

# Toras Aish

## Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

**RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS**

### Covenant & Conversation

This is a true story that took place in the 1970s. Rabbi Dr Nahum Rabinovitch, then Principal of Jews College, the rabbinic training seminary in London where I was a student and teacher, was approached by an organisation that had been given an unusual opportunity to engage in interfaith dialogue. A group of African bishops wanted to understand more about Judaism. Would the Principal be willing to send his senior students to engage in such a dialogue, in a chateau in Switzerland?

To my surprise, he agreed. He told me that he was sceptical about Jewish-Christian dialogue in general because he believed that over the centuries the Church had been infected by an antisemitism that was very difficult to overcome. At that time, though, he felt that African Christians were different. They loved Tanakh and its stories. They were at least in principle open to understanding Judaism on its own terms. He did not add, though I knew it was in his mind since he was one of the world's greatest experts on Maimonides, that the great twelfth century sage held an unusual attitude to dialogue.

Maimonides believed that Islam was a genuinely monotheistic faith while Christianity in those days was not. Nonetheless, he held it was permitted to study Tanakh with Christians but not Muslims, since Christians believed that Tanakh (what they called the Old Testament), was the word of G-d while Muslims believed that Jews had falsified the text. (Maimonides, Responsa, ed. Blau, no. 149)

So we went. It was an unusual group: the semikhah class of Jews College, together with the top class of the yeshiva in Montreux where the late Rabbi Yechiel Weinberg, author of Seridei Esh and one of the world's foremost halakhists, had taught. For three days the Jewish group davened and bentsched with special intensity. We learned Gemarra each day. For the rest of the time we had an unusual, even transformative, encounter with the African bishops, ending with a Hassidic-style tisch during which we shared with the Africans our songs and stories and they taught us theirs. At three in the morning we finished by dancing together. We knew we were different, we knew that there were deep divides between our respective faiths, but we had become friends. Perhaps that is all we

should seek. Friends don't have to agree in order to stay friends. And friendships can sometimes help heal the world.

On the morning after our arrival, however, an event occurred that left a deep impression on me. The sponsoring body, a global Jewish organisation, was a secular one, and to keep within their frame of reference the group had to include at least one non-orthodox Jew, a woman studying for the rabbinat. We, the semikhah and yeshiva students, were davening the morning service in one of the lounges in the chateau when the Reform woman entered, wearing tallit and tefillin, and sat herself down in the middle of the group.

This is something the students had not encountered before. What were they to do? There was no mechitzah. There was no way of separating themselves. How should they react to a woman wearing tallit and tefillin and praying in the midst of a group of men? They ran up to the Rav in a state of great agitation and asked what they should do. Without a moment's hesitation he quoted to them the saying of the sages: A person should be willing to throw himself into a furnace of fire rather than shame another person in public. (Berakhot 43b, Ketubot 67b) With that he ordered them back to their seats, and the prayers continued.

The moral of that moment never left me. The Rav, for the past 32 years head of the yeshiva in Maaleh Adumim, was and is one of the great halakhists of our time. He knew immediately how serious were the issues at stake: men and women praying together without a mechitzah between them, and the complex question about whether women may or may not wear a tallit and tefillin. The issue was anything but simple.

But he knew also that halakhah is a systematic way of turning the great ethical and spiritual truths into a tapestry of deeds, and that one must never lose the larger vision in an exclusive focus on the details. Had the students insisted that the woman pray elsewhere they would have put her to shame, the way Eli did when he saw Hannah praying and thought she was drunk. (1 Samuel 1:13-17) Never, ever shame someone in public. That was the transcending imperative of the hour. That is the mark of a great-souled man. To have been his student for more than a decade I count as one of the great privileges of my life.

The reason I tell this story here is that it is one of the powerful and unexpected lessons of our parsha.

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Judah, the brother who proposed selling Joseph into slavery (Gen. 37:26), had "gone down" to Canaan where he married a local Canaanite woman. The phrase "gone down" was rightly taken by the sages as full of meaning. (Gen. 38:1) Just as Joseph had been brought down to Egypt (Gen. 39:1) so Judah had been morally and spiritually brought down. Here was one of Jacob's sons, doing what the patriarchs insisted on not doing: marrying into the local population. It is a tale of sad decline. (According to midrashic tradition [Midrash Aggadah, Pe sikta Zutreta, Sechel Tov et al.], Judah was "sent down" or excommunicated by his brothers for advising them to sell Joseph, after the grief they saw their father suffer. See also Rashi ad loc.)

He marries his firstborn son, Er, to a local woman, Tamar. (Targum Yonatan identifies her as the daughter of Noah's son Shem. Others identify her as a daughter of Abraham's contemporary Malkizedek. The truth is, though, that she appears in the narrative without lineage, a device often used by the Torah to emphasize that moral greatness can often be found among ordinary people. It has nothing to do with ancestry. See Alshikh ad loc.)

An obscure verse tells us that he sinned, and died. Judah then married his second son, Onan, to her, under a pre-Mosaic form of levirate marriage whereby a brother is bound to marry his sister-in-law if she has been widowed without children. Onan, reluctant to father a child that would be regarded as not his but his deceased brother's, practised a form of coitus interruptus that to this day carries his name. For this, he too died. Having lost two of his sons Judah was reluctant to give his third, Shelah, to Tamar in marriage. The result was that she was left as a "living widow," bound to marry her brother-in-law whom Judah was withholding, but unable to marry anyone else.

After many years, seeing that her father-in-law (by this time a widower himself) was reluctant to marry her to Shelah, she decided on an audacious course of action. She removed her widow's clothes, covered herself with a veil, and positioned herself at a point where Judah was likely to see her on his way to the sheep-shearing. Judah saw her, took her to be a prostitute, and engaged her services. As surety for the payment he had promised her, she insisted that he leave his seal,

cord and staff. Judah duly returned the next day with the payment, but the woman was nowhere to be seen. He asked the locals the whereabouts of the temple prostitute (the text at this point uses the word kedeshah, "cult prostitute," rather than zonah, thus deepening Judah's offence), but no one had seen such a person in the locality. Puzzled, Judah returned home.

Three months later he heard that Tamar was pregnant. He leapt to the only conclusion he could draw, namely that she had had a physical relationship with another man while bound in law to his son Shelah. She had committed adultery, for which the punishment was death. Tamar was brought out to face her sentence. She came, holding the staff and seal that Judah instantly recognised as his own. She said, "I am pregnant by the person to whom these objects belong." Judah realised what had happened and said, "She is more righteous than I" (Gen. 38:26).

This moment is a turning-point in history. Judah is the first person in the Torah explicitly to admit he was wrong. (The text here is full of verbal allusions. Judah has "gone down" just as Joseph has been "brought down." Joseph is about to rise to political greatness. Judah will eventually rise to moral greatness. Tamar's deception of Judah is similar to Judah's deception of Jacob. Both involve clothes: Joseph's blood-stained coat, Tamar's veil. Both reach their climax with the words Haker na, "Please examine." Judah forces Jacob to believe a lie. Tamar forces Judah to recognise the truth.)

We do not realise it yet, but this seems to be the moment at which he acquired the depth of character necessary for him to become the first real baal teshuvah. We see this years later, when he -- the man who proposed selling Joseph as a slave -- becomes the man who is willing to spend the rest of his life in slavery so that his brother Benjamin can go free (Gen. 44:33). I have argued elsewhere that it is from here that we learn the principle that a penitent stands higher than even a perfectly righteous individual. (Berakhot 34b. Jonathan Sacks, Covenant and Conversation Genesis: The Book of Beginnings, 303-314) Judah the penitent becomes the ancestor of Israel's kings while Joseph, the righteous, is only a viceroy, mishneh le-melekh, second to the king.

Thus far Judah. But the real hero of the story was Tamar. She had taken an immense risk by becoming pregnant. Indeed she was almost killed for it. She had done so for a noble reason: to ensure that the name of her late husband was perpetuated. But she took no less care to avoid Judah being put to shame. Only he and she knew what had happened. Judah could acknowledge his error without loss of face. It was from this episode that the sages derived the rule articulated by Rabbi Rabinovitch that morning in Switzerland: Rather risk being thrown into a fiery furnace than shame someone else in public.

It is thus no coincidence that Tamar, a heroic non-Jewish woman, became the ancestor of David, Israel's greatest king. There are striking similarities between Tamar and the other heroic woman in David's ancestry, the Moabite woman we know as Ruth.

There is an ancient Jewish custom on Shabbat and festivals to cover the challot or matzah while holding the glass of wine over which Kiddush is being made. The reason is so as not to put the challah to shame while it is being, as it were, passed over in favour of the wine. There are some very religious Jews, sadly, who will go to great lengths to avoid shaming an inanimate loaf of bread but have no compunction in putting their fellow Jews to shame if they regard them as less religious than they are. That is what happens when we remember the halakhah but forget the underlying moral principle behind it.

Never put anyone to shame. That is what Tamar taught Judah and what a great rabbi of our time taught those who were privileged to be his students.  
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#### **RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN**

## **Shabbat Shalom**

"**A**nd Pharaoh's cup was in my hand, and I took the grapes, pressed them into Pharaoh's cup and I placed the cup in Pharaoh's hand." (Gen. 40:11) The Bible believes in the significance of dreams; so did the Sages of the Talmud (B.T. Berakhot, chapter 9), so did William Shakespeare and so did Sigmund Freud. Shakespeare declared that "We are such stuff as dreams are made on" (The Tempest 4:1) – that the thoughts and emotions of the human being provide the raw material for the dreams he experiences in his sleep at night. Conversely, Freud taught that the best code to unlocking the mystery of an individual's personality is by studying the symbolism of his dreams.

Hence when Joseph heard that the imprisoned cup-bearer is dreaming of serving wine to Pharaoh once again, he understood that this man did not have a guilty conscience and in all likelihood, Pharaoh's investigation would find him innocent; the cup-bearer would be freed and re-instated. The baker, on the other hand, dreamt that birds were eating Pharaoh's baked goods from a basket he was carrying on his head. One who paranoically believes that others are robbing him of the food he has prepared for Pharaoh obviously feels that he was derelict in his duties and worthy of being punished. Joseph knew that the baker would be found guilty...

Interestingly, the Sages of the Talmud utilize this dream of the cup-bearer as the source for one of the primary activities of our Passover Seder, and, in so doing, reveal a great truth about the personality of Joseph as well as about the political significance of our exodus from Egypt. In chapter ten of tractate Pesachim

in the Jerusalem Talmud, Rabbi Yohanan suggests that the four cups of wine which punctuate the Seder and enhance our Festival of Freedom hark back to the four references to "cups" of wine in the cup-bearer's dream – rather than to the four expressions of redemption in Exodus (6:6-8) as brought down in the version of that same tractate in the Babylonian Talmud. (Those who are familiar with my Commentary on the Haggadah will note that there is a fifth time when "cup" is mentioned in Genesis paralleling the fifth expression of redemption in Exodus.)

What would cause the Jerusalem Talmud to prefer a source from the period of Joseph over a seminal Divine prophecy which foretold the exodus?!

Firstly, the cup-bearer's dream relates specifically to goblets of wine, the precise objects with which we are dealing in the Seder. Halakhically speaking, Rav Haim Brisker maintains that the cup, or goblet, is very significant; one must not only drink the majority of a revi'it of wine (3.3.ozs) with each blessing over the wine, but one must drink a majority of the cup from which one is drinking, no matter how large it is. Remember that wine not only helps one feel joyous, but it also makes one feel free.

Moreover, the cup-bearer had been wrongfully imprisoned (enslaved) by Pharaoh, and was then exonerated and freed, perfectly paralleling the situation of the Hebrews at the time of the exodus. Herein lies a great lesson, which might have been overlooked had we only had the source from Exodus.

The four expressions of redemption apply specifically to the Israelites – which might have led us to believe that the significance of the exodus related only to G-d's special love for Israel. Linking the four cups of freedom to the Egyptian cup-bearer reminds us that G-d wants every human being to be free – because every human being is created in the image of the Divine, is equal to every other human being, and no human dare enslave his brother. Joseph is the true universalist among the tribes. He initially dreams of sheaves of grain, Egyptian agriculture, and he wishes to influence the entire cosmos, the sun, the moon and the stars.

This fundamental principle of a free humanity is a meta-halakhah which must govern human affairs. At the Song of the Reed Sea, all the nations – Edom, Moab, Canaan – are pictured as submitting to the power of the one G-d of the Universe, who alone must rule the world (Ex. 15:14-18). The American Revolutionaries got it right: "Rebellion against tyranny is obedience to G-d." Would that the President of the United States today would lead the United Nations in that direction vis a vis Syria and Iran!

For Maimonides, this principle must be the basis of our Oral Law as we interpret the Torah for each generation. Yes, says the Ramban, the law in the past did allow us to treat the Gentile slave with "rigor,"

but this must not be the attitude of any Jew now. He cites the Book of Job, wherein G-d says to the Master who is inconsiderate to his slave, "was it not the one G-d who formed both Master and Slave in His womb?" (31:13-15). Maimonides in effect abolishes slavery (see the last law in his Laws of Slaves).

And this fundamental human right to be free causes Maimonides to re-interpret the simple meaning of the Bible to enable the woman imprisoned in an insufferable marriage to be freed. "Our wives are not to be treated as captives under the control of their husbands," he declares! (Laws of Matrimony 14:8). If only today's legal decisors would take Maimonides' words to heart and mind. ©2014 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

#### **RABBI BEREL WEIN**

### **Wein Online**

**Y**aakov and Yosef, the two main protagonists of the narrative in this final section of the book of Bereshith, are both blindsided by the events that befall them. After years of exile and turmoil, incessant danger and inherent loneliness, Yaakov attempts to settle down to an apparent tranquil retirement.

He is not looking for new worlds to conquer, nor is he intending to be active or aggressive in further building and expanding his nascent national entity, the people of Israel. Yet all of his hopes will be dashed by the events surrounding the enmity of the brothers to Yaakov's visibly favorite son, Yosef.

In his love for Yosef, Yaakov remains unaware of the storm brewing within his own house and family. The trauma of Yosef's sudden disappearance will haunt Yaakov for the ensuing decades. In an unforeseen instant, Yaakov's entire life and seeming accomplishments are turned upside down and he is depicted as being powerless to do anything. Yosef is also apparently blissfully unaware of the consequences of his behavior towards his brothers.

He cannot imagine that his brothers would take violent and drastic action against him. He does not assess correctly how threatened they feel by his behavior, his dreams and his indiscretions towards them. Therefore, he accepts the mission that his father has proposed for him, to find his brothers and report back regarding their welfare and activities. There is no adequate way to describe his shock and amazement at being stripped and thrown into the pit and at finally being sold into slavery by his own brothers. None of this was ever imaginable to him.

Though all of the participants in this drama are to be held accountable for their actions, there is no doubt that there is an unseen hand that is guiding the events and directing them towards a certain goal. The realization of this will come only at the end of the drama when Yosef and his brothers reconcile and embrace one another. Only then will Yaakov also recognize that

this is the opening act of the fulfillment of the prophecy made to his grandfather Avraham regarding the exile, servitude and redemption of the people of Israel.

Only at the end of the drama does Yosef understand the full import of his dreams and visions. It is as the holy poet phrased it: "Only at the end of events, does one understand and contemplate correctly the original thought and plan." Though we are all held responsible for all of our actions and we possess complete freedom of choice regarding those actions, nevertheless it would be impossible for us to ignore the fact that our generation is part of an era where an unseen hand somehow is guiding events towards a certain purpose and fixed goal.

We may be involved in our mundane lives, in elections and disputes, minor victories and great tensions, but we should notice that we are also part of a great drama and historical process that is unfolding with almost irresistible force. I think that this is the most important lesson for us to ponder as we study the Torah reading of this week. ©2014 *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](http://www.rabbiwein.com). For more information on these and other products visit [www.rabbiwein.com](http://www.rabbiwein.com)*

#### **RABBI AVI WEISS**

### **Shabbat Forshpeis**

**C**hanukah celebrates the miracle of the Hasmonean victory over the Syrian Greeks. What is forgotten is that their dynasty did not last. Why not?

Ramban suggests that the disintegration of Hasmonean rule was due to their usurping too much power. (See Kiddushim 66a) By birth, the Hasmoneans came from the tribe of Levi, and could become priests. In the end, however, Judah Aristobulus, the grandson of Judah Maccabee assumed a second role; that of king. Here the Hasmoneans overstepped their bounds as kingship is confined to the tribe of Judah. (Genesis 49:10)

There is much logic to the idea that priest and king remain separate. Kingship deals with the politics of running the state, taking into account aspects of civil administration and international relations. Priesthood on the other hand, focuses on spirituality; on how to connect to G-d. Of course, the teachings of the priest give shape and direction to the state. Still, it can be suggested that kingship and priesthood should remain apart, in order to separate religion and politics.

The distinct responsibility of king and priest is part of a larger system of Jewish checks and balances. The prophet for example, served as the teacher of ethical consciousness rooted in G-d's word; and the Sanhedrin was the judicial/legislative branch of government.

Not coincidentally, in the same week in which we begin celebrating Chanukah, we begin reading the Biblical narrative of Yosef (Joseph) and his brothers. Yosef dreams that he will rule over the family. Yehuda leads the brothers in removing this threat by selling Yosef. In this sense, each seek to become the sole heir of Yaacov (Jacob). (See Sforno, Genesis 37:18)

Indeed, up to this point in the book of Genesis, the Torah deals with the message of choice—that is, individuals were picked and others were excluded. For example, of the children of Adam, only Seth, from whom Noah came, survived. Of the children of Noah, Shem is singled out, as Avraham (Abraham) the first patriarch, comes from him. Yitzhak (Isaac) is chosen over Yishmael, and it is Yaacov, and not Esau, who continued the covenantal mission.

The Joseph story breaks this pattern in that, in the end, all of Yaacov's children were included. No wonder, Yosef and Yehudah and for that matter, all of the brothers are blessed by Yaacov. Indeed, their descendents form the tribes of Israel, each included in the community of Israel while having distinct roles to fulfill.

One of the challenges of Chanukah is to learn from the mistake made by the Hasmoneans; to understand that attempts to usurp the roles of others are counter productive. Crucial to the continuity of Judaism is for each of us to make space for the other and recognize the respective roles every individual plays—as reflected by Yaacov's sons and ultimately the tribes of Israel. ©2004 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA. Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and Dean of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the Open Orthodox Rabbinical School, and Senior Rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale

#### **RABBI MORDECHAI KAMENETZKY**

### **Tainted Intent**

**T**he story of Yosef's discord with his brothers' waxes as a factual, albeit eternal, analogy to feuding Jews. There are dreams and fantasies, jealousies and misconceptions. Unfortunately, the saga never seems to end, as even today it seems that there are those of our brethren who would sell out their kin -- all for the sake of Heaven.

The Torah relates: Yosef's brothers go to Shechem to tend the flock of their father, Yaakov. Yosef is sent by Yaakov to find out what they are up to. As he approaches them they declare, "Behold, the dreamer approaches." At first they plot to kill him but Reuvain and Yehuda intervene, one suggesting he be cast into a pit, and the other convincing the brothers to sell him to passing merchants.

Were the plans to rid themselves of their younger sibling premeditated, or was the sale an impromptu action based on sighting Yosef as he approached them?

Let us analyze the story and the commentaries.

Yaakov asked his children to tend his sheep. The verse tells us that, "Now, his brothers went to pasture their father's flock in Shechem." In the Hebrew language, a prefix "es" is often used in conjunction with a noun. Here it is used in conjunction with the word sheep. Es is a word usually placed to allude to something additional. (e.g. the famous command, "In the command, "Honor your father and your mother" the Torah adds an es before the words father and mother, "Honor es your father and es your mother." The extra word es is there to include elder siblings, stepparents and the like, all who must be afforded honor.) In this case the word es in conjunction with the sheep is not only extra, it also has dots above it. Those dots intone, says Rashi, in the name of the Midrash, that the brothers did not set out to tend only the sheep, thus solely for the purpose of honoring their father, rather they were intent on tending to themselves. They were interested in a self-serving outing, one that involved eating and drinking, without the service of their father in mind.

The question is simple. How does the Medrash know that from the extra word es and the dots above it? Maybe the extra word and the dots imply that they had an extra mission to fulfill? Maybe it implies sheep and other cattle, thus the extra es. Where does it imply that they were not fulfilling their fathers's will. rather they were fulfilling their own agenda? The Gemara (Bava Kama 50a) relates that once there lived a man known as Nechunia the Well Digger. Nechunia selflessly dug wells to provide water for the pilgrims, who traveled to Jerusalem for the three pilgrimage festivals, Pesach, Sukkos and Shavuos.

It happened once that Nechunia's daughter fell into a deep well that he had dug. People ran to the great tzadik, Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa, who was known for his miraculous ability to intercede on behalf of those in distress, and asked him to pray for the child.

It seemed that he was not the least bit concerned. During the first hour he said to them, "Don't worry, she will be all right." An hour later, when there was still no sign of the girl, Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa still seemed unperturbed. "She still is fine," he said.

During the third hour, he told those who had come to him "do not worry, she has come out of the well already." When they asked the girl, "Who brought you up?" she replied, "A ram materialized, and an old man was leading it." After hearing this, the people asked Rabbi Chanina Ben Dosa, "What made you so sure that she would be saved? Are you a prophet?" Rabbi Chanina Ben Dosa replied, "I am not a prophet, nor am I the student of a prophet. But I said to myself, it is impossible that a deep well, one that the tzadik Nechunia the Well Digger took so much pain to dig in order to quench the thirst of travelers, would be a pitfall for one of his children! I felt it would be impossible for his child to be harmed by his good deed. Therefore I

knew she would be safe."

The Midrash used simple logic. If the brothers' intent was solely to honor and service their father by tending his sheep, then that mission could never have produced the consequences that brought Yaakov misery for 22 years. How is it possible that an exercise in parental honor would turn into an activity that would cause such parental grief and anguish? Therefore, those two dots that hover over the extra word contain a powerful message. Tainted acts cause tainted results. If the mission is pure, so are the results, and when we see sullied circumstances then we must assume tainted intent. However, when brothers act out of purity of purpose and with a non-tainted mission, then their intent will only bring honor to Heaven. ©2014 Rabbi M. Kamenetzky and torah.org

### **RABBI KALMAN PACKOUZ**

## **Shabbat Shalom Weekly**

**T**he Torah states: "And it happened after these things that the cupbearer of the king of Egypt and the baker transgressed against their master, the king of Egypt (Gen. 40:1).

Rashi brings the Midrash that the cupbearer was imprisoned because a fly was found in Pharaoh's goblet of wine; the baker was imprisoned because a small pebble was found in the king's bread.

The first paragraph of the Shulchan Aruch (the Code of Jewish Law) reads: " 'I have set G-d before me always' (Psalms 16:8) is a major principle of Torah -- because a person's behavior when he is alone in the privacy of his home is not like his behavior when he is in the imminent presence of a king. How much more so if one realizes that he is in the presence of the Great King, Almighty G-d, whose glory fills the universe: He would have the reverence, humility and fear of G-d."

Our tzaddikim (righteous ones) never lost sight of being in G-d's presence. Everything that transpired was contemplated as to how it applied to their service of G-d. The story is told of one such tzadik, the Alter (Elder) of Kelm who once found a small chip of wood in his bread. This immediately brought to mind the story of the king of Egypt's baker who was imprisoned for allowing a pebble to be in the king's bread. The Alter cogitated, "A defect in a person's bread is hardly grounds for so severe a punishment. No one will be punished for this chip of wood in the bread, especially since it was totally accidental. Why, then, was the king's baker punished so harshly?"

The Alter concluded, "It was because when one serves or relates to the king, the standard of perfection is much greater than when relating to other people. One must exercise much greater caution to prevent any defects. In serving the king, even a small defect is a major offense!"

"I am in the service of the King of kings,"

continued the Alter. "Is my behavior before Him without defect? Have I been cautious enough to avoid even accidental infractions?" *Dvar Torah from Twerski on Chumash by Rabbi Abraham J. Twerski, M.D. ©2014 Rabbi K. Packouz & aish.com*

### **RABBI DOV KRAMER**

## **Taking a Closer Look**

**"A**nd Yaakov settled in the land of his father's sojourning, in the Land of Canaan" (B'reishis 37:1). The commentators (e.g. Ramban, Radak and Chizkuni) discuss why the area is described using both terms ("where his father sojourned" and "Canaan"). The Midrash (B'reishis Rabbah 84:4), based on the letters for the word "sojourn" being the same as for the word "convert," reads the verse as "Yaakov lived in the land of his father's converts, in the Land of Canaan." From here, the Midrash says, we know that Yitzchok, like his father Avraham and his son Yaakov, converted people to monotheism.

That Avraham (and Sara) converted others to monotheism is learned from the verse "and the souls they made in Charan" (12:5), which is fairly well known and often quoted. Yaakov doing the same is learned from his instructions to those with him when he left for Beis El, telling "his house and all who were with him" to rid themselves of any foreign deities (34:2), and from a second reference (34:6), where it wasn't just Yaakov who arrived in Luz, but also "the entire nation that was with him." [It isn't just the context (getting rid of their idols) that teaches us that Yaakov converted them, but that there was a "nation with him."] For Yitzchok, reading the word as "converts" rather than "sojourn" negates any need for a context to teach us that Yitzchok converted others. Nevertheless, it is a bit curious that we are taught this as part of Yaakov's narrative, instead of during Yitzchok's. Before suggesting a possible reason why we are taught this here rather than earlier, let's take a closer look at some of the implications of Avraham, Yitzchok and Yaakov having converted others to monotheism.

I have already discussed the ramifications of Avraham bringing a "tension of ideas" into the world (see page 4 of <http://tinyurl.com/pgcd3cl>); his conversion of others was the start of the 2,000 years of Torah (see Avodah Zara 9a), and the age we are held responsible for our actions in the heavenly court switched to 20 from 100. I have also suggested (see page 7 of <http://tinyurl.com/qezjgbu>) that Avraham went back to Charan for five years when he was 70 to rebuild the community of converts he had built there, but had fallen apart in his absence. (This assumes these converts made the trip with him to Canaan when he was 75, not when he was 55; see <http://tinyurl.com/odoe4cb>.) Shem and/or Eiver may have moved their Yeshiva(s) to B'er Sheva in order to be near where Avraham was continually introducing

people to monotheism (see <http://tinyurl.com/l8ddaqb>). Nevertheless, despite having the community of monotheists that he built living with him in Canaan, Avraham insisted that Yitzchok marry someone from his family back in Charan (B'reishis 24:38). Similarly, Yitzchok and Rivka sent Yaakov to Charan to find a wife (27:46-28:2), without considering anyone from Avraham's monotheistic community. Why weren't any of these "daughters" worthy candidates?

It is unclear what happened to Avraham's converts. There is a fairly widely-quoted Midrash that says after Avraham died they went back to their old idol-worshipping ways. [I have been unable to locate this Midrash; recent additions of the Meshech Chochma, who quotes this Midrash (in his commentary on 21:33) say it is in Pirkay D'Rebbi Eliezer (29), but it is not there. What it does say there is that Avraham's servants, who were all circumcised with him (see 17:23), must not have stayed "in the fold," since we don't hear about them afterwards. Perhaps the implication that not hearing about a group anymore indicates abandoning their previous religious commitments was applied to Avraham's converts as well, but this is not stated explicitly. Besides, the point of the Midrash there is that we can't be confident that the conversion of servants, which is done whether they want to or not, will last; this should have little bearing on full converts, who did so of their own volition. If anyone knows where such a Midrash is, please email me at RabbiDMK at Yahoo dot com.] (Several Chasidische commentators use this Midrash to point out how important having a leader is; after all, after Avraham died, his converts didn't stick with the program. However, it could just as easily be used to point out how important it is not to become dependent on a leader.) If these converts were no longer monotheists after Avraham passed away, there would not have been anyone left for Yaakov to marry (he was 15 when his grandfather died). Even if Yitzchok had converted others afterwards, we can understand his being hesitant to have Yaakov marry one of them after seeing what had happened to Avraham's converts. How could they be confident that Yitzchok's would stay committed to monotheism for the long term? As far as whom Yitzchok married, Avraham may have noticed something about his converts that concerned him about their ability to remain committed monotheists (which turned out to be a valid concern). [This concern would have been more obvious if the reason Avraham went back to Charan was to rebuild the community of converts that had fallen apart without him.]

Midrash Talpios (not a Midrash, but a commentary; see <http://alturl.com/9fe3o> under "Elifaz") quotes another Midrash, which says that Eisav killed Avraham's converts. (He suggests that G-d allowed them to be killed because they were going to revert to their old ways, and were better off being killed before

they did, adding that the Midrash that says they did actually go back to their old ways may be referring to a small few Eisav did not kill, from whom we know that the same would likely have happened to the others had Eisav not killed them.) Although I have not been able to find this Midrash either, Bamidbar Rabbah (4:8) does say Eisav killed many righteous and pious people, and this may be referring to Avraham's converts. If Eisav wiped out the community of converts Avraham had built, there weren't any monotheistic locals around anymore for Yaakov to marry. [If the "rumors" that Rivka's twins would marry her brother Lavan's twins, with Eisav marrying Leah and Yaakov marrying Rachel, had any prophetic validity, this would be another reason why Yaakov had to go to Charan to get married. However, the reason Rivka gave Yitzchok strongly implies that this was not a factor.]

What about Yaakov's children? Whom did they marry? Rashi (37:35) quotes two opinions, based on whether saying that Yaakov's "daughters" tried to console him (over Yosef) could refer to his daughters-in-law, or whether it must refer to his biological daughters. If they weren't his biological daughters, who were they? Yehudah married a "local" girl (38:2), and we can be confident that she was monotheistic, or he wouldn't have married her. [His daughter-in-law, Tamar, was Shem's daughter (see Rashi on 38:24); there had to be others from Shem (and Eiver)'s circle to whom he could find his own wife (if there weren't other monotheists around).] Were the "locals" whom Yaakov's sons married from the community of converts that either Yitzchok or Yaakov had built? If so, why were they more confident that they would remain monotheists for the long-term if Avraham's converts didn't?

There were several differences between Avraham's converts and those of his son and grandson. For one thing, Avraham was not circumcised when he built his community of converts, whereas Yitzchok and Yaakov were. The Mechilta (Mishpatim 18) says that G-d purposely waited until Avraham was 99 years old before commanding him to become circumcised, because if he was 20 or 30, converts would have to be younger than that in order to convert without first becoming circumcised. Since Yitzchok and Yaakov were both circumcised when they were eight days old (see 21:4), their converts must have had to become circumcised too. [This explains why the people of Sh'chem bought into Shimon and Levi's demand that they all become circumcised; all of the converts with them had done it, so it seemed "normal."] If Yitzchok and Yaakov's converts had to undergo circumcision before converting, there was likely a much stronger level of commitment to monotheism before the conversion was completed.

Another difference between Avraham's converts and Yitzchok's and Yaakov's was the newness

of the concept. Avraham was a pioneer when he started spreading the word about monotheism. By the time Yitzchok invited people in for food and drink, the discussion didn't have to start with an introduction to what monotheism is; they had likely heard about the concept due to the inroads Avraham had already made into the polytheistic mindset. Instead, the potential convert already knew what the conversation with Yitzchok would be about, and was still willing to have it. And that conversation could start on a deeper level than it could with Avraham, and therefore penetrate more deeply.

Still another difference was the uniqueness of the communities. Avraham's community was a singular entity, all revolving around Avraham and what he was teaching. Although the messages taught by Yitzchok and Yaakov were similar, by the time Yaakov moved back to the Land of Canaan, there were two communities, not just one; Yitzchok's, which he had built in Canaan, and Yaakov which he had brought with him into Canaan. The mere presence of two totally separate communities having the same set of goals and ideals strengthened each of them. Having two leaders instead of just one, and additional leaders as Yaakov's sons became older, also gave the newly merged community additional strength and staying power. Additionally, with Yaakov's younger community joining with Yitzchok's older one, there were now multiple generations of converts, including the children and grandchildren of those who had converted years earlier. Therefore, by the time Yaakov's community joined with Yitzchok's, Yaakov's sons could marry members of that community and be confident that their life partners would not go back to the idol worship of their parents or grandparents.

Since the merging of Yaakov's community of converts with Yitzchok's was a major factor in the strengthening of that community, the Torah informs us of Yitzchok's involvement with converts here. "And Yaakov settled in the land of his father's converts," rather than maintaining two separate communities of converts. This helped both communities tremendously, creating one stronger community worthy enough for Yaakov's sons to marry into. © 2014 Rabbi D. Kramer

**RABBI SHLOMO RESSLER**

## Weekly Dvar

**P**arshat Vayeshev relates a seemingly disturbing series of events. After telling us that Yosef snatched on his brothers, it says that Yaakov loved Yosef more than all the other brothers and that's why he made him a striped shirt. Then it says of the brothers could no longer tolerate Yosef, and didn't believe his dreams of them bowing to him. First, why did Yaakov love one son more than the others? Second, why couldn't the brothers tolerate Yosef only after his father made him the striped shirt? Lastly, why

did Yosef insist on telling his brothers his dreams, when he must have sensed that they didn't want to hear them? Rav Kaminetsky explains that Yaakov had taught Yosef all that he'd learned in the Yeshiva (school) of Shem and Eiver where he studied, and where Yitzchok and Avraham studied as well. The main strength of that school was that they taught Torah that could survive in negative environments. Avraham used it to deal with the rest of the world, Yitzchok used it to deal with Yishmael, and Yaakov used it to deal with Lavan and Esav. Now Yaakov was teaching it to Yosef, and the brothers were worried. Were they as bad as Esav or Lavan? Why would Yaakov have to teach Yosef that Torah? Little did they know that Yosef would need it to deal with Egypt, and all the trials he would face there.

Yaakov loved Yosef more because he learned more, and wanted the other brothers to be jealous (that's why he made him the shirt), so that they'd want to learn it too. But instead they became jealous for the wrong reasons. It was then that Yosef tried to tell them that they shouldn't be jealous, because he had to learn for his own sake, because he'd have to be a leader in a foreign land (as the dreams with stocks suggested, since there were no stalks where they lived). But the brothers had let themselves be blinded by hate, and couldn't see the truth, as obvious as it may have been.

There's an important lesson in all of this: jealousy can be used in a good way, as Yaakov tried to do. However, if we're not careful, we could miss the whole point, and end up doing things we shouldn't. The first test is to ask ourselves if we want something because we need it, or simply because someone else has it. We should be jealous of things we can learn and grow from, like Torah knowledge, good character traits, and even courage and persistence. Everyone has qualities we can and should be jealous of, as long as we use it not to prove ourselves, but to improve ourselves. © 2014 Rabbi S. Ressler & LeLamed, Inc.

