

PARSHAS VAYISHLACH - NO MILQUETOASTS, THESE

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

No Milquetoasts, These¹

Now it is Yaakov's turn to reciprocate Esav's unexpected behavior. In the narrative preceding this one, Esav had given voice for a fleeting moment to the kol Yaakov of his brother. He came upon Yaakov accompanied by a small army, ready to give Yaakov his comeuppance for several grievances against him that had wounded him grievously. Yet, at the moment of their reunion, decades of planned revenge amounted to nothing. Esav was moved by a spirit of humaneness ordinarily associated with his younger sibling. That spirit would, in the course of centuries, ultimately grow and flourish into something great, and Esav would finally achieve his promise and his destiny.

In the reprisal raid against the city of Shechem, Yaakov's children also engage in role reversal. They give up the kol Yaakov and take up the sword of Esav. This is not a bad thing. There are situations where nothing else will work, and they can call for employing Esav's tactics.

The kol Yaakov could not have wrested Dina from the clutches of Shechem. Few would gainsay the right of Dina's brothers to use lethal force against Chamor and his son in order to rescue her. Shimon and Levi, however, exceeded the minimum force necessary to secure her return. They killed unarmed men who were at their mercy, and even plundered their possessions.

Yaakov reproved them for this, seeing it as dishonoring the honor and the message of his life's work and message.

Ironically, the last word in the text seems to belong to his sons. They respond to his rebuke, and pithily explain their behavior. "Should he treat our sister like a harlot?"[2] They reason with their father. Don't think we acted irresponsibly, without thinking of the consequences of our actions. Do you believe that Shechem would have acted the same way towards a woman better connected, and from a family perceived as less foreign? Wasn't Dina targeted because she was seen as foreign and friendless - and therefore vulnerable? How many more Dinas will be similarly outraged unless we hold the line against them? We were not interested in acting conservatively and prudently. Life can present unattractive choices at times. We needed a strong show of force to create a deterrent in the future. Had we acted in any other way, we would have been derelict in our responsibility to uphold the purity and honor of the women who rely upon us.

And yet their's is not really the last word. Yaakov does not respond here, but he does not accept their explanation, even if their argument has strong practical appeal. Jews cannot sacrifice principle

for practicality. Innocent men did not deserve to die for the misdeeds of their chieftain. On his deathbed, Yaakov still feels compelled to bring up this incident as a failing on the part of two of his sons [3].

Despite the impropriety, the episode is valuable to us. First of all, it demonstrates that the mild-mannered and gentle spirit of so many Jews does not come from a place of weakness. There are no genes for spinelessness on the Jewish chromosome; weak knees do not come with our inherited national posture. When we need to be strong and brave, we find those qualities within our people in abundant quantity. The Romans learned this the hard way during the closing chapters of the Jewish Revolt.

Secondly, from this episode we understand that our usual pacific tendencies are not linked to some essential Jewish core either. We have the ability to be bloody warriors. The fact that we are not owes to Torah's teachings that have penetrated us, have taken root within us, and have grown and flourished there.

Thirdly, we catch a glimpse of hidden potential of the Jewish people. While Yaakov chides Shimon and Levi for acting precipitously, he does not ask them to rid themselves of their strength. He asks instead for it to be held in check, and made available when needed. He wishes to see them spread out through the land. Should they live together, political and military decisions might fall into their hands, with disastrous results. Instead, they are dispersed, their strong spirit allowed to touch everyone else in the nation. There would be times when their strength would be needed, as in the aftermath of the Golden Calf [4], when Levi had execute their own guilty brethren in great number.

Finally, we can more readily understand the need for Yaakov's descendants to undergo transformation in the iron furnace of Egyptian exile. To turn this tribe into a people ready to receive Hashem's Torah, to be won over to His Word, we needed to be purified by adversity. We are a stubborn people, and parts of that stubbornness needed to be tamed. That strength and stubbornness on the whole is a good thing, however. Chazal call us the most obstinate of people. We are not a nation of pliant milquetoasts. Our obstinacy, once dedicated to His mission, would be valuable in making His goals a reality. And when we act so differently from the coarser ways that we are capable of, we testify to the success of Torah in refining mankind.

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1. Based on the Hirsch Chumash, Bereishis 34:25
 2. Bereishis 34:31
 3. Bereishis 49:5-6
 4. And in the struggle of the Maccabees against the Syrian-Greeks
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