

(Dvar Torah continued from front page...)

smite them.” Shechem, if you recall, was where Dina was raped, and where her brothers, Simeon and Levi, later massacred the male inhabitants. Following that event, Jacob was terrified of possible reprisals against his family.

So in verse 14 Jacob tells Joseph “Go and see how your brothers are faring...” The Hebrew is לְךָ-נָא רְאֵה אֶת-שְׁלוֹם אֶחָיִךְ, *lech-na re'eh et-shalom achecha*, which translates more literally as “go see the peace (shalom) of your brothers.” Jacob knows rationally that his sons are probably fine - there is no specific risk in Shechem - but he reaches out to make sure.

Later Hebrew calls this act of reaching out ‘*drishat shalom*’ - ‘enquiring after peace.’ Israelis wishing to send regards to a mutual friend will ask you to send a warm *drishat shalom*. But the word *drisha* has other meanings too. *Drisha*, as in Midrash, can mean ‘interpretation/exposition.’ So *drishat shalom* can also be understood as ‘interpreting peace,’ consciously choosing to see deeper harmonies, even when our cynical instincts tell us to accept the *p’shat* (simple meaning) of the world. And *drisha* can also mean ‘demand,’ as is often seen on Israeli protest signs: “*Ha’Am doresh...*” So *drishat shalom* can be translated even more strongly as ‘demanding peace.’

What all of this tells us is that checking in on a loved one is about far more than getting information; it is how we communicate care and concern. The inquiry is itself a performative act, one rooted in faith about deeper structures of connection, that establishes and reinforces those connections. Enquiring after the peace of others, in essence, brings it into existence!

We sometimes dismiss short “how r u?” text messages and pre-Shabbat phone-calls to family as mechanical or superficial, but a short message is much stronger than silence. Feeble as it sounds, re-establishing such connections is the antithesis of the chaos we fear, and often our first way to fight terror.

Jacob’s family, the original children of Israel, are complex and often dysfunctional. Unfortunately, there aren’t many positive things to learn from the brothers’ relationships, and we know the tragic end of Joseph’s mission to enquire after his brothers. However, there is a glimmer of love and hope in this story too. Somehow, the simple fact that Jacob cares about his sons enough to send Joseph to find them is absorbed into the consciousness of Reuven. While the other brothers plot to kill Joseph, Reuven resolves to save him - not necessarily out of brotherly love, but in order not to worry his father. The *drishat shalom* creates the peace it was seeking.

May we all merit to seek, demand and enjoy much peace. Shabbat shalom!



TORAH SPARKS

Parashat Vayeshev

December 9, 2017 | 21 Kislev 5778

Annual | Genesis 37:1-40:23 (Etz Hayim p. 226-245; Hertz p. 141-151)
 Triennial | Genesis 38:1-38:30 (Etz Hayim p. 233-237; Hertz p. 145-147)
 Haftarah | Amos 2:6-3:8 (Etz Hayim p. 246-249; Hertz p. 152-154)

Dvar Torah

Joshua Weiner, Conservative Yeshiva & Frankel Rabbinical College Student

In the midst of this *parasha* about Joseph and his brothers, I’d like to focus our attention instead on a character who speaks very little - their father, Jacob - and read between the lines to better understand him.

The twelve sons of Jacob, following in the tradition of their father, are shepherds. They tend to the animals and spend many days far from home searching for new areas for them to graze. Presumably, Jacob only hears of their whereabouts from random visitors who happen to have seen them wandering around the Judean hills. This is normal life. However, when someone happens to mention that eleven of the brothers are near Shechem, Jacob suddenly calls Joseph and exclaims: “Your brothers are pasturing at Shechem. Come, I will send you to them!” Why does he do this? Does he not trust his sons? What is going on here?

In one of the oldest commentaries on the Torah, the *Targum* (Aramaic translation) attributed to Yonatan ben Uziel, we find a different version of this verse that fills in some of the gaps. It reads: “Your brothers are pasturing in Shechem, and I am frightened, lest Canaanites come and

Dvar Haftarah

Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

The prophets were particularly sensitive about protecting God's honor. This is why idolatry, in particular, perturbed them. But "religious" betrayal of God was not limited to what we normally call "idolatry". When Amos identified the "idolatrous" sins of the southern kingdom of Judah, this verse stands out: "[Ah], you who trample (*hashoafim*) the heads of the poor into the dust of the ground, and make the humble walk a twisted course, father and son go to the same girl, and thereby profaned My holy name." (2:7)

What make these sins idolatrous? After all, they do not seem to be directed on high. God has not been replaced by another deity. Clearly, the injustices mentioned in this verse are abuses founded in human relationships, as Rashi points out: And they trample on the dust of the ground that they walk on; all of their ambition (*sheifatam*) and all of their thoughts are on those who are weak and how they will steal and take from them. They force the poor to go out of the way [to avoid trouble] out of fear..." Rabbi David Kimche (12th century Provence) adds color to this painful description: "[The powerful] place police over [the weak]. If the poor do not give what is demanded they take them by the hair of their heads, knock them to the ground and trample them... They pervert justice through bribery given by their rich adversaries.... The son is not embarrassed to consort with one whom his father has consorted... since you have profaned your holiness, you have profaned My holy name, for I sanctified you and you are called by My name – the holy people."

Are the above-mentioned behaviors just sins which tarnish the sacred image of God's people or are they more than that? Can we see in these acts a semblance of idolatrous behavior? These actions represent an abuse of power. "Trampling" on the poor, causing people to fear the ability to lead normal lives, taking advantage of power to satiate one's appetites all constitute a form of idolatry: idolatry of self – life that is totally self-serving. In some sense this has always been the biggest threat to God and is certainly the biggest threat to God in modern times.

People are wont to classify these sins as religious. Sometimes, in fact, people justify these sins in the name of religion but it is clear to Amos that these sins are a betrayal of God not just because these actions are unjust but largely because those who abuse others with the miscarriage of power have ultimately set themselves up as an altar in place of God and there is no greater idolatry than that.

Table Talk

Vered Hollander-Goldfarb, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

The Joseph story! Joseph's roller-coaster of a life takes off in this *Parasha*, along with the story of his brother Judah. Joseph starts out young and has to grow slowly (and painfully) through the *Parasha*. Let's follow both brothers.

- 1) In a rather unusual move, the Torah informs us of Joseph's age, 17, at the beginning of the story. Why might his age be significant?
- 2) The hate-filled relationship of Joseph and his brothers in chapter 37 culminates with Joseph being sold into slavery, and the brothers holding the symbol of their father's love for him: the coat. They dip the coat in the blood of a goat and bring it to Yaakov, so that he can draw his own conclusions. Why did they do this, rather than claim that they have no idea what happened to him? (Did Yaakov even know that Joseph reached his brothers?)
- 3) In chapter 38 Judah, recently widowed, goes to a (so he thinks) harlot. She demands payment of a kid goat, and he deposits his personal seal until he sends the payment (38:15-23). Who brings the payment, and what difficulty does he encounter? What is Judah's reaction and what do you think of it?
- 4) Goats link the stories that appear in 37:31 and 38:17-20. How does the following Midrash (Bereshit Rabba Vayeshev 85) see the connection?
"Said the Holy One Blessed be He to Judah: You tricked your father with a kid-goat, by your life (a form of an oath) that Tamar will trick you with a kid-goat!"
- 5) Joseph is sold by the Ishmaelites to Potifar, an Egyptian man. In 39:1-2 being in Egypt and the identity of his master as an Egyptian is stressed several times. Why might that be?

At the Conservative Yeshiva in Jerusalem we offer students of all backgrounds an opportunity to engage with Jewish texts in a dynamic, inclusive, and collaborative environment. We help students gain the skills necessary for Jewish learning and spiritual growth as individuals and in their communities in North America, Israel, and around the world.