

INSIGHTS

Into The Weekly Parsha

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"May his Neshama have an Aliya!"

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14 TEVET

Based on the Torah of our Rosh HaYeshiva HaRav Yochanan Zweig

PARSHAS VAYECHI

Critical Criticism

Reuven, you are my first born [...] unstable like water [...] you desecrated and ascended my bed. Shimon and Levi are brothers [...] in their rage they killed a man and uprooted an ox [...] (49:3-7)

This week's *parsha* contains Yaakov Avinu's final directives to his children, his last will and testament, as it were. Naturally, one would suppose that a final message to one's child would be one of love and empowerment. For the most part, Yaakov's individual message to each child was exactly that; describing that particular child's strength and unique contribution to the family as a whole. Yet curiously, Yaakov also singles out a few of his children for fairly severe criticisms.

Even more troublesome: the criticisms that Yaakov levels at his children are related to actions that took place many decades before – almost fifty years prior. If Yaakov Avinu felt that they should have been criticized for their improper behavior, why did he wait so long to rebuke them?

Rashi (*Devarim* 1:3) addresses this issue. Toward the end of his life, Moshe admonishes Bnei Yisroel for their many misdeeds in the desert. Rashi points out that Moshe followed the example of Yaakov Avinu and waited to rebuke Bnei Yisroel at the end of his life. Rashi goes on to explain that Yaakov was concerned that if he had criticized Reuven earlier he would have driven him away, and that Reuven would subsequently join Eisav. Yet, if that were true, what difference does it make when he criticizes him, either way he may end up driving him away?

Criticism is a very tricky concept. The word criticize is actually derived from the Greek word "*kritikos*," which means to judge, and the *kritikoi* were the judges who gave verdicts. In other words, the very word itself requires a dispassionate view of the circumstances. As discussed in a prior issue of INSIGHTS, most people do not understand this. They criticize actions of others that they find bothersome, not behavior that is detrimental to the perpetrator's wellbeing. In other words, our criticism of others is usually about us, not them.

When criticizing one's child there is a whole other layer of complication. With our children we don't merely criticize actions that we find annoying, we also criticize actions that we feel reflect poorly on us or our family. This comes from the mistaken notion that our children are merely an appendage, an extension of ourselves. One of the most complicated aspects of parent child relationships is rooted in the decisions that a child makes for him or herself such as their profession, spouse, clothing, appearance, etc.

To be sure, often our children make poor decisions, inevitably leading to mistakes. Of course there are some situations in which we must try to save them from making a critical error. But as much as we would like to help them avoid what we feel are mistakes, we



must internalize that their lives are their own and that their decisions might actually be the right choice for them.

Yaakov Avinu recognized that criticizing one's children can be fraught with peril. He was therefore extremely careful about how and when he leveled criticism at his children. To this end, he made two remarkable innovations: First, he waited until the end of his life. At that point it was clear that the criticism wasn't about Yaakov's own embarrassment stemming from their behavior. He didn't have much longer to live so how his sons chose to lead their lives from then on would have no emotional effect on Yaakov. It was thus clear that the criticism was about them, not Yaakov.

Secondly, he didn't merely criticize their actions; rather, he pointed out character flaws that they could identify and work on to improve themselves. He told Reuven that his impulsive behavior led him to careless acts that ultimately made him unworthy of leadership. He then told Shimon and Levi that their uncontrolled rage led them to making poor decisions that could have very well brought peril upon the entire family. By criticizing in such a manner, Yaakov conveyed the message that he was simply trying to help his sons – not control them.

Plotting a Plot

In my grave, which I have hewn for myself in the land of Canaan [...] (50:5)

Rashi (ad loc) informs us that Yaakov bought the rights to the Me'aras Hamachpeilah from Eisav with the funds he had accumulated while shepherding in the house of Lavan. The Midrash (*Rabbah* 31:17) goes on to explain that Yaakov did this because he didn't want to benefit from those funds. This raises the obvious question: If Yaakov didn't want to benefit from those funds then how does he use them to acquire the burial grounds from his brother Eisav?

Although Yaakov did not want to benefit from this wealth, he also did not want to destroy it. This creates a dilemma; even if Yaakov were to give it away as a gift, the recipient would owe him a favor, and subsequently Yaakov would be benefiting from the tainted money. If Yaakov would use the funds in a sale, he would benefit from the item that he received in exchange, and would ultimately be benefiting from those funds.

When Eisav claimed to be the rightful heir to Me'aras Hamachpeilah, Yaakov recognized an opportunity to resolve his dilemma. In actuality, Eisav had sold the *bechorah* to Yaakov, this included all the rights that went along with it – including the double portion that comes with being a first born. In addition, once Eisav turned his back on the legacy of Avraham Avinu, and the subsequent requirement of the children of Avraham Avinu to go down to Egypt, he lost all rights to Hashem's promise to Avraham that his children would inherit Eretz Yisroel. Yaakov and his children became the sole heirs to Eretz Yisroel and Avraham's legacy.

Thus, Yaakov came up with the perfect solution. He recognized that Eisav would not freely admit that he no

longer had a right to Eretz Yisroel. Therefore, Yaakov did not give the money to Eisav to buy the land - he was merely allowing Eisav his delusion that he was entitled to the burial grounds. He thus gave Eisav the money as a way of placating him. Eisav did not consider the money to be a gift, for he maintained that he sold land that belonged to him. Hence, Eisav felt no gratitude for the money he received and the land that Yaakov received "in exchange" for the sale could not be considered benefitting from those funds as he had already owned the rights to the Me'aras Hamachpeilah.

Often, for the sake of *shalom*, we must put aside what we know the reality to be and descend to another person's view of what reality is. Working through a painful situation by accepting another person's version of what the facts really are, and arriving at solutions acceptable to all, is the highest level of creating *shalom*.

Did You Know...

In this week's *parsha*, Yaakov blesses Menashe and Ephraim, and states that the Jewish people will use them as a blessing. They will say, "May Hashem make you like Ephraim and Menashe." But what is unique about this blessing that we have accepted it as the standard blessing for our children throughout the generations?

One answer given is that Ephraim and Menashe were the first set of brothers in the Torah who seemed to get along. This may also be what Yaakov emphasized when he switched hands. It teaches us that there is no greater blessing than peace among brothers.

Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch offers another explanation, saying that this blessing is a life lesson about Judaism surviving in exile. There are many existential challenges facing those in exile. Yet we need to look to the examples of Ephraim and Menashe, who against all odds, grew up in Egypt and still maintained their convictions and commitment to the Torah and its ideals. This is why we bless our sons to be like them, expressing our hope for proud Jewish children growing up within today's morally bankrupt society.

As to when the blessing should be given, the *Yaavetz* (original printing p. 153) says that Friday night is chosen because it is special in its abundance, and we should present this abundance to our children. *Maavar Yabok* (p. 143) explains that there is no Satan on Shabbos who can prevent the blessing. Others (*Nishmas Shabbos* 1:546) say that Friday night is most appropriate because the father is not distracted with work, so he can focus on the blessing.

Some suggest that one should bless children after *davening* in shul or a house (*Siddur Yaavetz* *ibid*), while others have the custom of blessing them after *kiddush* and before washing (*Likras Shabbos* 1 p. 274:2).



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