

TIMELESS TORAH

VAYISHLACH: Navigating Complexity & Commitment in Family Dynamics

The Bond of Two Brothers

Among the lesser-known stories of heroism in the Warsaw Ghetto surrounds the activities of Irena Sendler, a non-Jewish social worker, who, over the course of the war, smuggled 2,500 Jewish children from the clutches of the Nazis. Risking her life countless times, Irena changed the identities of these children, preserving their real names and personal details until after the war in a coded document buried under an apple tree in Warsaw. The parents of these children had an unthinkable decision to make. On the one hand, no one knew what the future would hold or if they would ever again be reunited with their children; on the other hand, the parents understood that this was probably the only way to save them. Together with Irena's heroic bravery, this is a story of the loyalty of family bonds and the complexities that can affect these commitments.

The narrative of Parshat Vayishlach, which has numerous examples of complex family relationships, gives us an opportunity to reflect on these dynamics. The most dramatic relationship of all – that of Yaakov and Eisav – comes to its climax in the opening passage of the parshah, as Eisav, surrounded by an army of four hundred soldiers, marches towards Yaakov's camp. At the last moment, though, Eisav is seemingly overcome with emotion and, in tears, the brothers hug and kiss one another. In the *sefer* Torah, the word '*vayishakeihu* – and he kissed him' is written with dots on top of the letters, indicating that it holds a hidden meaning. Rav Shimon Schwab (d.1995) suggests that this moment was an epiphany for Eisav. Facing his brother, against whom he had harboured strong

resentment for so many years, Eisav suddenly realised how low he had fallen. He wept over all he had lost over the intervening years. Yaakov, too, cried, mourning the tragedy of his brother, a scion of Avraham and Yitzchak, who had drifted so far away from his family's values. This was an electric moment, with the deep animosity between the brothers miraculously suspended.

And, as the Netziv (d.1893) remarks, this miracle lasted longer than just that moment. There have been countless positive relationships between the two nations descended from Yaakov and Eisav, built on genuine respect and admiration. As a specific example, the Gemara describes the close friendship that existed between Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi and Mark Antony. The love between Yaakov and Eisav that was present at that moment reflected a genuine bond that can be traced through the rest of history.

Family Honour

Another passage that underscores the power of family commitment is Shechem's abduction of Dinah, the daughter of Yaakov. Shechem was one of the local chieftains, a prince of the city that bore his own name, and after violating Dinah, he took her to be his wife. It is fascinating to observe the two immediate reactions of Dinah's brothers when they heard of the atrocity. The verses describe that at first, they were deeply saddened – '*vayis'atzevu ha'anashim*' – and then they became exceedingly angry – '*vayichar lahem me'od*'. Rav Hirsch (d.1888) explains that the first reaction, sadness, was born from a sense of loss; it was the anguish of forfeiting forever the innocence their sister.



Contemporary Perspectives on the Weekly Parsha with Rabbi Dr Yoni Birnbaum

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This was a personal emotion. The brothers' reaction that followed immediately after this, however, was anger; they were outraged by the profaning of the moral nobility of their family.

At the end of this episode, after the battle against the people of Shechem, the brothers justified their actions to their father, saying, 'Shall our sister be made like a harlot?' (34:31). According to the commentators, this rhetorical question could reflect either one of their two initial reactions. The Malbim (d.1879) explains that the brothers argued that it would have been a fatal mistake to let this breach in their security pass. As strangers in the land, they felt compelled to stand up forcefully for their rights so that they would not be further and further oppressed. This interpretation follows from the second reaction, that of anger over the moral degradation inflicted on their family. Rashi, however, in a cryptic comment explained by the Chizkuni, notes the singular form of the word '*achoteinu* – our sister'. Faced by the dilemma that has challenged the Jewish people in almost every generation – to keep quiet in the face of aggression or to respond actively – the brothers responded with unbridled personal emotion, 'This is our sister! We cannot restrain ourselves!'

Strength in Mourning

The two passages that we have looked at until now have demonstrated the power of commitment to family members even in adverse conditions. The verses describing the end of Rachel's life, however, show us the depth of such relationships even after death. Rachel, who had waited so long for children, was experiencing difficulty during

the birth of her second child, and, wanting to encourage her, the midwife told her to take heart, as the baby was the second son she had longed for. Rachel, however, knew that she was dying, and she replied pithily that the baby should be called 'Ben-Oni, the son of my mourning'.

Interestingly, the verse (35:18) relates that Yaakov, instead of immortalising his wife's memory by using the name that his wife had chosen with her last breath, immediately changed the baby's name to Binyamin. Why did Yaakov not follow his beloved wife's choice? In a fascinating piece, the Ramban shows that Yaakov, in fact, did use Rachel's name. The word *oni*, he explains, has two meanings. It can mean 'mourning' or 'pain', which was Rachel's intention, and alternatively, it can mean 'strength', and it is this meaning that is signified in the name Binyamin, which translates literally as 'Son of the Right'. By calling the baby Binyamin, Yaakov was re-interpreting the name that Rachel chose, changing it from an insinuation of hopelessness and despair to a sense of positivity. At this immensely painful juncture of Yaakov's life, he was acutely aware that his role was to look forward and somehow find the strength to continue. With the name Binyamin, Yaakov would never forget the fact that his son was named by Rachel in a moment of immense grief and pain. At the same time, he elevated the name, demonstrating his commitment to her even after their relationship on this earth had ended.

Next Week - VAYEISHEV: Building a Life of Moral Integrity