

In this week's reading, *Vay'chi*, we finally find within the largely dysfunctional family of Abraham, agents for *shalom bayit*, peace within the family. I'd like to discuss questions that are raised by these individuals.

Understandably, we bless daughters at Erev Shabbat in the names of our matriarchs, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah. One of the questions suggested by this week's Torah reading, *Parashat Vay'chi*, is: Why do we bless sons at Erev Shabbat in the names of Joseph's sons, Ephraim and Menashe, who seem to be minor characters?

An answer given by Rabbi Yisrael Kaniel, in the name of Rabbi Yissocher Frand, is as follows. Recall (Gen. 48:14 – *Etz Hayim*, p. 296) that Jacob prepared to give Ephraim, the younger, the greater blessing. Subsequent verses 15-22 do not record a single word from Ephraim or Menashe. Rabbi Kaniel writes:

When Menashe saw that his grandfather Jacob was giving precedence to his younger brother Ephraim, he could have cried foul. When Ephraim, in turn, perceived his father Joseph attempting to correct the situation, he could have contested the switch. Yet there were no complaints.

Despite the apparent inequality and unfairness, there was no demonstration of conceit on the part of Ephraim nor jealousy on the part of Menashe. The two brothers got along despite the seeming unfairness. They trusted the judgment of their father and grandfather. Seeing this wonderful display of perfect harmony between the two brothers, Jacob was inspired to say about all our offspring, "May G-d make you like Ephraim and like Menashe" and he put Ephraim before Menashe." Jacob hoped that just as he gave precedence to Ephraim before Menashe and it caused no jealousy or ill will, may all his descendents learn to do the same.

Another question suggested by our *parashah*: Should one always be truthful?

At pp. 308-309 of the *Etz Hayim*, we read:

15. When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, 'What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrong that we did him!'
16. So they sent this message to Joseph: "Before his death your father left this instruction:
17. So shall you say to Joseph, 'Forgive, I urge you, the offense and guilt of your brothers who treated you harshly.' Therefore, please forgive the offense of the servants of the God of your father." And Joseph was in tears as they spoke to him.

The next verses assure us that Joseph did not take revenge, but continued to deal kindly with his brothers. But what about this alleged message from Jacob. Was it for real, or did the brothers make it up? The text, other than in the brothers' claim, does not tell us that Jacob said any such thing. Important commentators believe that Jacob's message was an invention of Joseph's brothers, and that Joseph knew it immediately.

My primary source of commentary for the remainder of this d'var Torah is Professor Nehama Leibowitz' book, *Studies in Bereshit*, an excellent source in part because the late Professor Leibowitz typically surveyed earlier commentators as part of her studies. Professor Leibowitz comments on Jacob's alleged plea:

A strange testament is this! ... we were told of Jacob's deathbed message. If he had wished to add this, why hadn't he done so? Is it conceivable that he would have entrusted the brothers with such a message and left Joseph out?

She then quotes the 18th Century commentator, Rabbi Moses Hayyim Luzzato:

He [Joseph] understood that the brothers had instructed the messenger what to say; otherwise Jacob would have told him himself. Joseph therefore wept at seeing the tragic state of his brothers, going in fear of their lives and forced to such shifts to stave off his vengeance.

Professor Leibowitz raises a related question: Did Jacob even know what Joseph's brothers had done to him? She cites a work of Midrash, the *Pesikta Rabbati*, which deals with this question in order to answer another question raised by Gen. 48:1 (p. 294 in *Etz Hayim*): "... Joseph was told, 'Your father is ill.'" The *Pesikta Rabbati* comments:

... were it not for the fact that others came to tell him, Father is sick, wouldn't he have known? The purpose of this is however to make known to you his righteousness, that he did not want to be alone with his father that he should not say to him, What did your brothers do to you and he (Jacob) would be prompted to curse them. For this reason he refrained from paying frequent visits to his father.

Rashi (cited by Professor Leibowitz) adds:

The brothers deviated from the truth for the sake of peace, for Jacob had given no such command, since Joseph was not suspect by him of committing any injury to them.

And Nachmanides (also cited by Professor Leibowitz) says:

... Jacob was never told of the sale of Joseph.... Had Jacob known..., they should have begged their father on his deathbed to command Joseph to forgive them.... They ... wouldn't have had to fabricate the message.

So, what does our tradition say about telling a lie, or even a partial truth, for *shalom*? Where else does this occur in the Torah? Remember when the angels came to announce to Abraham that Sarah would bear a son at the age of 90. At Gen. 18:12-13 (*Etz Hayim*, p. 101), we read that Sarah remarked on her own and Abraham's advanced ages, but when God recounted for Abraham, he mentioned only Sarah's remark about her own age, presumably to spare Abraham's feelings.

Professor Leibowitz cites the Midrash and the Talmud:

R. Shimon b. Gamliel said: Great is peace, for even the tribes uttered fabrication in order to promote peace between themselves and Joseph, as it is written: "And they sent a messenger unto Joseph, saying, Thy father did command." For where did he command? We do not find that he so commanded.

Bereshit Rabbah 100, 9

Said R. Ila'a in the name of R. Eleazar b. R. Shimon: It is permissible for a man to deviate from the true facts in the interests of peace, as it said, "Thy father did command..." R. Nathan said: It is in the nature of a mitzvah....

Talmud, Yebamot 65b

Professor Leibowitz summarizes: "Our Sages regarded [the brothers'] conduct as warranted on the principle that truth has sometimes to be subordinated to more important values."

Sources

Rabbi Yisrael Kaniel, "Perfect Harmony," <http://www.byisrael.net/perfect-harmony/>

Nehama Leibowitz, *Studies in Bereshit*, Alpha Press, Jerusalem, 1976 – see the chapter "Vayehi 6," pp. 563-570