

OHRNET

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PARSHA INSIGHTS

CONSPICUOUS CONSUMPTION

“Thus says your servant Yaakov” (32:5)

The Jewish People has never found itself in a predicament as complex and disturbing as the one that faces it in our day. On the one hand, we have never enjoyed such material comfort and security. Not even during the “Golden Age” in Spain were Jews so accepted into the life of the non-Jewish world. Who would ever have thought that a Jew, and a religious one at that, could be seriously considered for Vice-President of the United States, let alone its President?

Jews are more comfortable, respected, and have a larger slice of the national “apple pie” than ever before.

And yet, on the other hand, the Jewish People are threatened by a new anti-Semitism, on the campus and off, whose depth and virulence can only be conjectured.

There is no doubt that this stems, at least in part, from living the American Dream at not-quite-first remove.

The American Dream is not our dream. It is the dream of our brother Esav. Esav sees the world as a series of spreadsheets and bottom lines, skyscrapers and condos. He sees roast beef on every table.

We see a prayer book on every table.

The hands are the hands of Esav. And nothing incites Esav more than when he sees us usurping his position. Esav knows who we are. He understands, subconsciously, that Yaakov is the voice; the world of the spirit, of Torah and prayer. When Yaakov strays into Esav’s territory and lords it up to boot, Esav reacts with implacable ferocity.

Which is not to say that we have to live in abject poverty, just we don’t have to knock out our neighbors’ eyes with our conspicuous consumption, living the lifestyles of the rich and famous.

We learn this from this week’s Torah portion:

“Thus says your servant Yaakov”

The Midrash tells that Rebbe (Yehuda HaNasi) would sign letters to his friend the Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius

Antoninus with the words “your servant”. Rebbe said, “Am I better than Yaakov our Patriarch who referred to himself as Esav’s servant?”

The Midrash criticizes Rebbe for following Yaakov’s example, since it itself opposed Yaakov’s conduct in this regard. Nevertheless, Yaakov calling himself Esav’s servant created a relationship with Esav and his offspring that binds us to this day. This spiritual land-mapping is called “the actions of the fathers are a sign to the children.”

Jewish identification in America and Europe is at an all-time low, and going down. Support for Israel has evaporated in direct proportion to Jewish cultural identification. And intermarriage, largely unheard of a hundred years ago, has galloped past the fifty percent mark, which means that more Jews now choose non-Jewish partners over Jewish.

If there’s one glimmer of light, it seems to be the religious community. The religious community is burgeoning both in Israel and in the Diaspora. Its birthrate, together with rampant assimilation in the non-religious sector, has brought the religious community to the forefront of Jewish social life both numerically and intellectually.

However, the religious community isn’t perfect. (Is any community?) Divorce, while scarce compared to the secular community, is growing steadily. The phenomenon of “children at risk,” children who leave observant homes and frequently end up on drugs and alcohol, is now a fact of the landscape.

But, maybe most of all, we should be very careful not to show off our newfound prosperity by making extravagant weddings and Bar Mitzvahs, building huge mansions, and spending fortunes on glatt-kosher dream cruises.

Are we better than our Patriarch Yaakov?

Sources:

• Based on the Avnei Ezel

PARSHA OVERVIEW

Returning home, Yaakov sends angelic messengers to appease his brother Eisav. The messengers return, telling Yaakov that Eisav is approaching with an army of 400. Yaakov takes the strategic precautions of dividing the camps, praying for assistance, and sending tribute to mollify Eisav. That night Yaakov is left alone and wrestles with the Angel of Eisav. Yaakov emerges victorious but is left with an injured sinew in his thigh (which is the reason why it is forbidden to eat the sciatic nerve of a kosher animal). The angel tells him that his name in the future will be Yisrael, signifying that he has prevailed against man (Lavan) and the supernatural (the angel). Yaakov and Eisav meet and are reconciled, but Yaakov, still fearful of his brother, rejects Eisav's offer that they should dwell together. Shechem, a Caananite prince, abducts and violates Dina, Yaakov's daughter. In return for Dina's hand in marriage, the prince and his father suggest that Yaakov and his fami-

ly intermarry and enjoy the fruits of Caananite prosperity. Yaakov's sons trick Shechem and his father by feigning agreement. However, they stipulate that all the males of the city must undergo *brit mila*. Shimon and Levi, two of Dina's brothers, enter the town and execute all the males who were weakened by the circumcision. This action is justified by the city's tacit complicity in the abduction of their sister. G-d commands Yaakov to go to Beit-El and build an altar. His mother Rivka's nurse, Devorah, dies and is buried below Beit-El. G-d appears again to Yaakov, blesses him and changes his name to Yisrael. While traveling, Rachel goes into labor and gives birth to Binyamin, the twelfth of the tribes of Israel. She dies in childbirth and is buried on the Beit Lechem road. Yaakov builds a monument to her. Yitzchak passes away at the age of 180 and is buried by his sons. The Parsha concludes by listing Eisav's descendants.

ISRAEL Forever

WHEN BELTS ARE TIGHTENED

In a world desperately trying to come to terms with the collapse of most of its financial structure, a single word can make the difference in how people succeed in adjusting to the lower standard of living forced upon them.

"I have plenty," is what Esav said in this week's Torah portion in politely turning down the lavish gift from his brother, the Patriarch Yaakov.

"I have everything," is what Yaakov declares when he begs him to accept this gift.

When one is content with what he has, he has no need for

more, and is indeed what the Sages in *Pirkei Avot* describe the wealthy man as "one who rejoices in what he has".

But if one is so enticed by materialism like Esav, he is never content with what he has, and strives for more and more so that he can boast that he has plenty.

As Israelis tighten their belts along with the rest of the world they can take comfort in the knowledge that they are the descendants of the *tzaddik* who said, "I have everything" — and thus persevere in Israel forever.

LOVE OF THE LAND

Selections from classical Torah sources which express the special relationship between the People of Israel and Eretz Yisrael

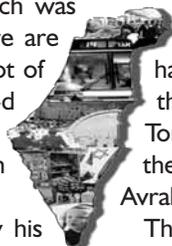
THE NEED FOR PATIENCE

Love of the Land can sometimes be so intoxicating that patience gives way to intemperate action. Such was not the case of the Patriarch Yaakov, who, we are taught in this week's Torah portion, purchased a plot of land in the city of Shechem. Despite the fact that G-d has promised him the entire land, Yaakov realized that the time had not yet arrived for making his claim and therefore settled for buying some land.

This sort of patience was also demonstrated by his grandfather Avraham who ordered his shepherds to muzzle their animals to prevent them from grazing in the fields

of others. In sharp contrast, the shepherds of his nephew Lot did allow grazing in the fields. Their argument was that the land was promised to Avraham, and since he had no children at that time Lot would inherit him and they could already graze wherever they wished. But the Torah stresses (*Bereishet* 13:7) that, "the Canaanites and the Perizzites were then dwelling in the land" and that Avraham's claim could not yet be actualized.

These lessons from history should guide both government and citizens in exercising patience in settling land claims and disputes.



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PARSHA Q&A ?

1. What sort of messengers did Yaakov send to Eisav?
2. Why was Yaakov both “afraid” and “distressed?”
3. In what three ways did Yaakov prepare for his encounter with Eisav?
4. Where did Dina hide and why?
5. After helping his family across the river, Yaakov remained alone on the other side. Why?
6. What was the angel forced to do before Yaakov agreed to release him?
7. What was it that healed Yaakov’s leg?
8. Why did Eisav embrace Yaakov?
9. Why did Yosef stand between Eisav and Rachel?
10. Give an exact translation of the word *nisa* in verse 33:12.
11. What happened to the 400 men who accompanied Eisav?
12. Why does the Torah refer to Dina as the daughter of Leah and not as the daughter of Yaakov?
13. Whom should Shimon and Levi have consulted concerning their plan to kill the people of Shechem?
14. Who was born along with Binyamin?
15. What does the name Binyamin mean? Why did Yaakov call him that?
16. The Torah states, “The sons of Yaakov were twelve.” Why?
17. How old was Yaakov when Yosef was sold?
18. Eisav changed his wife’s name to Yehudit. Why?
19. Which three categories of people have their sins pardoned?
20. What is the connection between the Egyptian oppression of the Jewish people and Eisav’s decision to leave the land of Canaan?

PARSHA Q&A!

Answers to this week’s Questions!

All references are to the verses and Rashi’s commentary unless otherwise stated.

1. 32:4 - Angels.
2. 32:8 - He was afraid he would be killed. He was distressed that he would have to kill.
3. 32:9 - He sent gifts, he prayed, and he prepared for war.
4. 32:23 - Yaakov hid her in a chest so that Eisav wouldn’t see her and want to marry her.
5. 32:25 - He went back to get some small containers he had forgotten.
6. 32:27 - Admit that the blessings given by Yitzchak rightfully belong to Yaakov.
7. 32:32 - The shining of the sun.
8. 33:4 - His pity was aroused when he saw Yaakov bowing to him so many times.
9. 33:7 - To stop Eisav from gazing at her.
10. 33:12 - It means “travel”. It does not mean “we will travel.” This is because the letter *nun* is part of the word and does not mean “we” as it sometimes does.
11. 33:16 - They slipped away one by one.
12. 34:1 - Because she was outgoing like her mother, Leah.
13. 34:25 - Their father, Yaakov.
14. 35:17 - His two twin sisters.
15. 35:18 - *Ben-Yemin* means “Son of the South.” He was the only son born in the Land of Israel, which is south of Aram Naharaim.
16. 35:22 - To stress that all of them, including Reuven, were righteous.
17. 35:29 - One hundred and eight.
18. 36:2 - To fool Yitzchak into thinking that she had abandoned idolatry.
19. 36:3 - One who converts to Judaism, one who is elevated to a position of leadership, and one who marries.
20. 36:6 - Eisav knew that the privilege of living in the Land of Israel was accompanied by the prophecy that the Jews would be “foreigners in a land not their own.” Therefore Eisav said, “I’m leaving — I don’t want the Land if it means I have to ‘pay the bill’ of subjugation in Egypt.”

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- How to check on a kosher mate
- The boundaries of Babylon
- The leaders and their successors
- Which Jews may not intermarry
- Determining status of an abandoned child
- Credibility of a single person in certain situations
- Status of child whose father is not known
- The status of the Kutim

THE THUMBLESS LEVITES

The return to Eretz Yisrael from Babylonian exile led by Ezra is a major topic of the final *perek* of our *mesechta*. The *mishna* mentions that Levites were among the Jews who made this journey. But in his record Ezra declares that he inspected the people at one point “but found none of the sons of Levi” (*Ezra* 8:15).

The solution to this mystery, explains Rashi, is based on some passages in *Tehillim* (137:1-4), which describe a touching scene of Jewish exiles weeping by the rivers of Babylon, where they hung their lyres upon the willows. The Babylonian King Nebuchadentzar had demanded of the Levites gathered there to play for him a song of Zion. “How

can we sing a song of G-d in a foreign land?” was their reply. They did not say that they do not wish to play for the king, but rather that they were physically unable to do so. In order to make themselves incapable of playing their lyres they had bitten off their thumbs.

It was these Levites, now ineligible to perform the musical service in the *Beit Hamikdash*, which would soon be built, who had accompanied Ezra, while those who were eligible decided to remain in Babylon where they were more comfortable and secure. Ezra was referring to Levites eligible for Temple service, while the *mishna* refers to the thumbless ones.

• *Kiddushin* 69b

What the SAGES Say

“One who marries for money a woman who is not kosher for him will have improper children.”

• *The Sage Rav - Kiddushin* 70a

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SHAKEN BY A HANDSHAKE

From: Caroline in NC

Dear Rabbi,

I was recently at a Jewish community event attended by members of the local community of all ages, gender and denomination. I saw there an Orthodox couple that seemed friendly and nice so I went over and introduced myself. To my utter surprise, when I extended my hand to meet the couple, the woman shook my hand but the man declined saying something like "touching is reserved for couples". I must say I was really offended by what seemed to be a very lame excuse for orthodoxy's negative attitude toward women in general or towards me as an "outsider" in particular. As a Jew myself, I don't want to harbor bad feelings against other Jews, but because of what happened I didn't enjoy my conversation with them at all and I ended it as soon as I could. Would you please help me make sense of this?

Dear Caroline,

I'd be happy to lend you a helping hand, figuratively speaking that is.

You see, Orthodoxy restricts physical contact between the genders except between close family relatives and spouses.

The reason for this is that physical touch is viewed as a potentially powerful and sensitive venue of interaction between people in general, and attraction between genders in particular. Even something as innocent and innocuous as a social handshake still involves touch, the underlying message of which is a mutual consent to connect. It is not coincidental, then, that in many cultures a verbal agreement becomes binding with a handshake. The hand-to-hand physical contact establishes a bond that binds people to one another. When this bond occurs between people of the same gender it is merely one of friendship; when between opposite genders it may extend, even if only subconsciously, further than that.

Admittedly, this might seem extreme and out of hand, but that may be because we've become desensitized to the power of touch. The general culture at large is so based on the physical and sensual, a person being bombarded constantly with implicit and explicit messages in all spheres of life, that we have lost the intrinsic sensitivity to intimacy and contact. The couple you met, in the spirit of Orthodox Judaism, is trying to main-

tain and preserve the purity and sensitivity of the power of touch in order to be able to share it entirely and exclusively with each other.

It has nothing to do with Judaism having a negative attitude toward women. While this is not the time to go into detail since we have addressed this issue in the past (in my article called **One-Upwomanship**), I assure you that Judaism has the utmost respect for women, and your issue is a case in point where women are not to be viewed as objects of physical contact but rather individuals with which interaction is encouraged on a higher plane. Also, according to the explanation above, the woman of the couple you met would have refrained from coming into contact with another man. So you see, it's nothing against women but rather about preserving the power of touch for the proper context.

It also has nothing to do with Orthodoxy being standoffish or unfriendly to "outsiders". Here too, the Torah is replete with commands and teachings regarding accepting, being friendly to, and caring for the needs of the "stranger" in our midst. This applies to all people, and certainly to other Jews. And again, your question is a case in point. You saw that the couple was friendly and nice, and since it was a mixed communal event, you probably saw them interacting with others like yourself and were thereby encouraged to introduce yourself. Unfortunately, for no fault of your own, a lack of familiarity with their religious sensitivities resulted in an uncomfortable situation for all. Since you were understandably flustered, you didn't have an opportunity to have your favorable impression of the couple confirmed.

As far as their handling of the situation is concerned, it's hard to say what else they could have said or done. I suppose the husband's brief response was intended to explain/apologize for any awkward feelings without making too much of an issue over it. Perhaps the wife should have looked for you afterward to explain in more detail – and who knows, maybe she did.

After all is said and done, this was a learning experience where you have become more familiar with another point of view. You should use it as an exercise in patience and tolerance and thereby as an opportunity for growth. I would encourage you to try to contact the couple (but this time shake only her hand) or a local outreach organization in order to give Orthodoxy another chance. I'm sure that once you get past the initial introductions you'll see that they are just as friendly and nice as anyone else.

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DOMESTIC PEACE

Question: A couple that lives near me are constantly quarreling. Some neighbors have tried to make peace between them but have been told not to mix in. Is there any point in persisting in our efforts despite their refusal to cooperate? What is the right thing to do?

Answer: In his commentary on the *mishna* that lists the *mitzvot* which bring a person reward in this world and the next, the *Teferet Yisrael* calls attention to an apparent redundancy. *Gemilat chassadim* — acts of kindness — is near the top of the list, and near the end is bringing peace between

man and wife. It would seem that achieving such peace is an act of kindness and has already been included in *gemilat chassadim*.

His resolution is that *gemilat chassadim* applies to a situation in which the receiver is happy to receive the kindness. Bringing peace, however, is something that must be done even if both of the quarrelling parties refuse to accept your efforts. He adds that for this reason the phrasing is “bringing peace” and not “making peace” — to indicate that one must go to all lengths to bring peace between man and wife.

THE HUMAN SIDE OF THE STORY _____

REWARD FOR FAIRNESS

The Torah scholar from Bnei Brak had rented a vacation facility in a moshav near the northern border. Then came the Second Lebanese War, which made it unfeasible to go to a place so near the Hizballah guns.

Even before he consulted an authority on the halachic aspects of asking that the money he had paid in advance — a sum of \$600 — be refunded, he decided to call the observant Jew from whom he had rented the place. That fellow immediately responded to his “Hello” that he is aware of why he is calling and that he need not worry about the money. A couple of days later the entire sum arrived in Bnei

Brak, but did not entirely ease the conscience of the renter. He called to offer him a part of the money he had returned and was surprised to hear the reaction.

“Do you think I lost out?” said the fellow in the moshav. “I succeeded in renting out that facility for double the amount of money we had agreed upon!”

“But who would agree to pay such a sum in such troubled times?” he was asked.

The answer was that reporters covering the war found this facility ideally located.

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