

MAINTAINING STRONG FAMILY BONDS

by Rabbi Berel Wein

As the story of Yosef and his brothers unfolds and reaches its climactic end in this week's parsha, we are left with the bewildering sense that there is no absolute right or wrong in the unfolding tale. Yosef is judged wrong in his original behavior towards his brothers in bringing inaccurate tales regarding them to their father. The brothers are judged wrong in casting him in a pit and thereafter selling him into slavery.

All of the brothers including Yosef are judged to have caused their aged father pain and suffering in not revealing to him the story and Yosef himself is criticized for not revealing himself to Yaakov for the first nine years of his rise to power in Egypt. Yet in spite of all of the negativity and guilt involved, the Torah portrays the reunion of the family in happy and complimentary terms.

This is true even though all of them realize that the family will reside in Egypt for a long time and that the return to the Land of Israel is to be a long postponed dream yet to be realized. Families are not perfect and events within them do not always proceed smoothly. However the parsha emphasizes that the family unit must overcome all of the obstacles that lie in its way and must strive at all costs to preserve the sense of family amongst all of its members.

The story of Yaakov's family is the story of almost all later Jewish family life - of quarrels, misunderstandings, misjudgments, and yet somehow of goodness, kindness, tolerance and reconciliation. Jewish tradition teaches us that all later disputes within the Jewish world - and there have been many bitter ones over the millennia - are already foretold in the story of Yosef and his brothers. And yet in spite of it all, the Jewish people remain a family with shared ideals and an optimistic vision for its future.

The Torah records for us that Yosef's revelation of his identity to his brothers was a simple two word statement - ani Yosef - I am Yosef. Implicit in that statement is the demand of Yosef to be seen by the brothers as a unique individual and not as a carbon copy of his father or of any of his brothers. Yosef is the ultimate nonconformist in the family and the entire dispute arises due to his brothers' unwillingness to allow him that nonconformist role in the family.

Every family has nonconformists in its midst. How the family deals with this situation is truly the measure of its inherent unity and purpose. Many of the problematic issues that plague the Jewish world generally stem from the fraying of family bonds and the loss of an overriding sense of family under all circumstances. All human failings - greed, jealousy, mean-spirited behavior, spitefulness

and even violence - are evident in family situations. Recognizing the symptoms of such behavior before they develop - and become chronic - is one of the keys of maintaining the necessary sense of family bonds that alone can prove vital and successful under all circumstances.

Shabat shalom,

Rabbi Berel Wein

Rabbi Berel Wein- Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com