

United We Stand

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Parshas Vayeishev

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The Parsha's Path

Our Sages teach us that we should not view the characters of our forebears as on the same level as ordinary people of today; they paved unprecedented paths in serving G-d and attained incredibly high spiritual levels. When the Torah speaks of their flaws, it alludes to much more minor flaws than what we can imagine, which are only flaws from the vantage point of their level of righteousness. Nevertheless, the Torah describes them in a way in which we can appreciate and glean insight on our level, and it is in this way that we relate to them here.

In the beginning of the Parsha, Yaakov's sons are confronted by a deeply troubling situation. Their brother, seventeen-year-old Yosef, Yaakov's favorite, primed to be a future leader of his family's clan, seems to remove himself from the bonds of brotherhood with his siblings. According to Rashbam (37:2), he was very friendly with the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, but didn't treat the sons of Leah the same way. He slanders them to his father and relates dreams of how he will rule over them. His brothers do not know how to cope with this. This brother, who doesn't treat them as brothers, is singled out for greatness and rulership? It poses an existential threat to their future as a united nation. They feel they have no choice; they have to kill him.

A couple of the brothers independently realize that such an extreme act is wrong. Reuven suggests that they throw him in a pit instead, hoping to retrieve him later. After he leaves, Yehuda suggests selling him into slavery. Of course, even this was entirely unjustified, and the brothers and their descendants would have to pay the price for their betrayal of their brother to this day.

What should the brothers have done in response to Yosef's behavior? The Torah doesn't tell us; all we know is that what they did was absolutely unacceptable. Perhaps they should have respectfully communicated their concerns with Yosef, but the verse informs us that they could not bring themselves to speak to him peaceably. Maybe that wouldn't have been effective anyway. But the fact that they couldn't even speak to him was perhaps the most glaring flaw in the brothers' perspective.

Yosef was seventeen. Yes, he had extraordinary potential which his father recognized and worked to cultivate, but right now he was still a youth, and youths do

things that are wrong and hurtful. They might be too self-centered and arrogant. From what we know about Yosef throughout his story, and which the midrash highlights, is that he excelled in inner strength. When you're very focused inwards, even on cultivating your own perfection, you may have a harder time cultivating appropriate sensitivities outwards, in your relationships and perspectives on the world around you. You may be living with a more limited and outdated point of reference to the world around you. Yosef may have been working with the model that he knew from his father and grandfather - that whenever there were brothers, one was righteous and the other was wicked, one destined to promulgate the grand vision of the Jewish people while the other destined for another path. As Yosef developed and matured, he would grow out of this perspective and recognize the full importance and value of his brothers. He would also learn to be more sensitive to the needs of others, as he did when he inquired of the fallen faces of Pharaoh's chamberlain and baker in Potiphar's prison. But at seventeen, he wasn't fully there yet.

The leader among Yosef's brothers was Yehuda, who reflected the opposite personality. He was deeply affected by relationships and the world around him, sometimes to his own detriment. It was what caused him to "sin" with Tamar and it may have been the peer pressure of his brothers that prevented him from taking a stronger stance to protect Yosef. He also had a lot to work on.

What Yehuda and his brothers should have recognized is that no matter how much your brother hurts you, he's still your brother - and he, just like yourselves, is a work in progress. Instead of obsessing over Yosef's distressing actions or his special treatment, they should have focused their energies on what they could control - trying to be better brothers themselves, and communicating their concerns in a respectful and loving fashion. As we strive to rebuild ourselves as a more united nation, the message of Yosef's brothers could not be timelier. No matter what our grievances against any of our brothers, an attitude of victimhood and resentment is not the answer. Our job is to do what we can - to understand, to appreciate, to embrace, and to communicate. Beyond that, the only place we should be looking is inwards.

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Deeper Meanings

How do we celebrate Chanukah in the midst of the darkness that surrounds us? This question is not only one that can be asked now; it could be asked when they first established the holiday of Chanukah itself. At the time of Chanukah, the Maccabees had regained control of the Beis-Hamikdash after it had been profaned by the Syrian-Greeks, but they would continue to battle with them for control of Israel for over twenty more years. Besides that, the influence of Hellenization had taken its toll, and many among the Jews opposed the Maccabees and rejected their heritage. Even after the Maccabees defeated the Greeks, the Hasmonean dynasty soon became corrupt and Hellenized themselves, and only lasted about a hundred years before falling to Rome, and another hundred years later the Beis-Hamikdash was destroyed. In the big scheme of things, the Maccabean victory seemed to be of very minor significance, and even from the outset the problems surrounding them loomed large. Yes, the oil miraculously lasted for eight days, but with all the formidable issues surrounding them, how could they celebrate? What did the miracle really do for them, anyway?

There is a cryptic midrash at the beginning of Parshas Bereishis (1:2). The verse relates how when G-d created the world, the land was *tohu vavohu and darkness on the surface of the deep*. The midrash sees this verse as hinting to the future exiles of the Jewish people, with *darkness* referring to the "exile of Syrian-Greece, in that they darkened the days of Israel with their decrees. They said to them, 'write on the horn of an ox that you do not have a portion in the G-d of Israel.'" Why would the Syrian-Greeks want them to write this on the horn of an ox? And why did they want them to write that "they don't have a portion", as opposed to just denying G-d?

R. Pinchos Bodner suggests that the Syrian-Greeks weren't trying to get us to deny G-d, but rather our perception of Him as the Master of the Universe, intimately involved in our lives and controlling every aspect of the world. The ox, being an incredibly strong animal, is a symbol of might and power in Jewish thought. It can be used to refer to the grandeur and might of G-d's attribute of Strict Justice - but it can also be used to refer to the arrogance of man, when he attributes his might to himself. The Greeks' perception of life was that man was the greatest being, responsible for his own accomplishment, and any gods were only tools for man to achieve his own ends. The notion that G-d was in charge, that He was the source of all good, and that man could

have a relationship with G-d was too much for them to bear.

Yet as frightening as the implications of such a notion of G-d was for the Syrian-Greeks, the implications of a G-d who was not present and involved was even more frightening for the Jewish people. Was G-d really with them in this time of darkness? Was the Maccabean victory the work of G-d, or it was just the strength and good fortune of their army? They still had formidable challenges to face - were they really all alone, left to rely on their own might against an overwhelming darkness? Or was there a Higher Power with them?

The miracle of the oil showed the Maccabees that they weren't alone. As dark as it seemed and as dark as things would get, G-d was with them, G-d cared, and G-d was ultimately in control. Time and again, our enemies rejoice and find security in their own might. We rejoice and take refuge in the might of G-d. Chanukah reminds us that no matter how much darkness surrounds us, G-d is with us. We just have to shine whatever light we have, and turn to G-d to carry it through the night.

Goal of the week

Sign up to learn with someone from an irreligious background over the phone once a week through Partners in Torah, Torahmates, or another organization - they desperately need more mentors!

This week's bulletin is dedicated for a Refuah Sheleima for Shaindel Temma bas Rochel Zlotta, Masha Sarah bas Tziviah Leah, Bracha bas Shoshannah, Reuven ben Golda, Yitzchok Moshe haKohen ben Miriam, Ephraim Melech ben Tzilah, Yitzchok Elimelech ben Chanah Sarah, Gavriel Margoliot Ben Malka, and all those injured by the war and acts of terror, as well as for the safe return of all the hostages and soldiers. Please have them in mind in your Tefillos.

Have A Great Shabbos !!

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