

REUVEN'S LESSON

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

As Yakov lay on his sickbed he gathered his 12 sons to instruct them regarding the future of the family and nation. The moment had to have been among the most emotional and profound scenes in our nation's history. Not only was it a father bidding farewell to his beloved children; it was a king making final arrangements for the destiny of his people. How desperate Yakov must have felt! The first 77 years of his life he had prepared for his job as husband and father. The later 70 years of his life he relentlessly and successfully shepherded his family through unrelenting physical and spiritual dangers. Now, at the moment of his children's greatest challenge, (surviving the years of Egyptian exile) he had to bid farewell and trust that others would carry on his job.

Had they been living securely in their own land, surrounded by the strength of a growing population and the inherent sanctity of Eretz Yisroel (the land of Israel), there would still be reason for concern. However, living in exile and being surrounded by the ethical incongruity of Egyptian amorality placed his family in grave physical and spiritual danger. It had been difficult enough to protect the family when they were merely 70 souls; how much more so were the difficulties when multiplied into the thousands! It had taken Yakov his entire life, all his time, undeterred by day, night, heat or cold, to oversee the growth and development of his children. How would his heirs manage to protect his children when they numbered in the thousands and tens of thousands?

By now you are wondering what Parsha Vayichi has to do with Vayishlach so allow me to continue. Given the seriousness and profundity of that auspicious gathering, Yakov's blessings to his sons at that time must be studied very carefully. Contained in his words must be the secret for Jewish survival both then and throughout the ages.

His first words were directed to Reuven his eldest son. (49:3-4) "Reuven, you are my first-born... foremost in rank and power...however, you cannot be foremost because you impetuously mounted my bed and desecrated my couch." With those words Yakov began his final and most important instructions to his children, the guardians of Avraham's legacy and the destiny of the world.

In a past issue of the Rabbi's Notebook I explained that criticism is also a blessing. It all depends on what we do with it. If we take criticism to heart and become better and stronger because of it, it is a true blessing. On the other hand, if we allow ourselves to be insulted and resentful because of it we gain nothing and the criticism is more a curse than a blessing. Clearly, Yakov trusted that his words, even his harsh criticism of Reuven (and Shimon and Layvie), would be accepted and be the blessing he intended. Nevertheless, what secrets of survival was Yakov imparting to his children with his

opening criticism of Reuven's impetuosity, and why was that the first secret to be imparted? The first usually implies the most important. The first is usually assumed to be the foundation upon which all the rest is built. What was the intended lesson of Yakov's opening blessing to Reuven?

(Quick aside... In Zos HaBracha, when Moshe bids goodbye to his beloved nation, he too blesses the 12 tribes. His opening blessing is also directed to Reuven. In another past issue I pointed out that it too was the most important of all the blessings by virtue of it being the first. (Divarim 33:6) "May Reuven live...and may he be included in the count.")

Now for "the rest of the story."

Having successfully fled from Lavan and avoided military conflict with Eisav, Yakov finally returned to Canaan. Twenty-two long years of exile had passed not counting the 14 years he had studied in the Yeshiva of Shem and Ever. The external changes were profound. At 77 he had left as a single and penniless man and at 99 returned a wealthy man with four wives and twelve, soon to be thirteen, children. Life was not going to be simple for Yakov and his family. The incident with Dina and the turmoil of Yoseph being sold would dominate Yakov and the family's lives for the remainder of Yakov's life. However, as a family and as a nation they would do more than survive, they would flourish. Despite all the difficulties and tragedies all would in the end be for the best.

Their survival was not an accident of luck. Their survival was and is predicated on two basic elements that are really one and the same. First of all, belief in G-d as Master of All and the protector of the Jewish people; and secondly, trust in the transmission of truth from prophet to nation, parent to child. The first is the most fundamental element of our existence and the second is the basis for our active relationship with G-d. Obviously, without belief in G-d there would be no reason for having a relationship with Him; and equally obvious is that without belief in prophets and teachers we would not know what was true or false good or evil. We would not know how to relate to G-d and accomplish His reasons for our having been created.

In the period of the Avos (patriarchs) and Imahos (matriarchs) the prophets and the parents were one and the same. Avraham and Sarah, Yitzchak and Rivkah, Yakov, Rachel and Leah, were patriarchs, matriarchs, prophets and teachers all rolled into one. Each of the first three generations had their specific task. Avraham and Sarah imbued the body of Am Yisroel (nation of Israel) with the ability and desire to live and do for others. First we must live and do for ourselves and then we will be able to live and do for the rest of the world. Yitzchak and Rivkah strengthened the body of Am Yisroel with the unyielding courage and discipline to withstand the impurities of this world and live lives of absolute truth and goodness. They gave us the strength to do what has to be done in the face of any and all challenges. Yakov, Rachel and Leah taught Am Yisroel how to integrate the Chesed (kindness) of Avraham and Sarah with the Gevurah (strength and courage) of Yitzchak and Rivkah, and do more than survive our enemy's determination to change us or destroy us. In fact they gave us the ability to change our enemies or outlive them. They embodied Emes - truth that can never

falter and must outlast.

In order for Yakov and his wives to impart three extraordinary generations of qualities and abilities into the body of their children their lives had to be devoted to the two basic elements of Jewish survival. They had to have absolute trust in Hashem and complete devotion to the job of giving over the truth to their children. As such, their positions as parents, prophets, and teachers were of paramount importance. Any challenge to their authority had to be treated with the greatest concern, and if need be, severity. At the same time, like all good parents, Yakov and his wives had to empower their children to think for themselves, take their own chances, make their own mistakes, and still survive to correct their mistakes, birth a next generation, and bequeath their children the absolute truths of Jewish existence.

Unfortunately, early on in the job of raising their thirteen extraordinary children, Rachel passed away. All of 36 years old, amidst the bittersweet moment of birthing Binyamin, the main support of Yakov's home was no longer. Fortunately, in this week's Parsha we are shown that she left a worthy substitute, her "maidservant" Bilha.

Who were Bilha and Zilpah? What was their uniqueness that made them worthy of being Mothers in Israel? Why are they seemingly ignored by name in the Torah? How does the incident of Reuven switching Yakov's bed from Bilha's tent to Leah's tent answer these questions?

Bilha and Zilpah were the silent sisters of Rachel and Leah. Born to different mothers, Rachel and Leah were raised as primary daughters while Bilha and Zilpah were relegated to lesser positions. Their uniqueness was their acceptance of their destiny as reflections of their older sisters. Bilha molded herself after Rachel and Zilpah molded herself after Leah. What Sarah had hoped to happen when she introduced Hagar into her marriage with Avraham Rachel and Leah were able to accomplish. Hagar refused to subjugate herself to Sarah while Bilha and Zilpah willingly subjugated themselves to Rachel and Leah. It was their willful negation of self to the teachings and directions of Rachel and Leah that earned them their greatest accolade, "Maidservants to Rachel and Leah." Had they been asked what was their greatest honor in life they would have answered to be known as the mirror images of their older sisters and mentors. It would mean that they accomplished their purpose in being created.

Rachel and Leah knew that they were the chosen ones to give birth to Am Yisroel; however, it became clear that doing so would not be as direct as they had first thought. Rachel was initially barren and Leah stopped having children after her first four. Rachel introduced Bilha into the marriage knowing from the example set by Sarah that to be a mother could mean to raise a child as your own and imbue in that "adopted" child the necessary qualities and strengths to be an heir to Avraham's legacy. However, to do so the birth mother had to be both willing to step aside as well as supportive of the process. She must be willing to step aside and allow another to lead the way in raising and educating her child and be supportive of the relationship between her child and the

teacher-parent. Such a woman would have to be completely devoted to the two elements of Jewish survival. She would have to believe that her personal destiny was in the hands of Hashem and that the demands being asked of her and her child by the other parent were truly the wishes of G-d. Bilha and Zilpah were such women.

When Rachel died the Zohar writes, "While Leah and Rachel were alive the Shechina (Hashem's presence) rested upon them. After they died, the Shechina did not depart from the household of Yakov; instead, it rested within the home of Bilha."

So long as Rachel and Leah were alive, they were (along with Yakov) the primary prophet-teachers. As such, the children were trained to unquestioningly follow their instructions. When Rachel died, Bilha replaced Rachel as prophet-teacher in every which way. Just as Rachel was Yakov's primary wife during her lifetime so too Bilha became the primary wife after her death. Not because Yakov wanted to insult or hurt Leah! Just the opposite! In fact, Leah accepted the inevitability of Bilha's designation. It had to be that way. Rachel was the one who was originally designated to marry Yakov. The fact that Leah married Yakov was not because of Leah but because of Yakov and Eisav. Had Eisav been righteous rather than evil he would have married Leah. Because he chose to be evil Yakov was forced to purchase from him the birthright and in his stead marry Leah!

Unfortunately, Reuven was young and impetuous and decided to correct what he considered to be an insult to his mother. Rather than consult with his mother; rather than respectfully question his father; Reuven acted on his own well-intended conclusion. In doing so, Reuven revealed a fundamental flaw that was not unique to him. Reuven revealed the tendency of every human to follow the dictates of his own heart and mind. He ignored the imposed subjugation that a true seeker of truth must have to his or her teacher in lieu of impetuosity.

Yakov's first and most important blessing to his children at the time of his death was to emphasize the two elements of Jewish survival that are really one and the same. He turned to Reuven and said, "Your impetuosity in deciding on your own to move my bed from Bilha's tent to your mother's tent undermined the principle of absolute subjugation to the process of Mesora (transmission of truth from generation to generation). Rather than subject yourself to the absolutes of the prophet-teacher, in that instance myself, you did as you thought was correct rather than humble yourself and first ask your teachers. Without that total acceptance and subjugation to the prophet-teacher you, my beloved children and nation, will not survive. Without it you will never know if the lives you live and the values you pass on to your children are true or false. Had you only asked either myself or your mother why I had placed my bed in the tent of Bilha rather than the more obvious choice of Leah's tent, you would have understood that Bilha and Rachel were one and the same and in Rachel's absence the Shechina (G-d's presence) had chosen Bilha.

Underscoring the first and most fundamental blessing of Yakov's criticism was Moshe's parting blessing. "Reuven, your greatness lies in having embraced Yakov's "critical blessing" and accepting its

grave and irrevocable consequences. The blessing meant that you would never be king or priest. It meant that your descendants would never be kings or priests. Your acceptance of Yakov's blessing showed all of us that the essence of our survival is the absolute and total subjugation of our thoughts and emotions to the dictates of prophets and teachers. To have that quality is to be truly blessed. If that is the case let Reuven's descendants be the criteria that defines what it means to be counted among the many. Let Reuven define what it means too be a Jew.

Now you know the rest of the story.

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