

THE WHOLE AND THE PART - PART II

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

Back to Shechem.

In many ways Shechem was a seminal moment in the lives and development of Yakov's twelve sons. Before Shechem, Yakov's children were "seen but not heard."

The incident with Dina and Shechem catapulted the brothers into the center stage of their maturation. They began to take independent action and responsibility. Without consulting their father they attacked the city of Shechem, killed the male inhabitants, and rescued Dina. When Yakov found out what they had done he was appalled at the potential consequences. (34:30) "You have brought me trouble to discredit me among the inhabitants of the land... I am few in number and should they band together and attack... I and my household will be destroyed."

Yakov presented two concerns: a) harm to his reputation, b) concern for the safety of the family. Generally speaking, the order of stated concerns reveals their level of severity, and the first concern is usually the most serious and important. How was it that Yakov was more concerned about his reputation among the inhabitants of Canaan than he was for the safety of his family?

To understand Yakov, the brothers, and the uniqueness of Yoseph, we have to go further back in our analysis of the place of Shechem and its relationship to the Jewish people throughout history. As explained in last week's Rabbi's Notebook, Shechem represented the choice between blessing and curse, good and bad. Blessing means to encourage and empower potential to become reality. Blessing is the use of potential to do good things - meaning, to serve Hashem (G-d). To curse means to hinder potential so that it never becomes a reality. Curses do not allow potential to accomplish goodness - meaning, they do not allow potential to be used in the service of Hashem.

(Note: Potential's ability to realize goodness depends on the interplay between free will and the circumstances that create the environment for its expression. If the environment encourages goodness, potential is blessed; if the environment does not encourage goodness, or worse, discourages goodness, potential is severely handicapped. It is doubtful whether under such circumstances potential will ever realize the fullness of its expression to accomplish goodness.)

In Shechem, starting with Avraham's entry into the land of Canaan and ending with the Jewish nation's entry into Canaan (at the ceremony of blessings and curses between the mountains of Grizim and Ayval), the Jewish people were asked to choose. They were asked to proclaim how they would use the gift of the land. Would they use its potential and their own in an integrated and

concerted effort to accomplish G-d's intent and purpose for placing them in the Promised land; or, would they squander the gift of the land, its potential and their own, in pursuing other agenda removed and therefore in opposition to G-d's wishes?

Avraham chose to engage the land in every facet of its potential to allow him to realize his own. Yakov chose to first settle in Shechem and actively pursue his potential in conjunction with the land. The brothers were forced to take a stand in Shechem because of Dina and chose, to the best of their understanding, to do as they thought G-d wanted them to do. They chose Shechem as the springboard of their extraordinary potential.

In this week's Parsha they do the same as it related to Yoseph and what they perceived as a his direct assault on their unity and combined potential. They could not see him or accept him as their leader and concluded that his posturing amidst his dreams and seeming self righteousness (presuming to reprimand them and tattle to Yakov) was self serving and potentially disastrous to the future of the family and nation.

(Note: Yitzchak is the only one of the Avos who did not have an incident in Shechem. Why? Why didn't Yitzchak have to express his decision to engage the land's potential in realizing his own? I would like to suggest that the Akeidah was his expression of absolute symbiosis with Eretz Yisroel (land of Israel). The Mizbeach (alter) was either a pile of 12 stones or a mound of earth. Many of the commentaries explain that the intended imagery and message is that we have the power to sanctify this world in service to G-d. The heaped stones and the pile of earth reflects this concept in that we raise up the earth itself in service to G-d. When Yitzchak allowed himself to be bound on the Mizbeach he became bound to the land itself. His relationship to the Promised Land was far more fundamental and far more profound than the other Avos. This may be why he was forbidden to ever leave Eretz Yisroel. Regarding Yitzchak we can state that he truly realized his potential in the manner of his integration with the land.)

How about Shechem the son of Chamor, Prince of Shechem? Who was he and what were his motives? Why was he named Shechem?

The Shem Meshmuel on Vayishlach explained that the name was deliberate and not coincidental. As we noted last week, the word Shechem means portion or part. A part can be primary to the whole or secondary to it. If primary, the purpose of the whole is to support the part. If the whole is primary then the part is important because it has the potential to contribute and complete the whole. That was the fundamental lesson of the place of Shechem. Did the people who lived there feel independently complete and viewed the rest of society as their secondary support; or, did they find their own completion through their subjugation and contribution to the whole?

Shechem, the son of Chamor, was raised in a social and familial environment where the part was seen as primary and the whole its secondary support. He was raised to take what he wanted, when he wanted it, and somehow things would be made OK. Yet, after Yakov's arrival at the outskirts of

the city, Shechem encountered, for the first time, a person and family who viewed themselves as secondary and the whole as primary. He witnessed a man whose entire devotion was to the raising of his large family and household and the contributions he and they could offer the greater society.

The Medresh records three things that Yakov contributed to the society of Shechem. It appears that the Schemites were rather primitive. They did not have running water. Their economy still existed on the barter system, and there was no central market where buyers and sellers gathered to do business. Yakov introduced all three innovations into the society of Shechem. He created an aqueduct to bring water into the city. He minted coins and taught them how to convert their commercial bartering into a monetary exchange opening their economy to far greater possibilities. Finally, he established a central market where exchanges of products and ideas became available and possible.

The verse says, (33:18) "Yakov came 'whole' to the city of Shechem..." Yakov needed nothing. He was wealthy, healthy, and back in Canaan. He was father to 13 (including Dina) extraordinary children that he had saved from both Lavan and Eisav. He had both physically and spiritually avoided the taint of their evil on himself or his family. Yakov was truly whole. Upon his arrival in Shechem he immediately set out to show that his intent was to become the part that completes the whole. He set out to sanctify G-d's name among the inhabitants of Shechem in word and in deed. He would not remain a squatter on land that was not legally his; therefore, he immediately purchased the field outside of Shechem where he and his household were camped. He showed his intention to not be a taker and then set out to be the giver. This was what Shechem the son of Chamor witnessed.

Because Shechem was fascinated by Yakov and his values he happened to see Dina and was smitten. Old habits die a lingering death and his upbringing of seeing the whole in service to the part allowed Shechem to forcibly take Dina. However, after his craze had been spent he returned to his earlier and healthier fascination and "fell in love with Dina." More so was the fact that it provided him with an assumption of redemption. If he could make the relationship proper and respectful the "first date" could be overlooked. In essence Shechem contained within himself the very challenge of Shechem the place. He too had to choose between selfless or selfish service. He "nobly" chose to become part of Yakov's family.

Yakov, although pained and dismayed by Dina's abduction and his inability to protect her, nevertheless was greater than any personal pain or disappointment. He immediately saw the possible benefit. Given the character of the place and the clear intent of Shechem, regardless of Chamor and his intention to subjugate Yakov and his wealth to his own power base, Yakov recognized that there was potential for goodness to be realized. There was the potential to turn a curse into a blessing.

On the other hand, the brothers who were just feeling the stirrings of their independence, focused on the insult to Dina and the family. "Shall he then treat our sister like a harlot?" Their concerns were

immediate rather than long range whereas Yakov's was concerned on both levels. However, the deal they presented to Chamor and Shechem was brilliant. On the one hand it appeared to accommodate Shechem's desire to belong. Milah (circumcision) defines the Jewish people as a family and a nation which is why the male convert must accept the "covenant of Avraham" if he wishes to belong. On the other hand, it also evened out the playing field. The many could be beaten by the few because their physical strength would be severely compromised by the circumcision.

The brothers made one serious and fundamental mistake. They did not ask Yakov to critique their strategy. Had they done so he would have been able to explain how the situation might be salvaged and all would spiritually benefit. Instead, they did as they thought they should and Yakov was left explaining why they were wrong.

First of all, they had wasted an opportunity to advance their ultimate mission of sanctifying G-d's name. Had they worked with Shechem, his family, and his city, they could have been influenced to become strong allies of the Jews in support of teaching the world about G-d. Yakov had already proven that by sharing his wisdom and understanding the citizens of Shechem benefited greatly. Secondly, not only had they not advanced their standing and mission, they had lost credibility in the eyes of the surrounding nations. No longer would they trust Yakov, either about his intentions or about his G-d. Instead, the family was in real danger of being harmed. The other nations would band together to annihilate Yakov and his family.

The reason that Yakov first voiced his concern for their mission rather than personal safety was because their mission was the source of their protection. So long as they did what they had to do to advance Hashem's intentions, Hashem guaranteed that they would not be harmed. In massacring the males of Shechem they had not advanced G-d's wishes.

The fact remains that the brothers did not relent. They remained in disagreement with Yakov. That disagreement had other consequences. It built up the brothers to the extent that when they perceived Yoseph as a threat and that Yakov was blinded to Yoseph's true intentions, they once again decided to take matters into their own hands. Had they asked Yakov to explain his actions and Yoseph's behavior they might have understood and changed their opinion of their younger brother. Once again they failed to avail themselves of our most fundamental resource - our parents, elders, and teachers. In essence, at that moment they saw themselves, the part, as greater than the whole. Had they accepted that the part must always be subservient to the whole they would have not discounted Yakov. They would have understood that on the one hand he too is a part of the whole and on the other hand, as the last of the Avos (Patriarchs), he was the whole! The concept of our Mesorah (transmission of Torah knowledge and tradition from generation to generation) is that all subsequent generations must view themselves as parts that can only be fulfilled if they are subject to the whole that preceded them. When faced with doubt always err on the side of doing what was taught rather than what you think should be.

Furthermore, in not accepting Yakov's criticism of their action against Shechem they supported their 'rebellion' by concluding that Yakov was philosophically wrong. Pacifism is a weakness that the Jews can not afford. The only response is to hit them hard. Granted, at times that is the proper response and other times it is not; and therefore, the brothers had no right to deviate from Yakov's understanding and wisdom. They were too young. Besides, Yakov was not motivated by weakness; rather, he had the courage to know that his plan would have worked. He was the balance between the Chesed (kindness and compassion) of Avraham and the Gevurah (strength and courage) of Yitzchak. He knew when Chesed would work and when confrontation was required. This time he was convinced that the proper response was Chesed. (Note: to do Chesed under such circumstance demanded the greatest degree of Gevurah.)

Unfortunately, the brothers had convinced themselves that their actions against Shechem, and not consulting first with Yakov, were fully justified. Therefore, they had no means of assessing their younger brother Yoseph and understanding that he shared Yakov's philosophy of defining the part by its contribution to the whole. Yoseph personified the balance between Chesed and Gevurah. On the one hand he was a son of Yakov. On the other hand he was the incarnation of the Eisav that could have been. Eisav the son of Yitzchak had the potential to be stronger than Yakov. Not only did he possess great physical strength, he also possessed great spiritual potential. At the same time he also had the choice to use his great potential against G-d. Because Eisav chose the path of evil, Yakov had to take on what would have otherwise been Eisav's responsibilities. Yoseph was endowed with the Eisav's great spiritual potential while still being the son of Yakov. As such, he truly had the strength and courage to make the tough decisions regardless of the consequences to himself. If he was going to lead, if he was going to unify his brothers in service to G-d, he would have to exert himself to be known and accepted among the society of his older brothers.

Not all of his approaches were successful; in fact, they backfired by alienating him from his brothers and causing great distrust. However, Yoseph would not cease or desist. He continued to exert himself as the leader-to-be regardless of the negativity and growing hatred of his brothers. In the end they sold him into slavery.

It is clear from the end of last week's Parsha that Yoseph continued to make mistakes and that he continued to grow from them. Realizing that his hoped for savior, the wine steward, was not going to deliver; he did what he did best. He reviewed all the facts and developed a plan that would ultimately allow him to once again serve the whole both in the immediate and in the future. He realized that he was being held in the palm of G-d's hand and that all would be for the best. He recognized that he was the first stage of the exile that had been promised to Avraham at the time of the Covenant Between The Halves. He did not know how things would evolve but he readied his prodigious mind and spirit to be ready whenever the moment came.

This week's Parsha was the moment. First of all his initial encounter with Pharaoh. Without missing a beat he launches into a developed plan for saving Egypt as well as the rest of the world. In the

process he guaranteed that Egypt would be catapulted to prominence and power beyond its wildest dreams. He also guaranteed that Pharaoh could not afford to discard him. In a society that presumed such superiority that they refused on principle to show appreciation and gratitude (see Darash Moshe end of last week's Parsha), Yoseph knew that he had to become invaluable to Pharaoh's personal greatness. He did so with grace and humility. Moreover was the fact that he attributed all his skills and gains to Hashem's direct intervention. In his own small capacity he began to shed the light of truth and change on the dismally selfish darkness of Egyptian amorality.

Secondly, he was ready when he encountered his brothers after twenty-two years. He was ready to apply the full measure of his Gevurah in accomplishing the intended Chesed. In but moments the master strategist and brilliant analyst devised the plan that would bring his father and family to Egypt amidst great exaltation and respect. His mind personified the Divine quality of, "The end result was what was intended from the very first thought."

As The Shem Meshmuel wrote, Yoseph's intended purpose was to gather in the family and make them whole. His greatest challenge was the brothers themselves. He had to win their trust and convince them of his forgiveness. More so than anything else, he had to prove to them that all that had happened was as G-d had intended. He had to show them that he, no different than them, was but a Shechem, a part, a portion, of the whole. It was the whole that assigned true value and purpose to the part not the whole in service of the part. They had accused him twenty-two years earlier of wanting the whole to be subservient to his part. His plan would prove to them that all along his intent was only to serve the whole, whether as younger brother or as Viceroy of Egypt.

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