recite the blessing. In the end, the Gemara concludes that even Yaakov will not be able to recite the blessing, but only David, for reasons that we will not expand upon now.

Why did Yaakov merit that his bed would be whole, i.e., that he would not have unworthy seed? Let us examine Yaakov's background.

### A complicated family

Yaakov's family background is actually very problematic. Before Leah's first pregnancy, Scripture states: “And the Lord saw that Leah was hated, and he opened her womb” (*Bereishit* 29:31). It is not just that Leah was not loved in the way that Rachel was loved; it seems she was truly hated. The Midrash explains that Yaakov resented her because she had agreed to participate in Lavan’s deception of him, when Lavan substituted Leah for Rachel. Thus, the names that Leah chooses to give to her sons relate to the tense relationship between Leah and Yaakov, for example:

Now this time will my husband [*yilaveh*] be joined unto me, because I have borne him three sons; therefore was his name called Levi. (*Bereishit* 29:35)

Naftali received his name from Rachel in similar fashion:

With mighty wrestlings [*naftulei*] have I wrestled with my sister, and have prevailed; and she called his name Naftali. (*Bereishit* 30:8)

How awful! Naftali's name is not a positive name of destiny and joy. He is called Naftali because of the struggle between Leah and Rachel. The names that Leah and Rachel choose are not names of joy and fulfillment, but rather names of tension and harsh feelings.

This is also how Rachel and Leah decided to give Yaakov their maidservants as wives. It was not just so that the maidservants should bear him children, but that the one sister should surpass the other. So too the story of the mandrakes attests to the excessive tension and problematic relationship between the two sisters. Rachel buys the mandrakes from Leah in exchange for a night with Yaakov. Yaakov returns from the field, expecting Rachel, but, lo, Leah goes out to meet him, hoping for love that will never be hers.

In addition to the difficult relationship within Yaakov's own household, the place where he raises his family is exceedingly problematic. Yaakov builds his family against the backdrop of Lavan and his deceptions; this is the same Lavan who replaced Rachel with Leah in order to squeeze more years of work out of his son-in-law, Yaakov. The relationship between sisters often involves competition and jealousy, but Lavan chooses to intensify these feelings by marrying the two of them to the same man, and all this in order to increase his own profits.

Lavan later attempts to control Yaakov's assets as much as possible. Replacing the speckled sheep for the streaked in order to enhance his own wealth came at the expense of his son-in-law, his daughters, and ultimately his grandchildren. This does not stop Lavan from trying to execute his schemes.

Yaakov's own background is also troubled. After his mother convinced him to steal his father's blessings, Yaakov flees from his brother who wishes to kill him. Even when Yaakov returns from Charan, he is forced to contend with his brother, who still wants to kill him. To all this we may add the new situation that Yaakov faces when he returns to the land of Israel. Here we encounter the story of Dina, which expresses, among other things, the generational gap between Yaakov and his sons.

All of what we have said only sharpens our question: It is precisely Yaakov, with his exceedingly complex family story, who merits the level that "his bed was whole"!

### Righteous people who sin

In addition to what has been noted thus far, there is another interesting distinction between Yaakov's family and the families of the patriarchs who preceded him. Until Yaakov all of the righteous were absolutely righteous. Yishmael was a sinner, but Yitzchak was a perfect whole-burnt offering. Esav was wicked, but Yaakov was “a wholehearted man.” Those who were righteous contained no negative elements.

All this is true until we come to Yaakov's family. Here for the first time we encounter righteous people who sin, such as Yehuda, in his relationship with Tamar, and Dina, in her going out to see the daughters of the land, and her relations with Shechem. This led to the problematic actions of Shimon and Levi, who slay all the men of Shechem in a manner that brings upon them Yaakov's harsh deathbed rebuke.

Later in the *parasha* we read about Reuven's sin. Whether we understand that Reuven lay with Bilha, according to the plain sense of the text, or we understand that he rearranged his father's bed, in protest of the insult inflicted on his mother Leah, in accordance with the Midrash, we are dealing with a grave sin. And above all, of course, is the story of Yosef and his brothers.

### Yaakov's Silence

All these characters – all of Yaakov's children, with their transgressions – continue to be part and parcel of the Jewish people. They are part of the whole bed of Yaakov. The reason for this is uniform for all, namely, Yaakov's silence.

It is reasonable to assume that Yaakov heard about the story of Yehuda and Tamar. When they were about to execute his grandsons' widow, Yaakov presumably knew what was going to happen. Thus he must have heard about Yehuda's confession: "She is more righteous than I" (*Bereishit* 38:26). However, the verses make no mention of Yaakov rebuking Yehuda.

So too in the story of Dina, we do not find that Yaakov reproached her. What we do find are Yaakov's words to Shimon and Levi and their response:

And Yaakov said to Shimon and Levi: You have troubled me, to make me odious unto the inhabitants of the land, even unto the Canaanites and the Perizzites; and, I being few in number, they will gather themselves together against me and smite me; and I shall be destroyed, I and my house. And they said: Should one deal with our sister as with a harlot? (*Bereishit* 34:30-31)

Yaakov expresses here a real concern. His sons answer what they answer, and Yaakov offers no further response. The story ends here. Did Yaakov accept Shimon and Levi's argument? Based on the passage here, one might think that he did. However, in his last moments on his deathbed, Yaakov expresses his feelings about the episode:

Shimon and Levi are brethren; weapons of violence their kinship. Let my soul not come into their council; unto their assembly let my glory not be united; for in their anger they slew men, and in their self-will they houghed oxen. Cursed be their anger, for it was fierce, and their wrath, for it was cruel; I will divide them in Yaakov, and scatter them in Israel. (*Bereishit* 49:3-7)

Yaakov utters here exceedingly harsh words that he had kept to himself for many years, from the time of the episode in Shechem. In real time, however, Yaakov chose to remain silent.

Yaakov's silence is manifest also in the story of Yosef and his brothers. Yosef relates his second dream to his father and his brothers, after which the Torah states: “And his brethren envied him; but his father kept the matter in mind” (*Bereishit* 37:11). Yosef's brothers envied him, and presumably they expressed their feelings. But Yaakov chose to "keep the matter in mind." That which he had to say he said, but afterwards he chose silence.

The silence reaches its climax in the Reuven affair. Reuven "confuses his father's bed." If we understand this in its plain sense, we are dealing with the worst sin that Reuven could have committed. He takes his father's place while he is still alive, taking control of the most private and intimate aspect of his life, his concubine.

Even if we understand that all he did was rearrange the beds, we are still dealing with a very serious transgression. This was an undermining of Yaakov's authority as head of the family, and an attempt to influence matters about which Reuven should have no say whatsoever. After the fact, Yaakov hears about what happened, as it is stated:

And it came to pass, while Israel dwelt in that land, that Reuven went and lay with Bilha his father's concubine; and Israel heard of it… (*Bereishit* 35:22)

Hearing is not just physical hearing. Hearing in Scripture means understanding. When Yosef's brothers come and speak Hebrew before him, it says: “And they knew not that Yosef understood (*shome'a*, heard)them; for the interpreter was between them” (*Bereishit* 42:23). Surely the brothers knew that Yosef could hear them. They thought, however, that he did not understand their language, because during the course of their conversation an interpreter had been present. This understanding also has a halakhic implication, namely, the need to understand and internalize the words of *Shema*, based on the verse: “Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one” (*Devarim* 6:4).

Let us return to the story of Reuven. According to what we have said, Yaakov heard what had happened. He heard and understood the significance of the event – namely, the undermining of his standing. Yaakov also understood the ramifications. But he said nothing. Here we encounter an unusual phenomenon in the way that the verse is written in a Torah scroll – a break in the middle of the verse, something which occurs only a few times in all of Scripture. This break emphasizes that which we would have expected to be said, but was not said.

### Education Through silence

We would expect severe reproach, shouting, perhaps even Reuven's removal from the family. Instead, there is a break in the verse. Nothing is said.

Following the break, it says:

Now the sons of Yaakov were twelve: the sons of Leah: Reuven, Yaakov's first-born, and Shimon, and Levi, and Yehuda, and Yissachar, and Zevulun… (*Bereishit* 35:22)

The sons of Yaakov are still twelve, and Reuven remains Yaakov's firstborn. All this was due precisely to Yaakov's silence.

Keeping silent is of utmost importance in raising children. It is easy to talk, to argue, to reproach. According to the simple understanding, rebuking children is not part of the general *mitzva* of giving rebuke (*Vayikra* 19:17), but rather part of the *mitzva* of education. And in raising children, it is often silence that is needed.

Rebuke can lead to victory in battle. It is possible that if Yaakov had rebuked his children, they would have immediately repented. This, however, would have led to defeat in the war, in the future. Multiple, overly sharp rebukes would have led to distancing and removal from the family.

As we have seen, Yaakov voices his reproach at the end of his life – to Reuven, to Shimon and to Levi. Let us, however, be precise about his words of rebuke: "I will divide them **in** Yaakov, and scatter them **in** Israel" (*Bereishit* 49:7). Shimon and Levi will be divided and scattered, but they will remain in Israel, in Yaakov.

Silence does indeed require great strength, but it is critical. It is necessary in both our personal and our public lives. Yaakov merited that his bed remained whole precisely because he was capable of accepting his children despite their sins, and loving them despite what they had done. This is the only way to achieve unity, perfection, and a "whole bed."

(This *sicha* was delivered on leil Shabbat, *Parashat Vayishlach* 5772 [2011].)