**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**STUDENT SUMMARIES OF SICHOT BY THE ROSHEI YESHIVA**

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Please daven for a refua sheleima for YHE alumnus
Rav Daniel ben Miriam Chaya Rut

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**PARASHAT VAYISHLACH**

**SICHA OF HARAV MOSHEH LICHTENSTEIN SHLIT”A**

Family Values

Adapted by Binyamin Frankel

Translated by Kaeren Fish

“I Am Unworthy of All the Mercies”

Over the course of several *parashot*, Yaakov experiences a range of events and challenges. This week’s *parasha* opens with a prayer that he offers prior to his encounter with Esav:

“And Yaakov said, O God of my father Avraham, and God of my father Yitzchak, the Lord who said to me, ‘Return to your country and to your kindred, and I will deal well with you’ – I am unworthy of all the mercies and of all the truth which You have shown Your servant; for with my staff I passed over this Jordan, and now I have become two camps. Deliver me, I pray You, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esav, for I fear him, lest he come and smite me, mother and children. And You said, ‘I will surely do good to you and make your seed like the sand of the sea, which cannot be numbered for multitude.’” (*Bereishit* 32:10-13)

Yaakov prays with the feeling that God has performed kindnesses towards him all along. What is the source of this feeling? We must keep in mind the events that he has experienced along the way: he has had to flee Canaan with a death threat hanging over him; he is robbed by Elifaz (according to Chazal); he is a refugee who wanders around with nothing more than his staff in hand, forced to sleep upon the cold ground. And yet, despite the sometimes difficult conditions and all the dangers that might have struck, God watches over him and brings him safely to Charan.

Upon his arrival, he could easily have become entangled with any local family that he chanced upon, but once again he sees God’s guiding hand leading him directly to Rachel, his cousin – daughter of Lavan, his mother’s brother. His years of laboring for Lavan are likewise carried out under God’s ever-present and watchful Providence so that Lavan is prevented from exploiting Yaakov’s conscientious work ethic and depriving him of his rightful wages. In fact, it is possible that Lavan is prevented from causing him even more significant harm: “Pharaoh decreed only concerning the males, but Lavan sought to uproot everything.” Even on Yaakov’s return journey, with Lavan in hot pursuit, God intervenes and appears to Lavan in a dream, commanding that he do him no harm. Yaakov had originally set out with nothing more than his staff; now he returns with a large family, his beloved wife having borne a son after many years of infertility, and this perspective helps him to see how great God’s mercies towards him have been.

I feel the same way on the personal level, concerning myself and my family. My father escaped from occupied Europe by the skin of his teeth. He remained for a significant time without his parents, and eventually they managed to join him and to escape with just a few boxes of books. After they moved to Israel in their old age, my grandparents, of blessed memory, used to walk about in Jerusalem, leaning on their walking sticks, seeing how it was being rebuilt, with children playing in the streets. My wife Michal fell ill with cancer twenty-three years ago, and there were moments when we knew that the Angel of Death sought to “uproot everything.” During the First Lebanon War I was called up for service in the middle of studying the sugya about “a guardian who hands over to another guardian,” in Bava Metzi’a, and thank God I returned safe and sound. Our eldest daughter is getting married in a few days’ time, and I am overcome with emotion over all the Divine aid that has accompanied us throughout.

Faith and confidence

God’s constant accompaniment gives Yaakov a sense of self-confidence. However, concerning the verse, “So shall my righteousness answer for me in time to come…” (30:33), the midrash comments:

“R. Yehuda bar Simon said, It is written, ‘Do not boast yourself of the time to come…’ (*Mishlei* 27:2): You say, ‘So shall my righteousness answer for me in time to come.’ But in the time to come your daughter will go out and she will be assaulted, as it is written, (*Bereishit* 34), ‘And Dina, Leah’s daughter, went out…’” (*Bereishit Rabba* 73:9)

Indeed, Yaakov has to contend with two difficult challenges in our *parasha*. How does he direct his household in view of these challenges? It seems that we can identify two fundamental principles that guided Yaakov in his educational approach, and that helped him to consolidate such a powerful household.

Rashi, basing himself on the midrash, teaches:

“‘And his eleven sons’ – but where was Dina? He placed her in a box which he locked, so that Esav would not lay eyes upon her. Therefore Yaakov was punished, for he prevented the possibility of Dina bringing his brother back to the proper path, and [instead] she fall into the hands of Shekhem.” (*Bereishit* 32:23)

Seemingly, Dina should have appeared before Esav along with all the rest of the family, and Chazal note that Dina might have been able to turn Esav around. What was Yaakov thinking? Apparently, Yaakov was afraid of exposing Dina to Esav’s depraved conduct, which might cause her own spiritual level to deteriorate.

What is Chazal’s view? The midrash seems to indicate that Yaakov should have had confidence in Dina, and should not have been afraid to expose her. Often, parents think that the best way to protect their children is to apply all sorts of filters and barriers. In the past, they would forbid certain books; today, there are filters for media and content. However, just as in the past a way was found to get around the filters, so it is today and so it will be in the future.

The true filter is the one that rests between a person’s eyes, inside his head. It is based on education that empowers and gives confidence. The midrash that Rashi cites argues that Yaakov should have placed his faith in Dina; this would have had a positive effect on Esav, and who knows how history would have turned out. The fact that Yaakov hid his daughter caused her, ultimately, to rebel against him, and she fell into the hands of Shekhem.

Acceptance

When Dina goes out to see the daughters of the land, Yaakov’s initial reaction is one of silence:

“And Yaakov heard that [Shekhem] had defiled Dina, his daughter, and his sons were with his cattle in the field, and Yaakov held his peace until they came” (*Bereishit* 34:5).

The reaction of Shimon and Levi is very different:

“And the sons of Yaakov answered Shekhem and Chamor, his father, with cunning, and they spoke, for he had defiled Dina, their sister… And it was on the third day, when they were in pain, that two of the sons of Yaakov – Shimon and Levi, Dina’s brothers – took each man his sword, and came upon the city unresisted, and slew all the males. And they slew Chamor and Shekhem, his son, with the edge of the sword, and took Dina out of Shekhem’s house, and went out. The sons of Yaakov came upon the slain, and plundered the city, because they had defiled their sister. They took their sheep, and their oxen, and their asses, and that which was in the city, and that which was in the field, and all their wealth, and all their little ones, and their wives they took captive, and plundered all that was in the house.” (*Bereishit* 34:13-29)

How does Yaakov react to this episode?

“And Yaakov said to Shimon and Levi, ‘You have brought trouble upon me, to make me odious among the inhabitants of the land, among the Kenaani and the Perizi, and I being few in number, they shall gather themselves together against me, and slay me, and I shall be destroyed – I and my house.’ But they said, ‘Should he deal with our sister as with a harlot?’” (*Bereishit* 34:30-31)

Yaakov is troubled by the real threat that he now faces, but he does not persist in his rebuke of or argument with his sons. Their response is met with silence.

Yaakov reacts in the same way when he hears of Reuven’s terrible deed:

“And it was, when Yisrael dwelled in that land, that Reuven went and lay with Bilha, his father’s concubine, and Yisrael heard of it.” (*Bereishit* 35:22)

Even if what Reuven actually did is not exactly what the plain reading of the text suggests, it was clearly a very dramatic and severe deed. Reuven damages Yaakov’s status in the eyes of the family; a wedge has been driven between Bilha and Yaakov, and the other brothers might feel scorn towards their father who has no control over his eldest son and heir. Yaakov hears what has happened, and we expect to hear his fierce condemnation of Reuven and a reasserting of his status and honor.

All of these considerations must certainly pass through Yaakov’s mind as he deliberates how to respond. And here we encounter a unique phenomenon in the Torah: an open space, until the end of the line of text, with the same verse continued on the next line. This open space conveys something of Yaakov’s state of mind. After much consideration he restrains himself and maintains his silence.

The rebuke comes only later on, just before Yaakov’s death. Even here, Reuven is spared the harsh words that we might have expected, and Yaakov seems to understand the background that prompted Reuven’s behavior:

“Reuven, you are my firstborn, my might and the beginning of my strength, the excellency of dignity and the excellency of power; unstable as water, you shall not excel, because you went up to your father’s bed, then you defiled it; he went up to my couch.” (*Bereishit* 49:3-4)

Yaakov understands that Reuven acted intuitively, as an adolescent, not out of serious, rebellious thinking, and therefore he criticizes him only as being “unstable as water,” while continuing to maintain his honor: “You are my firstborn, my might and the beginning of my strength.”

Both in Dina’s case and in Reuven’s, Yaakov expresses his ability to accept. His children do not always behave in the way he would like them to: Dina goes out to see the daughters of the land; Shimon and Levi endanger the family; Reuven undermines Yaakov’s status in the home. But Yaakov contains himself; he does not banish them and cut them off from the family.

Family and values

Showing trust and acceptance are two significant educational principles. Why does the head of the household need to maintain them? Let us return to the story of Yaakov. Yaakov is not a person who spends his life running after money and power. He has a meaningful vision and ideas about education in light of the heritage handed down from his fathers, Avraham and Yitzchak; and he has opinions and ideals concerning many other subjects as well. But Yaakov knows that beyond all these ideals, there is something that comes before all else: family.

Yaakov is ready to pay a very steep price – not only in monetary terms, but also in terms of his ideology – for the sake of his family. The trust that he should place in Dina in anticipation of the encounter with Esav, and the acceptance he shows his sons despite their problematic behavior, are two of the ways in which parents establish a healthy and positive home.

A parent might believe that he is the ultimate authority in knowledge, because he has learned more and has accumulated more life experience. Yaakov himself is aware, in each of the situations discussed above, of ramifications that his children have not considered: the real danger that “they will gather themselves against me and slay me,” or, alternatively, Bilha’s anger, and so on. However, he still restrains himself and continues to maintain his bond with his children.

Therefore, Yaakov merits the continuation of the same verse that was interrupted halfway: “… Now Yaakov’s sons were twelve” (35:22). Ultimately, Yaakov’s sons continue his path; they are not removed from the family. Yaakov’s bed is complete. A parent who wishes to maintain a whole, sturdy home must be prepared to accept that his children are not replicas of himself. He must allow them to develop in the direction in which they themselves are meant to grow, and he must believe in them and accept them even when their behavior does not conform with his own preferences.

In the wake of Yaakov’s educational approach, we see that he does indeed succeed in forming significant bonds with his children. The Torah tells us, at the end of *Parashat Vayetze*: “Yaakov said to his brethren, ‘Gather stones,’ and they took stones and made a heap, and they ate there upon the heap” (*Bereishit* 31:46). The midrash explains:

“[What is the meaning of the plural, ‘brethren’?] How many brothers did Yaakov then have? Only one, and he was deserving of being buried under that heap. But his sons are referred to, in the holy tongue, as his ‘brethren.’” (*Bereishit Rabba* 74:13)

The midrash introduces the revolutionary idea that “brethren” here refers to the sons of Yaakov. Parents and children coexist on a vertical axis, where knowledge and life experience are to be found amongst those of the previous generation. Yaakov knows that in order not to be perceived as a figure of no relevance, he must invest himself deeply in the bond with his children and create discourse with them. This ability finds expression in his acceptance of their behavior, and in the expression “brethren” used in relation to them.

And indeed, when the critical moment arrives and Yaakov must remove the idolatry from his home, the members of his household accede to his wishes:

“And Yaakov said to his household and to all who were with him: Put away the strange gods that are among you, and make yourselves clean, and change your garments, and let us arise and go up to Beit-El, and I will make there an altar to God, Who answers me in the day of my distress, and was with me on the way on which I went. And they gave Yaakov all the strange gods that were in their hand, and all their earrings which were in their ears, and Yaakov hid them under the oak which was by Shekhem.” (*Bereishit* 35:2-4)

The fact that Yaakov is tolerant towards his children and treats them with respect proves itself when he asks them – as someone who understands them, rather than ordering them – to remove the foreign gods and earrings. This behavior also stands him in good stead in the eyes of God, Who extends His protection:

“And they journeyed, and the terror of God was upon the cities that were round about them, and they did not pursue after the sons of Yaakov.” (*Bereishit* 35:5)

At one of the Yeshivat Har Etzion dinners held in the US a few years ago, Rav Amital delivered greetings to the donors in English. Then, all of a sudden, he switched to Hebrew and addressed himself in a serious tone to the alumni, rebuking them harshly for the long hours that they spent at work, and the fact that they got to speak to their children only for a few moments, before they went to sleep, if at all. With these words Rav Amital sought to convey the importance of family as one’s first priority, and as a significant area of life that should come before success in one’s career. May we all learn from his wisdom and priorities, which reflect the priorities we learn from the Torah.

[This sicha was delivered at se'uda shelishit, Shabbat Parashat Vayishlach 5774 (2013), a few days prior to the wedding of Harav Mosheh Lichtenstein's eldest daughter.]