**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT VAYECHI**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

We read in Parashat Vayechi of Yaakov’s final words to each of his sons as they gathered at his bedside just before his passing. In speaking to Yosef, Yaakov speaks of the hostility that Yosef had suffered at the hands of those who sought to harm him: “*Va-yemareruhu va-robu*” – “They embittered him and fought [against him]” (49:23).

Rashi comments that the word “*va-robu*” stems from root “*r.v.*,” which refers to fighting, but does not actually mean “they fought.” Instead, Rashi explains, this word is the reflexive construction of the root “*r.v.*,” and should thus be interpreted as, “they became quarrelsome people towards him,” referring to the hostility shown to Yosef by his brothers. In Rashi’s words, “*na’asu anshei riv*” – “they became people of quarreling.” According to Rashi, Yaakov described Yosef’s brothers not as fighting against him, but rather as becoming people who fought against him.

This description of Yosef’s brothers’ hostility, as understood by Rashi, assumes greater significance when we consider the background to the tensions that existed between Yosef and his brothers. The brothers resented the special, preferential treatment which their father gave Yosef (37:4) – special treatment for which *Chazal* criticize Yaakov (Shabbat 10b) – and their resentment was fueled by Yosef’s reporting to them his dreams of ruling over them (37:8). Their hostility towards Yosef, seemingly, did not originate with them. It was triggered by the special way Yosef was treated, and by his speaking to them about his plans to rule over the family. And yet, according to Rashi’s interpretation, Yaakov said about his sons, “They became people of quarreling” – they made the decision to be hostile to Yosef. Their feelings of resentment were, indeed, justified, ignited by the circumstances, but nevertheless, they are blamed for deciding to initiate hostility.

Too often, we assume that legitimate feelings of resentment give us license to act with hostility, that when we feel hurt or offended, we are entitled to respond by fighting. Yaakov’s depiction of this sons’ hostility to Yosef, as explained by Rashi, teaches us that we can be considered guilty of instigating a quarrel even if we have legitimate grievances, because not every grievance warrants an angry response or should be a cause for hostility and conflict.

Sunday

Parashat Vayechi begins with Yaakov’s summoning his beloved son, Yosef, and having him vow that he would bring Yaakov’s remains to Canaan for burial, rather than burying him in Egypt. Indeed, the Torah tells later that Yosef and his brother faithfully obeyed Yaakov’s request, and they carried his remains to Canaan and interred them in Chevron, in the Makhpeila Cave where Avraham, Sara, Yitzchak, Rivka and Leah were buried.

Many commentators raised the question of why Yaakov found it necessary to impose an oath on Yosef. As the Ramban writes, “Yaakov did not suspect his righteous, beloved son that he would disobey his father’s command…” Yaakov undoubtedly trusted Yosef, so why did he have Yosef promise on oath to fulfill his request?

The Ramban, among others, explains that the oath was necessary due to the fears that Pharaoh might be reluctant to permit Yosef to leave Egypt for this purpose, or might insist on having Yaakov – a distinguished figure – buried in his country. By imposing an oath, the Ramban explains, Yaakov made it less likely for Pharaoh to refuse to grant Yosef permission to bury Yaakov in his homeland.

However, the Ramban adds a surprising remark at the conclusion of his discussion of this topic: “Yosef, too, would need to make a great effort in this regard because of the oath.” After stating that Yaakov clearly did not suspect that Yosef would not fulfill his wish, the Ramban then writes that the oath ensured that Yosef would make a greater effort to obey his request if there was opposition from Pharaoh. At first glance, this remark directly contradicts the Ramban’s presumption expressed at the outset of his discussion – that Yaakov clearly did not suspect that Yosef would disobey his request. How could the Ramban now write that the oath was necessary to motivate Yosef to comply?

Apparently, as many have noted, even when we are sincerely committed, and want to do the right thing, our natural lazy instincts will dissuade us from doing so when we confront an obstacle, when practical complications arise. We genuinely want to meet our obligations, but we are not necessarily willing to make the extra effort, to “go the extra mile,” to overcome the hurdles that stand in the way. Yaakov had no doubt that Yosef would very much want to grant his wish, but even so, he had concerns about whether Yosef – as much as Yosef truly loved him, and as loyal as he was to him – would make the effort to convince Pharaoh to allow it if Pharaoh would refuse, and so he had Yosef make an oath. Sincerity alone does not always suffice as a motivator for hard work, and so Yosef’s loyalty to his father did not necessarily guarantee that he would put in the effort to fulfill Yaakov’s wish if this became a difficult challenge.

We need to try to muster passion and drive, to remind ourselves of the central importance of *mitzvot* in our lives, so that we are not simply sincerely committed to fulfilling them, but motivated to fulfill them even in the face of the challenges that arise, and even when this entails a great deal of work, effort and sacrifice.

Monday

We read in Parashat Vayechi Yaakov’s remarks to his sons just before his death, when he assembled them all to his bedside and addressed each one individually. Yaakov introduced his series of personal addresses by proclaiming, “Gather round and I will tell you that which will befall you at the end of days” (49:1). The plain meaning of this introduction, as Ibn Ezra explains, suggests that Yaakov’s addresses to his sons were prophecies about the future, and so he began by announcing to them that he would now be informing them about what would transpire many generations later.

However, the more conventional understanding is that Yaakov’s addresses to his sons were primarily blessings for the future, and not prophecies about the future. This presumption challenged the commentators to explain why Yaakov began by proclaiming that he would be informing them of what was going to happen. The Ramban answers this question by suggesting that this introduction refers to the allusion made in Yaakov’s blessing to Yehuda of *Mashiach*’s arrival, when he proclaimed that royalty would always remain with the tribe of Yehuda “*ad ki yavo Shilo*” (“until the arrival of *Shilo*” – 49:10), which many understood as a reference to *Mashiach*. As Yaakov’s blessings contained an allusion to the final redemption, Yaakov introduced his blessings by proclaiming that he would be telling his sons what would happen in the future.

The more famous explanation, however, is that offered by the Gemara (Pesachim 561), and cited by Rashi in his commentary to this verse. According to the Gemara, Yaakov assembled his sons planning “*le-galot et ha-keitz*” – to disclose to them the time when the redemption will arrive. However, the Gemara relates, God at that moment took away Yaakov’s prophetic insight, and he lost access to this information. He therefore proceeded to present his sons blessings, instead of informing them about the time of redemption.

Rav Avraham Yaakov of Sadigora offers an insightful explanation of the Gemara’s comment, noting the Gemara’s famous teaching elsewhere, in Masekhet Sanhedrin (96a), establishing two possibilities for the final redemption. The Gemara states that the final redemption will arrive as soon as *Am Yisrael* is worthy of it (“*achishena*”), but there is a point at which time the redemption will finally arrive even if we are not worthy (“*be-itah*”). The Rebbe of Sadigora observes that if the Gemara speaks of Yaakov intending to reveal the “*keitz*” – the time when the exile would end – then it must, necessarily, be referring to the final time by which the redemption must arrive even if *Am Yisrael* does not deserve to be redeemed. For the first option – earned redemption – there is no set time, as this could happen anytime, as soon as our nation is worthy. Clearly, then, the Gemara meant that Yaakov wanted to reveal the time when the exile will end if his descendants are not deserving of having it end earlier. And God did not allow Yaakov to disclose this information, the Rebbe of Sadigora explained, in order to preserve the honor of the Jewish Nation. It would have been disparaging to *Am Yisrael* for Yaakov to inform them of the final “*keitz*,” which would imply that he did not expect them to earn redemption earlier. In order to protect *Am Yisrael*’s honor, God prevented Yaakov from revealing the “*keitz*.”

The Rebbe of Sadigora here teaches that we must maintain a positive, optimistic and hopeful outlook upon the Jewish Nation, and anticipate our nation’s growth and improvement, confident in *Am Yisrael*’s ability to earn redemption. God did not want Yaakov to give a gloomy prediction, to even suggest that his descendants would never earn redemption on their own merits. He wants us to trust in our nation’s capabilities and potential, to believe that we indeed have the ability to become the special nation we were chosen to become, to fulfill our mission and destiny, and to rightfully earn the long-awaited redemption through which that mission and destiny will be realized in full.

Tuesday

In his addresses to his sons right before his death, Yaakov took this opportunity to sharply condemn Shimon and Levi for their violent actions – referring, as the commentators explain, to their assault on the city of Shekhem to avenge the abduction and rape of their sister. (According to Rashi, Yaakov here also refers to these sons’ seminal role in the sale of Yosef.) After criticizing Shimon and Levi for their use of “*kelei chamas*” (“tools of violence” – 49:5), Yaakov pronounces, “Let my soul not come in their counsel; let me honor not be included in their assembly” (49:6). The Radak explains that although this verse is formulated in the future tense, this is actually a poetic form of describing the past. According to the Radak, Yaakov here bemoans the fact that Shimon and Levi acted without consulting with him, without seeking his advice or receiving his authorization for their deadly assault.

Others, however, explain that Yaakov here indeed refers to the future. (The Rashbam notes that the word “*al*” is always used in reference to a wish or command for the future, and it thus cannot refer here to a past event.) Rashi, based on the Midrash, writes that Yaakov here prayed that his name should not be mentioned in reference to sins that would be committed in the future by descendants of Shimon and Levi. When Korach – a descendant of Levi – led a revolt against the authority of Moshe, the Torah traces Korach’s lineage back to Levi, without mentioning Yaakov (Bamidbar 16:1). Likewise, when Zimri – the leader of the tribe of Shimon – committed a public illicit act with a Midyanite woman, he is introduced as the leader of Shimon, without any mention of Yaakov’s name (Bamidbar 25:15). According to Rashi, this was in fulfillment of Yaakov’s request to be excluded from the context of the grave misdeeds that would be perpetrated by descendants of Shimon and Levi.

Why, according to this reading, would Yaakov mention these future events here, in his condemnation of Shimon and Levi for their assault on Shekhem? What connection might there be between Shimon and Levi’s violent attack on Shekhem, and the sins committed later by Korach and Zimri?

The answer perhaps emerges from the Radak’s interpretation of the verse. According to the Radak, as we saw, Yaakov here focuses on the fact that Shimon and Levi acted on their own, without consulting him and without seeking his advice or guidance. Under certain circumstances, warfare is justified and necessary for self-defense, and Shimon and Levi likely felt that the disgraceful act committed against their sister warranted a harsh military response. But such a drastic, violent measure requires careful, patient consideration and consultation. Shimon and Levi acted hastily and impulsively, allowing their justifiable emotions to dictate their course of action, and in their reckless zealotry they refused to consult and receive advice from their wise, experienced father. Accordingly, the Midrash connects Shimon and Levi’s audacious decision to the rebellious acts perpetrated by their progeny. Korach openly and brazenly challenged Moshe’s authority, and Zimri, as the Gemara (Sanhedrin 82a) famously tells, publicly opposed Moshe when he took the Midyanite woman for an illicit relationship. In the presence of the entire nation, Zimri brought the woman to Moshe and argued that a relationship with her was no less permissible than Moshe’s marriage to a Midyanite woman. He then brought the woman into a tent in full view of the nation, brazenly defying Moshe’s authority. The connection between these incidents, then, is the rejection of authority, acting individually without regard for the instruction and guidance of more knowledgeable and more experienced leaders. By linking Shimon and Levi’s reckless act with the revolts mounted by Korach and Zimri, the Midrash perhaps teaches that undertaking drastic action without patient, prudent consultation with those who know better is akin to “rebellion,” to the outright rejection of authority. Just as we must respect those who rightfully belong in positions of authority, we must turn to competent authority figures for guidance before reaching drastic decisions on our own.

Wednesday

Just before his death, Yaakov delivered a personal message to each of his twelve sons, and took the opportunity to sharply condemn Shimon and Levi for the violence they perpetrated, referring (as the commentators explain) to their deadly assault on the city of Shekhem to avenge the rape and abduction of their sister. Yaakov then proclaimed, “Let my soul not come in their counsel; let me honor not be included in their assembly” (49:6). Rashi, citing from the Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 99:6; see also Sanhedrin 82a), explains that Yaakov here requested that his name be excluded from the Torah’s accounts of sins that would be later committed by descendants of Shimon and Levi. And thus when the Torah introduces Korach, who led a revolt against Moshe, he is identified as a great-grandson of Levi, without any mention made of Yaakov (Bamidbar 16:1). Likewise, when the Torah introduces Zimri, who committed a public sinful act with a Midyanite woman, he is identified as the leader of the tribe of Shimon, without any mention of Yaakov’s name (Bamidbar 25:15).

What might be the significance of Yaakov’s request that his name be omitted from these contexts?

The *Chiddushei Ha-Rim* (cited in *Likutei Yehuda*, Parashat Vayechi) explains that as the patriarch of *Am Yisrael*, Yaakov represents the spiritual root of every Jew. *Chazal* teach that Yaakov’s image is engraved upon the Heavenly Throne (*Bereishit Rabba* 68:12), such that Yaakov – the father of every member of *Am Yisrael* – signifies the connection we each have with the Almighty. As Yaakov foresaw the grave spiritual failures of his descendants, the *Chiddushei Ha-Rim* explains, he offered a prayer that his name would be excluded – meaning, that the mistakes committed would not tarnish the core essence of the sinners. Even when they fail, their inner spirit should remain pure and pristine, thereby allowing them to easily recover and rebound from their fall. According to the *Chiddushei Ha-Rim*, Yaakov’s proclamation, “Let my soul not come in their counsel” means that the wrongdoing of his descendants would never taint their inner, sacred spark, which would forever be intact and capable of spurring a process of improvement and change.

This chassidic insight teaches that even when it is necessary to criticize – as Yaakov here was criticizing Shimon and Levi – we must recognize the pure essence of the individual being criticized. When we feel compelled to react to wrongdoing, we must remember Yaakov’s pronouncement, “Let my soul not come in their counsel” – that the wrongful conduct does not say anything about the person’s inner core, about his innate goodness and his vast potential. Even when Yaakov sharply condemned Shimon and Levi, he proclaimed that their core essence forever remains pure and pristine – teaching us to recognize and respect the capacity for goodness within all people, even when it becomes necessary to scold and reprimand.

Thursday

The Torah in Parashat Vayechi tells of the famous blessing which Yaakov gave to his grandchildren – Yosef’s two sons, Menashe and Efrayim – shortly before his death: “The God whom my fathers – Avraham and Yitzchak – followed, who has shepherded me from my birth till this day; the angel who has redeemed me from all evil, shall bless the lads…” (48:15-16).

The Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 97:3) finds it significant that Yaakov here mentions both his having been “shepherded” – referring to God’s having provided him with sustenance, even during difficult periods – and his having been “redeemed,” rescued from harm. Noting on this juxtaposition, the Midrash comments, “*Ma parnasa be-khol yom, af ge’ula be-khol yom*” – “Just as sustenance is each day, so is redemption each day.”

The Midrash here draws our attention to the fact that just as we receive sustenance from God each day, so we do experience “redemption” each day. The simplest interpretation of this comment, perhaps, is that God protects us each and every day from harm that lurks, often without us ever realizing it. Every day that we are healthy, we are being protected from harmful or fatal illnesses. Every day that we reach our destination and return safely, we are protected from the dangers of travel. The Midrash thus teaches us to appreciate our safety and wellbeing, recognizing that these are blessings which God grants us each day, just as He grants us each day the food, clothing and shelter we need.

Rav Shmuel Borenstein of Sochatchov, in his *Sheim Mi-Shmuel*, offers an additional interpretation of the Midrash’s comment, suggesting that the “redemption” spoken of by the Midrash refers to the spiritual assistance we need each day. He cites the Gemara’s remark in Masekhet Kiddushin (30b), “*Yitzro shel adam mitchadeish alav be-khol yom*” – “A person’s evil inclination is renewed against him each day.” Just as each day we need new sustenance for our bodies, so do we experience each day new spiritual needs, temptations and lures from which we must be “redeemed.” We might have thought that unlike physical needs, which present themselves on an ongoing basis, spiritual needs, once cared for, never return. We perhaps would have assumed that in our youth we need to learn and struggle to establish the right patterns and build the right habits, but afterward, we require no “redemption,” as our success is assured. The Midrash, according to the *Sheim Mi-Shmuel*, advises that spiritual success is a constant, ongoing, daily struggle, no less than our constant, ongoing, daily struggle to meet our physical and material needs. We must be prepared and determined to meet the challenges that are “*mitchadeish…be-khol yom*,” which we confront on a daily basis, and recognize that daily struggle is part and parcel of religious life.

Friday

The Torah tells in the beginning of Parashat Vayechi that as Yaakov sensed his life was soon coming to an end, he summoned Yosef and asked him to promise that he would bring his remains to his homeland for burial, rather than burying him in Egypt. Rashi, commenting on the words “…he summoned his son, Yosef,” cites the Midrash’s comment, “*Le-mi she-haya yekholet be-yado la-asot*” –“The one who had the ability to do it.” The reason why Yaakov chose to place specifically Yosef in charge of his burial in Canaan, rather than any of his other sons, is because Yosef was the one with the best chances of fulfilling this wish, given his special position of power and authority in Egypt.

At first glance, the Midrash here makes the simple point that Yaakov, who very much wanted to ensure that he would be buried in Canaan and not in Egypt, charged this mission to the one who was best suited to carry it out, in order to increase the chances of his request being fulfilled. However, Rav Mordechai Rothenberg, in his *Imrot Tal*, offers an additional insight into the Midrash’s terse remark, suggesting that the Midrash observes how Yaakov sought not to overburden his children. Yaakov decided to choose Yosef for this mission not simply to increase the chances of its being fulfilled, but also because he wanted to place this responsibility upon the child for whom it would be easiest. Any other of Yaakov’s children might have encountered considerable difficulty arranging for a procession to escort his remains out of Egypt and all the way to Chevron. For Yosef, however, this challenge was relatively easy. And so Yaakov chose Yosef – in order not to overburden any other child. As important as it is for children to go to great lengths to respect their parents’ wishes, and to be prepared to bear even weighty burdens of responsibility for their parents’ sake, parents, for their part, should avoid unnecessarily burdening their children.

According to this reading of the Midrash’s comment, the Midrash here teaches that parents should never expect more of their children than that which “*yekholet be-yado la-asot*” – the children are reasonably capable of doing. One of the great challenges of education is finding the delicate balance between encouraging children to maximize their full potential, and causing frustration by demanding too much. If we expect and demand beyond that which “*yekholet be-yado la-asot*,” more than our children are capable of, they will likely despair from trying altogether. The Midrash thus reminds us to set high but reasonable standards in education, that we should demand neither too little nor too much, and must try as much as possible to encourage our children to actualize their potential without discouraging them by imposing unreasonable demands.

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