

The Parsha Discussion

TORAH TO DISCUSS WITH TEENS AND ADULTS AROUND YOUR SHABBAT TABLE

Parashat Vayeshev. When Communication Fails

In the house of Jacob, tensions are running high. We meet a precocious, immature Joseph, his father's favourite, who is tattle-tale-ing against his brothers, parading himself in a special coat, and endlessly harping on about his dreams.

His brothers ... hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him.

This latter clause of this verse reads in Hebrew: – “ולא יכלו לדבר לשלום”. How should it be translated? One reading is simply: “they could not speak to him peaceably.”



A second reading sees the person “speaking peace” as Joseph himself. In this understanding, the brothers “couldn’t tolerate it when Joseph addressed them peaceably.”

“Even when he spoke to them in a conciliatory manner, they could not abide him.”(Shadal)

Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch explains:

“They couldn’t tolerate his friendly approach to them. In a place of affection, all is straightforward. But when tensions are fraught, one becomes sensitive and reactive and critical of everything... all the more so, when the other side is trying to express amicability.”

Although Joseph tries to apologize, to make conciliatory gestures, paradoxically, the very attempts to repair the hate deepen it. The brothers aren't open to hearing his peaceful overtures, his words merely exacerbate the resentment.

In the first reading, the brothers cannot speak with Joseph; in the second reading they cannot hear him! Here we have not only hatred and deep hostility but an absolute breakdown of communication.

To underscore this, we should note that in the family's reaction to Joseph's dreams, their responses hang mid-air with no answer from Joseph.

“Do you mean to reign over us? Do you mean to rule over us?” (37:8)

“What,” [Jacob] said to him, “is this dream you have dreamed? Are we to come, I and your mother and your brothers, and bow low to you to the ground? (37:10)

These questions become rhetorical statements because no one is listening; they are talking to themselves! And the only scene in which Joseph has a genuine dialogue is when Joseph gets lost in the field and encounters a mysterious man who directs him to his brothers. Dialogue is possible outside the family, but among family members communication is dysfunctional.

Is there anything to salvage from this story? Rashi sees a silver lining:

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AND THEY COULD NOT SPEAK PEACEABLY TO HIM – from what is stated to their discredit we may infer something to their credit: **they did not speak one thing with their mouth having another thing quite different in their hearts.**

In Rashi's perception the brothers were not hypocrites. They didn't act politely to Joseph's face and then malign him from behind his back; they were "אחד בפה ואחד בלב" – consistent, honest and up-front; they did communicate by telling Joseph exactly what they thought of him.

Later, when they stand before Joseph, unaware that he is their brother, they say "כנים אנחנו" – we are honest, genuine people.

Is it better to talk up, argue, and fight, or better not to speak at all?

So, let's discuss all this:

- Is this trait to the brothers' credit or to their detriment? - Is it better to tell somebody what you think about them, or better just to act polite?
- What are the problems, or dangers with each of these approaches?
- Israelis often pride themselves in being direct. In Israeli slang, this is called speaking "dougri", meaning the quality of being straightforward, even blunt, eschewing formalities and getting straight to the point. Is this a positive cultural mannerism? How does this differ to other countries?
- In our world, we have also reached a point where we at times "cannot talk peaceably" and even when people reach out, they are not received in good faith, they are judged critically.
- Do you understand why our public discourse has become so toxic? Can you think of one thing that may be done to reduce tensions between divergent and opposing sectors in society?

Shabbat Shalom!