**S.A.L.T. – Parashat Vayishlach 5776**

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Motzaei

The Torah in Parashat Vayishlach tells of Dina’s abduction and defilement by Shekhem, and describes her brothers’ reaction upon hearing of the tragedy: “*Va-yit’atzevu ha-anashim va-yichar lahem me’od*” – “The men were distressed, and they were very incensed.”

Rabbenu Avraham ben Ha-Rambam, in [his Torah commentary](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=40223&st=&pgnum=120&hilite=), cites his grandfather, Rabbenu Maimon, as noting the distinction between the two verbs in this phrase – “*va-yit’atzevu*” and “*va-yichar*.” The first implies sorrow and distress, whereas the second denotes rage and a desire for revenge. “*Va-yit’atzevu*” means that Yaakov’s sons were pained by the misfortune that befell their sister, whereas “*va-yichar*” means that they felt inclined to exact revenge from the perpetrator and his abettors.

Rabbenu Avraham’s emphasis on this distinction is perhaps intended to underscore the two separate stages of the brothers’ emotional reaction to the news of their sister’s abduction: first sorrow, and then anger. By noting the difference between these two emotions, Rabbenu Avraham reminds us that they need not coexist; it is possible to feel sorrow without feeling angry.

Too often, anger flows directly from sorrow. In our frantic effort to relieve ourselves of the emotional pain of sorrow, we become angry and seek to hit back at the person who caused us the pain. In the case of Yaakov’s sons reacting to their sister’s defilement, the feelings of vengeance are understandable and perhaps even valid. However, this case marks the exception, rather than the rule. Far more often than not, the response of “*va-yichar*” is inappropriate. Even when we experience “*va-yit’atzevu*,” when we feel aggravated, despondent or distressed, we should hesitate before allowing ourselves to reach “*va-yichar*.” We are capable, and usually expected, to live with the discomfort of sorrow without resorting to anger. Seldom is revenge the solution to emotional pain. We must train ourselves to deal with life’s frustrations and challenges without anger, recognizing our ability to handle difficult feelings without rage and hostility.

Sunday

We read in Parashat Vayishlach of Shimon and Levi’s violent assault on the city of Shekhem in retaliation for the city’s prince’s abduction and rape of their sister, Dina. The brothers deceived the people of city by offering to engage with them in commerce and marriage if they underwent circumcision. The people agreed, and Shimon and Levi capitalized on the frail condition of the city’s men, and launched their assault, killing every male and looting the property. Yaakov condemned the attack, charging that Shimon and Levi endangered the family through their violence. This narrative concludes with Shimon and Levi responding to their father’s harsh censure, rhetorically asking, “*Ha-khezona ya’aseh et achoteinu*” – “Shall he turn our sister into a harlot?” (34:31).

It is worth noting that Shimon and Levi did not ask, “Shall our sister be turned into a harlot,” but rather, “Shall **he** turn our sister into a harlot?” At first glance, this seems to be a reference to Shekhem, the man who had seized and defiled Dina. We might, however, question this interpretation, as Yaakov made no mention of Shekhem in his censure which evoked this response, and, moreover, they had killed the entire city, and not only Shekhem. If they were trying to defend their violent reaction on the basis of Dina’s violation, they should, seemingly, have cast the blame on the entire city – all of whom they obviously held accountable – and not just Shekhem.

If the pronoun “he” in Shimon and Levi’s response does not refer to Shekhem, there appears to be only one other possible explanation – one which is suggested by Rav Yehuda Henkin ([*Bnei Banim*, vol. 2, *Chiba Yeteira*, p. 41](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=20022&st=&pgnum=278&hilite=)), who boldly asserts that Shimon and Levi speak here of their father. As Rav Henkin notes, the Torah does not describe Shimon and Levi as responding to their father’s criticism; the Torah’s wording is, “They said,” not “They said **to him**.” Yaakov had spoken to Shimon and Levi, but they did not respond to him. The remark, “Shall he turn our sister into a harlot” was made when Yaakov was not present, and it was made about him. Angered by their father’s condemnation of what they perceived as an appropriate and courageous measure, they accused him of disregarding their sister’s honor. In their minds, they acted to defend Dina, and by opposing their actions, they charged, Yaakov was turning his back on their sister.

Shimon and Levi’s reaction is, unfortunately, typical of how many of us tend to respond to criticism and opposition. Rather than seriously consider and address the real concerns that Yaakov raised regarding their violent action, Shimon and Levi simply dismissed him as disinterested in defending Dina’s honor. If he did not agree with their way of handling the situation, then, in their minds, he did not share their conviction and their pain over what happened. Instead of listening to Yaakov’s concerns, Shimon and Levi concluded that he ignored their concerns. Many of us are guilty of this mistake when arguing and debating. Rather than addressing the actual issue, we cast aspersions on the other person’s commitment to our goals and values. Shimon and Levi’s angry reaction to Yaakov’s criticism shows us the wrong way to engage in argument and debate. The right way is honestly and objectively considering the various sides of the issue, without challenging the sincerity and virtue of our opponents.

Monday

Parashat Vayishlach tells of Yaakov’s dreaded but ultimately peaceful reunion with his brother, Esav. After the two meet, Esav respectfully refuses the lavish gifts that Yaakov had sent him, but Yaakov insists that he accept them, explaining, “now that I have seen your face like I have seen the face of God, and you have received me favorably” (33:10). The Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 75), explaining the comparison Yaakov draws between his meeting Esav and “meeting” God, comments, “Just as ‘the face of God’ is judgment, your face, too, is judgment.” The word “*Elokim*” in reference to God generally denotes the Almighty’s role as judge who holds us accountable for our actions. The Midrash thus understands Yaakov’s comparison between Esav and “*penei Elokim*” to mean that Esav was somehow a “judge” like God.

Rav Yehuda Leib Ginsburg, in his *Yalkut Yehuda*, suggests an explanation for this enigmatic Midrashic passage. God’s judgment is unique in that complete impartiality is maintained despite God’s being the other “party,” so-to-speak. No litigant can ever serve as judge for his own trial – except the Almighty. Anytime we are judged for our conduct, the other “litigant” is God, against whom we may have committed the offense in question. And yet, God is capable of serving as “*Elokim*,” as an honest, objective arbiter who fairly determines our guilt or innocence. As God transcends the human vengeful instinct as well as our limitations of knowledge and understanding, He is able to issue an accurate, just sentence despite the fact that He is the “victim” of the alleged offense.

It is this quality, Rav Ginsburg suggests, that Yaakov here attributes to Esav. Regardless of whether or not Esav was sincere (a matter that is subject to debate among the *Tanna’im*, as Rashi notes), Esav acted towards Yaakov in a forgiving, brotherly manner, despite Yaakov’s having deceived him. While Esav and his progeny would forever more be known for evil and violence, at this moment, at least outwardly if not genuinely, Esav rose above his resentment and angst and acknowledged Yaakov’s right to his blessings. At least for now, Esav was capable of viewing his brother with mature, honest objectivity, without concern for his personal interests. And thus Yaakov compared his brother to God, the only Being who can serve as an impartial judge while also being a litigant.

The Midrash here draws our attention to the difficulty of judging people honestly when our own feelings and personal interests are at stake. When people around us say or do things that negatively impact upon us, our instinct is to protest and cast blame. When we’re the “litigant,” when we have vested interest in the outcome of the “trial,” it is very difficult to remain objective. If there’s anything to learn from Esav, it is from this one moment when he rose above his own interests to assess Yaakov in an honest, objective manner. Rather than rush to criticize and accuse, we must try, as much as humanly possible, to judge others honestly and objectively even when we feel hurt and victimized.

Tuesday

The Torah in Parashat Vayishlach tells of the mysterious assailant who began wrestling with Yaakov during the night as he traveled with his family back to Canaan and prepared for his confrontation with Esav. We read that when morning broke, the attacker – whom is commonly identified as an angel – asked that Yaakov let him go, and Yaakov agreed only once the angel conferred a blessing upon him (32:27).

The Gemara in Masekhet Chulin (91a) comments that the angel pleaded to be released because the time had come for him to sing *shira* (praise to God) in the heavens. A more elaborate version of this account appears in the *Yalkut Shimoni*, which tells that large numbers of angels descended to the site of Yaakov’s wrestle and urged this angel to return to the heaven to recite *shira*. The angel then told Yaakov that if he would not be released, he might be killed by these angels on account of the delay in the *shira*.

Symbolically, this Midrashic account perhaps serves to remind us of the need to “let go” of our struggles after we succeed and prevail. Overcoming our challenges should lead to “*shira*” – giving praise and expressing gratitude to God, which has the effect of bringing Him glory. Sometimes, however, we are too frightened to celebrate our victory, and we instead insist on continuing waging the battle which has already been won. The trauma of the struggle can cause us to be fearful of “letting go” and experiencing the exultation of triumph. When this happens, the “*shira*” is lost. God’s praises go unsung, as we wallow in fear rather than give praise for our success.

While there is certainly a danger in prematurely celebrating triumph when danger still looms, there is also a danger in refusing to celebrate triumph when it has been achieved. *Chazal* here teach us to allow ourselves to celebrate and give praise to God, rather than get stuck in fear and negativity. Like Yaakov, we at times need to fight and struggle, but we must also know when it is safe to release our grip, enjoy the satisfaction of achievement, and express heartfelt “*shira*” to the Almighty for His ongoing assistance.

Wednesday

The opening section of Parashat Vayishlach tells of Yaakov’s preparations for his dreaded reunion with his brother, Esav, who was approaching with an army of four hundred men. Yaakov’s preparations included an impassioned prayer, in which he expressed his gratitude for the kindness God had showered upon him until that point: “I am unworthy of all the kindnesses…that You have performed for Your servant, for I crossed this [river], the Jordan, with but my staff, and I have since become two camps” (32:11).  Yaakov recalls how he had nothing but his staff when he left Canaan twenty years earlier, and had since built a large family and amassed a considerable fortune.

The Tosafists, in *Da’at Zekeinim* to Parashat Teruma (Shemot 25:5), draw an intriguing association between Yaakov’s staff and the *Mishkan* constructed by *Benei Yisrael* in the wilderness. According to the *Da’at Zekeinim*, this staff was used to construct the *beri’ach ha-tikhon*, the central beam that ran from one end of the *Mishkan* to the other to hold it together. This staff was preserved by Yaakov’s children and their descendants throughout the Egyptian exile, and was then used to form the central beam of the Tabernacle.

The question naturally arises as to the meaning behind this association drawn between Yaakov’s staff and the*Mishkan*. How might Yaakov’s staff be relevant to the construction of a *Mishkan* as a “home” for the divine presence?

Yaakov makes mention of his staff in this context to emphasize his state of impoverishment as he made his way to Charan, the fact that he had nothing but a walking stick. Symbolically, then, this staff represents extreme austerity. The *Mishkan*, by contrast, was a luxurious structure with furnishings made from gold and other precious materials.  The wealth and grandeur on display in the *Mishkan*, which was needed to give honor to God, could potentially lead us to mistakenly afford excessive importance to material wealth. Looking at the *Mishkan*, we might reach the conclusion that serving the Almighty requires the kind of opulence needed to construct His Earthly abode. *Da’at Zekeinim* therefore reminds us that the “*beri’ach ha-tikhon*,” the central “beam” which supports the *Mishkan* and underlies the concept it represents, is Yaakov’s staff.  At the core of the *Mishkan* experience is the sense of “*be-makli*,” that ultimately we own nothing, as everything is mercifully given to us by our loving, compassionate Father. The grandeur and majesty of the *Mishkan* does not reflect its essence; its essential quality is not gold and silver, but rather a simple walking staff, our ability to feel our dependence on God and to connect with him meaningfully without allowing ourselves to be distracted by material luxury.

Thursday

After Yaakov and Esav’s peaceful reunion, Esav proposes that they join together: “He [Esav] said: Let us go and journey, and I will go alongside you” (33:12). Yaakov declines, explaining that this would be difficult on his children and flocks: “My master knows that the children are delicate, and my sheep and cattle are nursing; if they are pushed one day, all the sheep will die. My master shall please pass in front of his servant, and I will proceed at my slow place, as appropriate for my property and the children…” (33:13-14). Yaakov explained to Esav that he must travel at a slow, relaxed pace because of his children and animals, and therefore he could not join together with Esav, who would travel too quickly.

The Tolna Rebbe noted the symbolic significance of this exchange between Yaakov and Esav. The figure of Esav is widely regarded as a symbol of the forces of evil which threaten to derail us from our mission and destiny. And one of the spiritual dangers that threaten us is Esav’s offer that we try to keep us with his rapid pace. Impatience is one of the greatest impediments to spiritual growth and progress. If we try to advance in instantaneous leaps, and to change and grow overnight, we are doomed to failure. In all likelihood, we will either undergo a short-lived change, convince ourselves that we have grown and achieved when we have not, or just despair. Growth must proceed “at my slow pace,” one step at a time. If we expect too much of ourselves, our chances of success are near zero.

In his response to Esav, Yaakov emphasizes in particular the delicate nature of his children. The Tolna Rebbe noted that the notion of slow, incremental growth is especially vital in the area of child-rearing and education. Pushing a child beyond his limits, and setting unreasonably high expectations, can easily overwhelm a child and lead to despair and resentment. “*Chanokh le-na’ar al pi darko*” – “Educate a child according to his path” (Mishlei 22:6). Each child must be led along the route most suitable for him or her. Some require an accelerated route to high achievement, whereas others need to progress more slowly. Pushing children to progress and advance beyond their capabilities is a tactic of “Esav,” a manifestation of the impatient impulse that too often drives us to demand immediate results.

In all areas of life, we need to follow Yaakov’s example of “*va’ani etnahala le-iti*” – to set reasonable expectations of ourselves and others, and understand that ambitious goals require a great deal of time and effort to realize.

Friday

The Torah in Parashat Vayishlach tells of the abduction and defilement of Dina, Yaakov’s daughter, and makes a point of noting Yaakov’s surprisingly calm reaction: “Yaakov heard that his daughter, Dina, was defiled, and his sons were with his cattle in the field, and Yaakov was silent until they arrived” (34:5).

Rav Avraham Saba, in his [*Tzeror Ha-mor*](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=30801&st=&pgnum=94), suggests two possible explanations for Yaakov’s silence. First, he writes, “This shows his wisdom and patience, that he was experienced in tribulations and horrors.” People who have yet to grow accustomed to crisis and hardship are prone to react with hysteria or resort to drastic measures when they confront trouble. According to the *Tzeror Ha-mor*, the Torah notes Yaakov’s clam reaction to emphasize Yaakov’s ability – borne out of years of hardship – to retain his composure under duress, to calmly process difficult situations without reacting impulsively or hysterically.

Secondly, the *Tzeror Ha-mor* suggests, “Perhaps this alludes to the fact…that he accepted the judgment and remained silent, for he was the cause, having sent all his sons with the cattle, for if some of them were home, they would have accompanied her and protected her.” According to this approach, the Torah’s description of Yaakov’s “silence” refers to his accepting a degree of responsibility for what happened. The *Tzeror Ha-mor* in this interpretation seeks to explain the relevance of the fact that “his sons were with his cattle in the field” in this verse, and he suggests that this is the reason for Yaakov’s “silence.” Yaakov realized that by sending all his sons to tend to his sheep, he left Dina alone and unprotected, and thus he bore some level of guilt for the tragedy that had befallen his daughter.

These approaches teach us two important lessons regarding the proper way to handle adversity. First, we are reminded to remain calm, patient and level-headed. Whereas Yaakov’s sons resorted to drastic measures to respond to the crisis, Yaakov, who was far more experienced in dealing with hardship, urged patience. Secondly, the *Tzeror Ha-mor* teaches us the importance of recognizing our mistakes that may have contributed to the difficult situation. Rather than simply feel angry at others, Yaakov was humble and honest enough to acknowledge his own misjudgment which helped precipitate the crisis. One of the ways we can turn unfortunate circumstances into learning opportunities is by considering whether our mistakes are partially to blame for the situation, and then working to ensure that these mistakes are not repeated in the future.