

Torah Talk—מאמרי תורה



The Parasha Post of the Jewish Primary Day School of the Nation's Capital

Parashat Vayeshev
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פרשת וישב
כ"ד בכסלו תשע"ז

Torah Reading: *Bereshit* [Genesis] 37:1-40:23

In this *parasha*, Yosef's dreams anger his brothers, and they sell him into slavery in Egypt, where he eventually ends up in prison, still interpreting others' dreams.

One could subtitle the last few *parshiyot*, and the next few, "Jews Behaving Badly." In each *parasha*, we see our forefathers and foremothers behaving in ways that are, frankly, not among the best of human responses.

Avraham and Sarah treat both Hagar and Yishmael in a less-than-sensitive manner [chapter 21]. Yaakov and Rivka conspire to trick Yitzchak into thinking that Yaakov is Esav in order for Yaakov to get the firstborn's blessing [chapter 27]. Rachel steals, hides, and lies about having taken her father's idols [chapter 31]. Yosef lords his dreams over his brothers, and the brothers respond by instigating a sale which is tantamount to murder, and then lie to their father about Yosef's fate [chapter 37]. Yehudah seeks out a woman who is not his wife [chapter 38].

Some believe that everything the forefathers and foremothers did was according to God's will, and that they never crossed any lines. Some *midrashim* support this view, defending through explanation how each action was, in fact, correct. It is difficult to make that case when reading the *pshat*, the text itself, however. Others suggest that these errors are the beauty of the ancestors, and what makes them such great human beings. If someone never errs, we can never aspire to be like them; their accomplishments are out of reach. But if someone messes up on occasion, just as we do, and still achieves great heights, that is someone we can strive to emulate.

Every one of the people mentioned above did the wrong thing on occasion. But the vast majority of the time, they overcame great obstacles, reached new moral

heights, and managed tremendously difficult situations. Avraham and Sarah spread the word about God and created serenity among the surrounding nations. Rivka was raised in a household of idolatry and immorality, but lived a life of kindness and intelligence, as evidenced first by her encounter with Eliezer at the well. Yaakov was hard-working and persevering and never gave up his faith in Hashem despite living with Lavan for 21 years. Rachel, according to *midrash*, gave her sister the secret signs on the night of her marriage to Yaakov to avoid causing Leah public embarrassment. Yosef resisted the advances of the wife of Potifar and suffered through jail as a result, and later he arranged the affairs of Egypt so that Egyptians were the only ones in the Levant with food during the seven years of famine. Yosef's brothers ended up defending their youngest brother, Binyamin, against the vizier of Egypt, possibly at the cost of their own lives. They were led by Yehudah, who demonstrated true leadership skills in this episode.

Many people believe in the veracity of the Torah, specifically because the major characters are flawed. In the tomes of most major ancient and modern religions, the heroes make no mistakes, but we Jews expose every flaw and foible of our revered leaders. If these episodes were not true, the reasoning goes, would the Jews make up such negative images of our leaders?

Some philosophical food for thought as we go into our winter break.

I wish everyone a safe and restful winter break and look forward to seeing the children refreshed and ready to begin second semester in January.

Shabbat Shalom

For Discussion:

- Can you think of other episodes in the Torah where the main characters act in a way that is less than acceptable?
- Think of someone in your life whom you consider a hero. Is that person perfect? Do you admire him or her despite his or her failings? What do you admire about him or her?
- What are your greatest strengths? What are areas in your life that you would like to improve upon?