

HEART TO HEART

by Rabbi Dovid Green

...And he (Yaakov) bowed to the ground seven times until he approached his brother (Eisav) (Genesis 33:3).

This week's parsha begins with the suspenseful meeting of Yaakov and his angry brother Eisav. Eisav had not forgiven Yaakov for receiving the blessings which were meant for him, and he was determined to do away with Yaakov. Yaakov prepared well for the awesome meeting with his brother. In the end Eisav was appeased and the meeting appeared more as two loving long-lost brothers than that of mortal enemies. What changed?

The Yalkut Lekach Tov enlightens our eyes with the answer to this question. Rabbi Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld was once visited by five men who threatened him to compromise his religious convictions regarding a particular matter, or else! Rabbi Sonnenfeld responded calmly and coolly that he would not cooperate. Although the men were confounded by the Rabbi's presence of mind, they more menacingly reiterated their demands and their threats. At the peak of the confrontation, the Rabbi bared his chest and arose before the men. "I am ready to sanctify G-d's name. Shoot me and kill me! I won't budge one iota from the truth!" He then continued to explain his stance in this matter. At that, instead of carrying out their threats, the men turned and left.

At a later time Rabbi Sonnenfeld explained his behavior in this incident. He had based his actions on a similar incident which happened to a pious Rabbi who presided in the small Polish town called Shadik. The rabbi had accepted the position in Shadik in the hopes that he would be able to pursue his studies in relative peace there in this small village. To his great disdain he learned that there was a man who made his living preying on the townspeople. He was a slanderer, a stool-pigeon who would relate any and all questionable activities, be it true or not, to the corrupt local officials. He was greatly feared, because he could bring ruination upon anyone for the smallest slight to his honor. He demanded a place of honor for his seat in the synagogue, and he expected to be called up to the Torah for the reading in a turn given to the truly honored and respected members of the community. One Sabbath day the rabbi appeared in the main synagogue. When the slanderer was called to the Torah, the rabbi banged on his podium and asked "What have you to do with the holy Torah? How can such a defiled and despicable mouth which hands over the lives and wealth of the Jews to the authorities utter a blessing over the Torah scroll? Get out you defiled person!"

The surprised man began running towards the Rabbi who had so embarrassed him, but the congregants held him back. As he left, he turned and pointed a menacing finger as if to say "I'll yet

teach you a lesson!"

A number of months passed, and the Rabbi was asked to serve a function at a happy occasion in a nearby village. He and two of his disciples set out on the way. As they traveled, the two disciples noticed that the slanderer was coming their way on horseback. The two began to panic, but the rabbi stayed calm. The horse drew close, and as it did the rider jumped off with alacrity, and rushed toward the rabbi. To the astonishment of the students, the man bowed to the rabbi and begged his forgiveness for all he had done against him. When he finished, he jumped back on his horse and soon disappeared into the surroundings.

The three continued along their journey, and soon the rabbi began to explain what had occurred. When I saw the slanderer galloping toward us on his horse, I searched in my mind for something in the holy Torah which would save us. The verse in "Proverbs" (27:19) occurred to me. 'As with water the (reflection of the) face is to the face, so is the heart of man to man.' I searched for some defense for this man; how unfortunate and in need of compassion he is for the deep depravity he has sunken to. Who knows how he would have turned out had he received a proper education. I searched and searched for such defenses for him until I felt truly compassionate for him, and all of my resentment disappeared. As a result, my heart affected his, and good thoughts entered his mind. He began to think 'maybe the rabbi is right, for didn't he act toward me with the proper intentions for the sake of the honor of G-d, and not just to pick a fight?' These thoughts softened his heart, and brought him to a feeling of regret. Hence, he asked my forgiveness."

Rabbi Sonnenfeld finished relating the story, and said that when the five ruffians were shaking their fists at him, he was thinking similar thoughts about them. Rabbi Sonnenfeld added that this is how Yaakov softened the heart of Eisav. Eisav hated Yaakov, but Yaakov also resented Eisav for the type of person he chose to be. Still Yaakov bowed to him seven times, each time drawing closer until he reached "his brother." This means until he reached deep in his heart the feeling of brotherliness with Eisav; until he felt the compassion of one brother for another. At that point Yaakov's sincere feelings penetrated Eisav's heart and softened it. Eisav ran toward him and kissed him and hugged him.

This is the method of our great sages in their dealings with people who threatened them. It is certainly worthy of imitation. How many situations might we change if we would employ this in our efforts in dealing with those around us?

Good Shabbos!

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