

PARSHAS VAYEISHEV - AN ALMOST PERFECT FAMILY

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

An Almost Perfect Family¹

How do we balance our understanding of the greatness of the Founding Family of our people with the reality that they showed deficiencies at times? The answer may be that even their deficiencies contributed to the development of the Torah nation.

The key may be an implied contrast in the pasuk that introduces us to the young Yosef. It would be a mistake to see the word "batzon" as the object of phrase "he was a shepherd." This erroneous translation would then mean only that Yosef was a shepherd of flocks of sheep. Rather, batzon indicates the context of the preceding phrase. The Torah tells us that he shepherded with his "brothers," meaning the sons of Leah. But it informs us that the time he spend with those brothers was only batzon - only during working hours. It means to underscore that Yosef's life was artificially and unsatisfactorily split between his vocation and the rest of his day. He spent the work part of the day with some of his brothers; by contrast, he spent the na'ar part - the part in which he lived out the development of his youth - with the sons of the Bilhah and Zilpah.

What could this mean? It points to the unfortunate dilemma of Yosef's early years. The rest of his brothers had the advantage of both a nurturing mother, and the companionship of brothers with whom each was particularly close. Yosef had neither. He lost his mother while very young, and he never quite found unambiguous brotherhood. Binyamin was the brother for whom he could have had the greatest affinity. Because he was younger, though, Binyamin did not offer Yosef the close companionship he needed. With the sons of Leah - who like Rachel was a full wife, in contradistinction to the maidservants - the relationship remained somehow a professional one. When work was over, he gravitated to a different group, the sons of the maidservants.

It might very well have been some youthful vanity that took him there. In the last parshah, we saw that while Yaakov may have treated all four of his wives equally, the distinction between them was never fully erased. It is likely that some of the hierarchy of the way the women viewed themselves continued on in their children, with the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah feeling themselves not quite on an equal footing with the sons of Leah. Yosef, the one destined to rule, may have been drawn to those who would more easily stroke his ego.

Should such subtle differences in status exist in Yaakov's household? Shouldn't all the brothers have lived in harmony and complete equality, united in their understanding of their great Divinely-

ordained mission? Our first reaction is to be confounded by the lack of absolute unity among them. This, however, would be naïve and unperceptive.

The ideal Jewish household does not grow out of ideals that are grasped and shared by a group of human beings, no matter how lofty. The Jewish household is a product of our G-d given Torah, and of the destiny to which we have committed ourselves.

We require certain personality tools to nationally achieve what Hashem has in store for us. Chazal call us the strongest and fiercest of the nations. Utilized properly, this capacity for might, this tenacity in the face of adversity would allow us to survive the challenges of our history. It might also, at an early stage of our development, predispose us to some unpleasant capacities, such as revenge. Indeed, we even detect some jealousy and hatred in the actions of the shevatim, likely stemming from the same source.

If we had to extrapolate forward, what would we predict from the nation that would grow from such a clan? We would certainly expect to see this fierceness express itself at times in terrible crimes of murder and immorality. Instead, the heirs of this family became a people known for its humaneness, for its compassion and kindness to each other. History would subject them to conditions that, among other people, would pit father against son, and siblings against each other. We would have expected that the seeds of discord planted at the infancy of our people would sprout bumper crops of intra-familial ugliness and communal discord.

That is not what happened. The might and fierceness in the Jewish psyche served our people well, rather than turn into a festering sore. We can find only one explanation for this. Torah did its job. The element that turned a potential problem into a national asset was Hashem's Law that shaped and guided us. Our success did not come from ourselves, but was given to us. The first manifest victory of Divine law was that it conquered us! It tamed and reshaped our nature, and steeled us for survival in the most difficult of circumstances.

The small faults and imperfections that we find, then, should not disturb us. To the contrary, they show the greatness of Torah in two ways. They make it apparent that Hashem's Torah is an effective agent of character change and development. Furthermore, they are the raw stuff out of which the Torah's master craftsmanship molds sublime beauty and utility.

Dreams, Symbols, and Derashos³

Each one according to the interpretation of his dream

The word פתרון is related to פטר, as in פטר רחם, the opening of the womb. Other Hebrew words convey the idea of opening, but פטר implies one that is organic, from the inside, rather than forced from the outside. We could not ask for a better word to describe the unlocking of the hidden content of a dream.

Interpretation is a risky business. It is all too easy to approach the subject with violence - to force any one of many possible interpretations coming from the outside, satisfying some need of the interpreter. What is needed, however, is an interpretation that successfully reveals meaning from the inside. (The explanation of the dreams of Yosef's cellmates was close but elusive. The similarity between them led both to believe that the dreams contained a significant prediction. Had the dream contained a reference to three days rather than three vines, the wine butler would have understood in an instant. His dream needed one small element properly explained from within the dream itself.)

Interpretation is analogous to the development of a flower from a closed bud. From this one, closed form, all that is contained therein naturally ensues. This is true not only in regard to dreams, but in interpreting every symbol, and in understanding the inner meaning of any pasuk in the Torah. Through the hermeneutical principles suitably called derashos - from the word meaning "inquiring within" - we arrive at a פתרון in which the inner sense of the verse stands apparent and revealed. In all these areas the key is to be able to read from within, rather than suggest meanings from without.

[1] Based on the Hirsch Chumash, Bereishis 37:2

[2] See his comments above 33:6-7, where the difference in background of the women displayed itself in a different capacity to humbly bow to Esav.

[3] Based on the Hirsch Chumash, Bereishis 40:5
