**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT VAYESHEV**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

We read in Parashat Vayeishev the story of Yehuda and his daughter-in-law, Tamar. After the premature death of her first husband, Yehuda’s oldest son, Yehuda had her marry his second son, following the practice of *yibum* (levirate marriage). However, Yehuda’s second son also died, at which point Yehuda sent Tamar back to her parents’ home, fearful of having her marry his third son. Tamar, determined to have children, later posed as a prostitute along the road as Yehuda traveled, and he solicited her services and impregnated her. When it was discovered that she was pregnant, it was assumed that she had engaged in a forbidden relationship, for which she was going to be executed. At the last minute, Tamar produced Yehuda’s personal items which he had given her as security, and announced that the owner of those items was the father of the twins she was carrying. Yehuda at that point acknowledged that he had impregnated his daughter-in-law, such that the relationship was acceptable, as a form of *yibum*, and Tamar was therefore not punished.

The Gemara, in several places (Berakhot 43b and elsewhere), famously comments on the basis of this story, “It is preferable for a person to cast himself into a furnace of fire than to publicly humiliate his fellow.” Tamar did not allow herself to save her life by explicitly disclosing the identity of the man who had impregnated her, and instead allowed that man to make the decision for himself whether or not to come forward. This demonstrates, the Gemara teaches, that one should be prepared to surrender his life rather than subject another person to humiliation. Meiri (Berakhot 43b) writes that this comment was made “*derekh tzachut*” – rhetorically, to emphasize the gravity of causing somebody embarrassment, and should not be taken as an actual halakhic directive. By contrast, *Tosafot* (Sota 10b), Rabbeinu Yona (*Sha’arei Teshuva* 3:138) and the Tashbetz (*Magen Avot*, 3:11) seem to have understood the Gemara’s remark literally, as requiring surrendering one’s life to avoid embarrassing another person. (See [Rav Asher Weiss’ discussion of the topic](https://www.torahbase.org/%D7%A4%D7%A8%D7%A9%D7%AA-%D7%95%D7%99%D7%A9%D7%91-%D7%A0%D7%97-%D7%9C%D7%95-%D7%9C%D7%90%D7%93%D7%9D-%D7%A9%D7%99%D7%A4%D7%99%D7%9C-%D7%90%D7%AA-%D7%A2%D7%A6%D7%9E%D7%95-%D7%9C%D7%9B%D7%91%D7%A9/).)

Regardless, Rav Meir Yechiel of Ostrovtza noted the significance of the fact that the Gemara made this inference from the particular circumstance of Tamar, who refused to name Yehuda as the father of her twins. Tamar was prepared to sacrifice her life even after producing Yehuda’s articles – meaning, had Yehuda decided to remain silent in order to protect his reputation, Tamar would have allowed herself to be killed. It thus turns out, the Rebbe of Ostrovtza observed, that Tamar was ready to surrender her life in order not to shame somebody who was ready to allow an innocent pregnant woman to be killed for the sake of protecting his reputation. We might have assumed that once Tamar determined that Yehuda would prefer that she die rather than admit to being the father, she would no longer deem him worthy of being protected from shame. But even at that point, Tamar refused to cause Yehuda humiliation – even though it could certainly be argued that he would have then fully deserved to be publicly shamed, as he was ready to allow Tamar and her fetuses to die to protect his reputation.

The Rebbe of Ostrovtza’s observation reminds us that even people who have acted wrongly do not necessarily deserve to have their wrongs publicly exposed. We cannot assume that just because somebody acted improperly, he *ipso facto* forfeits his or her right to dignity. Certainly, those who pose an actual danger must be exposed. Generally, however, we are not entitled to cause others humiliation, even if we have valid reasons to dislike them, as even those who are guilty of misconduct must be given the right to live in dignity and not have their reputations destroyed.

Sunday

We read in Parashat Vayeishev of the scheme devised by Tamar, Yehuda’s widowed daughter-in-law, to lure Yehuda to an intimate relationship after he refused to allow his younger son to marry her as required by the custom of levirate marriage which was, apparently, practiced at that time. Hearing that Yehuda was traveling from home, Tamar dressed as a prostitute and sat at a place which the Torah calls “*petach einayim*” (38:14). When Yehuda passed by, he saw her and solicited her services, which resulted in her conceiving twins.

Rashi explains the term “*petach einayim*” – which literally means “the opening of eyes” – as a reference to an intersection. It seems that an intersection is called “*petach einayim*” because it requires one to pay close, careful attention to ensure he follows the right direction. When traveling a long road without intersections, one can, in a sense, keep his eyes “closed,” traveling forward without looking at or thinking about his route. Upon reaching an intersection, however, one needs to “open his eyes,” to look and think carefully about where he wishes to go. Therefore, an intersection is called “*petach einayim*.”

Tamar’s objective was to attract Yehuda’s attention and interest, and so she positioned herself at a “*petach einayim*,” a place where people travel with their eyes open. When people travel with “open eyes,” looking around and exploring in order to properly choose their direction, they are likely to take note of the many different distractions and lures that present themselves along the way. Tamar capitalized on Yehuda’s “open eyes” at the intersection to catch his attention and lure him to intimacy.

We need to lead our lives, on the one hand, with a clear path and direction, journeying determinedly and with our minds focused toward the goals which we want to achieve. This determination and focus help us avoid the distractions that abound so we stick to our chosen path without being thrown off course. But on the other hand, we must keep our eyes open to new opportunities, for new ways to grow, to improve, and to reach higher. If we insist on always staying on the same precise route, we limit ourselves. The challenge, then, is to keep our eyes open for new opportunities without falling prey to the distractions and lures all around us; to adhere to the course of life that we are to follow while constantly seeking new ways to make the journey more productive and more fulfilling, ensuring to avoid the diversions that threaten to draw us off the correct path.

Monday

The Torah in Parashat Vayeishev tells the tragic and disturbing story of *mekhirat Yosef* – the story of how Yosef’s brothers conspired to kill him, and ultimately decided to sell him as a slave. Seforno, in among the more famous passages in his Torah commentary (37:18), writes that the brothers reached this drastic decision because of their misperception of Yosef. The Torah tells that Yosef would report to his father the brothers’ wrongdoing (37:2), and Seforno explains that when Yosef approached the brothers in Dotan, where they decided to sell him as a slave, they assumed he was coming to find something wrong with their behavior, or to cause them to sin. His goal, they thought, was either to have Yaakov curse them, or to have God punish them for their misdeeds. In their mind, then, Yosef posed a grave danger to them, and so they felt they had no choice but to eliminate him.

Seforno explains on this basis the expression “*va-yitnakelu oto*” used by the Torah to describe the brothers’ reaction to seeing Yosef approach. This phrase is normally understood to mean that the brothers schemed against Yosef, but Seforno explains that the brothers regarded Yosef as a “*nokheil*” – a plotter of evil, and this is how they understood his unexpected visit in Dotan. And so they devised a plan to eliminate him, figuring this was necessary in order to protect themselves.

Further insight into Seforno’s approach can be gleaned from his comments later (42:22), in explaining Reuven’s censure of his brothers for what they did to Yosef. After they arrived in Egypt to purchase food and were accused of coming as spies, the brothers reflected upon their situation and figured that their crisis was a divine punishment for their crime against Yosef. Reuven then said, “Did I not tell you: ‘Do not harm the boy’ but you did not listen!” Seforno explains: “…for he was not intending to cause your death when he did what he did, as you thought, but rather his actions were because he was a boy.” Reuven refers to Yosef here as a “*yeled*” – “child,” in order to emphasize to his brothers that Yosef acted as he did not out of hatred and animosity, but simply out of immaturity. The brothers, Reuven charged, took Yosef’s talebearing too seriously, regarding it as a real threat that required urgent action. In truth, Yosef was simply acting childishly, and was not contriving some sinister plot.

Already in the beginning of Parashat Vayeishev, the Torah describes Yosef as a “*na’ar*” – “lad” (37:2), and Seforno explains, “Because of his youth, he sinned by bringing negative information about his brothers [to his father], as he was inexperienced and did not anticipate the end result.” Yosef reported his brothers’ perceived wrongdoing to Yaakov not with actual malicious intent, but simply out of immaturity. The brothers’ mistake was rashly concluding that Yosef was plotting to destroy them.

Just as the brothers’ suspicions of Yosef ended up tearing apart the family, many families and relationships are broken or strained by this same mistake – of misinterpreting common faults and foibles as pointed hostility. If somebody upsets us, we should not instinctively suspect ill will and hatred. We all have faults that lead us to occasionally say or do the wrong thing, but they do not bespeak any malicious intent. The tragic story of *mekhirat Yosef* warns us to hesitate before interpreting other people’s actions as spiteful, and to recognize the critical distinction between common human faults and actual hatred.

Tuesday

Parashat Vayeishev begins by telling of the strained relationship between Yosef and his brothers, which included Yosef’s reporting to his father about his brothers’ wrongdoing. The Torah relates, “*Va-yavei Yosef et dibatam ra’a el avihem*” – “Yosef brought negative information about them to their father” (37:2).

Rabbeinu Bechayei (likely elaborating on a brief comment made by the Ramban) notes the distinction between the Torah’s formulation in this verse and another context in which it speaks of “*diba*,” the report of negative information. In Sefer Bamidbar (13:32), the Torah tells of how the spies returned from scouting the Land of Israel, and after presenting an accurate report of their findings, “*va-yotzi’u dibat ha-aretz*” – they made false claims about the land. They described it as “*eretz okhelet yosheveha*” – “a land that consumes its inhabitants,” and in which *Benei Yisrael* thus should not want to live. Whereas Yosef is said to have “brought” – “*va-yavei*” –negative information about his brothers to Yaakov, the Torah tells that the spies “brought out,” or “produced” – “*va-yotzi’u*” – negative information about *Eretz Yisrael*. To explain this distinction, Rabbeinu Bechayei asserts that “*va-yavei*” is used in reference to reporting true information, whereas “*va-yotzi’u*” denotes a fabricated report. When one reports accurately, the information already exists, and the speaker merely brings it to the listener, and so the process is described with the verb “*va-yavei*,” which means simply “bring.” But when false information is concocted, it is produced, created anew. This process is thus referred to with the verb “*va-yotzi’u*,” which has the connotation of bringing something into existence (as in the *berakha*, “*ha-****motzi*** *lechem min ha-aretz*,” which refers to the production of food from the ground). Rabbeinu Bechayei cites as an example the verse in Sefer Iyov (8:10) which speaks of people fabricating lies – “*mi-libam* ***yotzi’u*** *milim*” – “they concoct words from their heart.”And so Yosef is said to have “brought” negative information about his brothers, because he accurately reported what he saw, whereas the spies are described as “producing” *dibat ha’aretz* – false information about the quality of *Eretz Yisrael*.

Rav Yitzchak Goldwasser, in his *Asapera Kevodekha* (Parashat Vayeishev), suggests a different reason for why accurate transmittal of information is described with the verb “*va-yavei*” whereas false reporting is described as “*va-yotzi’u*.” Very simply, the former speaks of the material’s destination, whereas the latter speaks of its origin. The term “bring,” by definition, implies that the item in question reaches its destination, whereas “produce” means only that the item is brought into existence, without necessarily arriving at any particular location. In the case of information, Rav Goldwasser suggests, there exists a difference between truth and falsehood with respect to the outcome. True information can indeed be said to reach the person for whom it is intended, but false information will, sooner or later, be exposed as falsehood. As such, it can be “produced” from the liar’s mind and mouth, and disseminated, but it is never actually “brought” to anybody – because its “stay” will be only temporary, until the time when the truth is revealed. As falsehood is never permanent, is never actually “arrives” at the listener in the pure sense of the word, and therefore one can only “produce” false information, but can never “bring” it to somebody’s ears.

Wednesday

The Torah in Parashat Vayeishev tells of the personal tragedies suffered by Yaakov’s fourth son, Yehuda, whose two older sons died after marrying. After the death of the first son, Er, Yehuda had the widow marry the second son, Onan, in accordance with the practice of *yibum* – the levirate marriage, whereby a childless widow marries the deceased’s brother. The purpose of the brother’s marriage to the widow, as Yehuda told Onan, is that the child resulting from the union would carry the name, and thus perpetuate the memory, of the deceased. The Torah relates that Onan, realizing that any children he produces with Er’s widow would be seen, in a sense, as Er’s child, did not want to beget children, and so during intercourse he would make a point to spill his seed outside his wife’s body so that she would not conceive. God punished Onan for what he did, and Onan died (38:9-10).

Rashi (38:7), based on the Gemara (Yevamot 34b), writes that Er had actually committed the same sin. The Torah says about Onan, “*va-yamet gam oto*” – that God “also killed him,” which the Gemara understood as alluding to the fact that the two brothers were killed for the same misdeed. And so, according to the Gemara, Er also sinned by spilling his seed to avoid impregnating his wife. The reason, the Gemara explains, is that Er did not want his wife to lose any of her physical attractiveness, and so he engaged in marital relations in a way that avoided conception.

Symbolically, the sin of Er and Onan perhaps represents the two common reasons why we refrain from “producing” and achieving. Er’s mistake was refusing to make any sacrifices or compromises in his physical enjoyment for the sake of producing children. He wanted everything in his life to remain perfectly and pristinely to his liking, and so he did not want his wife to bear a child. This might symbolize the tendency we have to prefer comfort and convenience over the challenge of ambition. Sometimes, we refuse to compromise to any degree the “beauty” of our lives, the comforts we enjoy, for the sake of pursuing important and meaningful goals. Onan, meanwhile, refused to produce a child because the child would be attributed, in a sense, to his deceased brother – representing the tendency to avoid hard work when no fame or prestige is involved. People often are driven to exert effort to achieve for the sake of earning acclaim, but not when their efforts will not be rewarded through fame or respect. Just as Onan was discouraged from producing a child because he knew he would not be recognized as the father, we, too, might be discouraged from investing hard work in important endeavors that do not offer the prospect of recognition.

If so, then perhaps the tragedy of Er and Onan reminds us that we must strive to achieve even if this entails sacrifice, and even if this does not offer the promise of prestige. We are here in this world to “produce,” to make the greatest contribution we are capable of making. We must therefore set ambitious goals and be prepared to work hard even if this means making considerable sacrifices of comfort and convenience, and without aspiring to personal fame, focusing instead on maximizing our unique potential and fulfilling our mission on this world to the very best of our individual capabilities.

Thursday

Yesterday, we mentioned the tragic story of Yehuda’s sons, which includes the sin committed by Onan, the second son, after he married Tamar, his brother’s widow. In accordance with the practice of *yibum* (the levirate marriage), Yehuda had Onan marry the widow so that the child they would beget would carry the name of the deceased – as Yehuda said to Onan, “Marry your brother’s wife…and establish offspring for your brother” (38:8). However, the Torah then tells, “Onan knew that the offspring would not be his,” as the child would be, in some sense, attributed to his older brother. And so he would finish intercourse outside his wife’s body to ensure she would not conceive, unwilling to produce a child that would be “credited” to his brother. The Torah tells that God killed Onan for this sin.

Onan’s punishment is one of the sources brought for the prohibition against intentional semenal emissions outside the context of intercourse. Additionally, however, we suggested yesterday that Onan’s sin might reflect the more general ill of refraining from “producing,” from striving to accomplish, when there is no expectation of recognition. Just as Onan did not want to beget a child for whom he would not receive “credit,” so-to-speak, so are we sometimes reluctant to commit ourselves to, and exert effort in, endeavors that do not offer prospects for recognition and prestige.

We might add that the story of Onan perhaps points to the specific application of this concept to parenting. Onan wanted to beget children only if he would receive “credit,” if the child would bring him pride and respect. The same mistake is often made by parents who try to raise their children in a way that would bring them – the parents – the most pride and admiration among their peers, rather than in the way that best suits the particular needs of each child. In our work to “produce” children, to educate them, care for them, nurture them, and set them on the path towards achievement and self-actualization, we must be driven by the sincere desire to help them maximize their unique potential and live the life that is best for them. Our motive must be to do what is most beneficial and advantageous for the child, not what is most beneficial for our own reputation and ego. We must help, encourage and lead our children to become the accomplished adults that they are capable of becoming, each according to his or her own talents, strengths and weaknesses, and not to become the adults that will bring us the most respect and acclaim.

Friday

The Gemara teaches in Masekhet Shabbat (10b), “A person should never treat one child differently from the others, for on account of the two *sela’im* of fine wool which Yaakov gave to Yosef beyond [that which gave to] his other sons, his brothers envied him, and this ended up causing our forefathers to go down to Egypt.” This comment refers, of course, to the *ketonet pasim* – the special striped tunic which Yaakov made for Yosef, which represented the special love and affection he felt towards him, as we read in Parashat Vayeishev: “And Yisrael loved Yosef from among all his sons…and made him a striped tunic” (37:3). This gesture triggered strong feelings of resentment, as the Torah proceeds to tell: “His brothers saw that their father loved him from all his brothers, and they resented him, and they could not speak to him peacefully” (37:4). The Gemara thus warns against giving preferential treatment to one child over the others, noting that it took just two *sela’im* of wool – the material used for Yosef’s tunic – to arouse feelings of jealousy that led Yosef’s brothers to sell him as a slave, the event that effectively began the process of the Egyptian exile.

The question arises, is it accurate to attribute the tragedy of the brothers selling Yosef to “two *sela’im* of fine wool”? True, this special gift fueled the brothers’ ire, and indeed, the Torah emphasizes that before the brother cast Yosef into a pit, they first tore off his *ketonet pasim* (37:23) – indicating that the tunic was the symbol of his special stature which they resented. However, the Torah also makes it clear that other factors – besides the *ketonet pasim* – aroused the brothers’ ire against Yosef. He would report their wrongdoing to their father (37:2), and they reacted angrily to his informing them of his dreams of their subservience to him (37:5,8,11). And, at least according to some commentators (see, for example, Seforno to 37:18), when Yosef approached the brothers as they shepherded their flocks in Dotan, they presumed he was coming to find fault in their conduct which he could then report to their father. The question must therefore be asked, while the *ketonet pasim* certainly contributed to the brothers’ resentment, why does the Gemara seem to attribute the entire story of *mekhirat Yosef* (the sale of Yosef as a slave) to the wool used to make Yosef’s special tunic, when numerous other factors were at play?

Rav Henoch Leibowitz (in *Chiddushei Ha-leiv*) suggests, very simply, that *mekhirat Yosef* resulted from the cumulative effect of various factors, and so indeed, the tragedy can be rightly attributed to each individual factor. The Gemara teaches that while there certainly existed tensions between Yosef and his brothers irrespective of the *ketonet pasim*, the effect of “the two *sela’im* of fine wool” tipped the scales, so-to-speak, turning an unpleasant situation into a tragic situation.

It is all but impossible for a family to live together in perfect harmony, without any tensions or disputes. The Gemara here teaches that given this reality, we must try to avoid the “two *sela’im* of fine wool” – the seemingly small and inconsequential words or gestures that can fuel and exacerbate existing tensions. The fact that tensions already exist should lead us to exercise greater caution, and not allow us to simply despair, figuring that in any event the situation is far from perfect. More generally, perhaps, the Gemara’s teaching instructs that in all areas of life, our flaws and imperfections should not be viewed as reasons to despair and to not try harder. Every “two *sela’im* of fine wool” – every additional mistake that can be avoided, should be avoided. Imperfect as we are, we should take every small step we can to avoid becoming even less perfect, and to inch ever closer towards perfection.

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