

Tze U'Imad—Go and Learn

Weekly Talmud Learning with Rabbi Mordecai Schwartz, director of admissions, The Rabbinical School, JTS.

מסכת שבת

דף לח, ב משנה אין נותנין ביצה בצד המיחם בשביל שתתגלגל ולא
יפקיענה בסודרין ורבי יוסי מתיר ולא יטמיננה בחול ובאבק דרכים בשביל
שתצלה

One must not place an egg at the side of a boiler for it to be roasted, and one must not break it into a [hot] cloth; but Rabbi Yose permits it. And one may not put it in [hot] sand or road dust for it to be roasted (Shabbat 38b Mishnah).

Last time, we mentioned that our Sages inherited prohibitions on a number of activities that are permitted by the Torah, but not in consonance with the spirit of Shabbat. Our Sages knew that prohibiting all everyday activities on Shabbat would not only be impossible, but also make Shabbat overly burdensome. Shabbat is a day of sanctified rest as an offering to Heaven, but it is also a day of earthly pleasures. As a result, the Sages limited these protective "Rabbinic prohibitions" on Shabbat to a small number of categories. We find in the above text an example of one such category: it is a Rabbinic prohibition to perform acts that could easily be confused with Torah prohibitions.

As we saw in mishnah Shabbat 7:2, cooking on Shabbat is a Torah prohibition. What is cooking? Is it merely the application of heat to food to make it edible? Our Sages answered, no. Human will and human behavior dictate the conventional definitions of all of the prohibited acts. There is a way that people cook, and a way that they generally do not cook. In the time of the Mishnah and the Talmud, cooking generally involved fire. The cases in our mishnah above do not. Laying an egg down on the pavement for it to fry is not a case of conventional cooking. As such, it cannot be included in the Torah prohibition on cooking on Shabbat. Nonetheless, our Sages say, preparing an egg in such a way on Shabbat would lead to a kind of confusion that would ultimately be destructive to the spiritual discipline Shabbat represents. We must prepare our food in advance to truly taste the Shabbat spice, a taste of the world to come.

Questions

1. In the time of the Talmud, cooking was done primarily with fire. Are there other types of cooking that the Torah might prohibit today?
2. How can we use Shabbat to clarify the confusing moments in our own lives?

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Torah from JTS

Parashat Va-yetzei
Genesis 28:10 – 32:3
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Parashah Commentary

This week's commentary was written by Rabbi Burton L. Visotzky, Nathan and Janet Appleman Professor of Midrash and Interreligious Studies, JTS.

Stairway to Heaven

This week's Torah reading, Parashat Va-yetzei, begins with Jacob's famous dream, in which he sees a ladder stretching all the way up to the very heavens. The dream ends with God's promise to him that "the ground that you are lying upon I will give to you and your offspring. Your seed shall be as numerous as the dust of the earth, you shall spread out to the west, east, to the north and south"

I will resist the urge to play Freud and interpret the meaning of the ladder in this dream (hint: it is related to the promise of many offspring), preferring instead to read on a bit in the Torah to the next paragraph:

"Jacob woke from his sleep and said, 'Surely, God is in this place and I did not know it!' Jacob then took a vow saying, 'IF God remains with me, IF God protects me on this journey I am making, and gives me bread to eat and clothing to wear, and IF I return safe to my father's house—THEN the Lord shall be my God'"

The Rabbis of our classical texts don't know what to do with this last set of verses that seem so conditional. Is it possible that our ancestor Jacob, that apparently unrepentant trickster, is bargaining here with God? After an enormously consoling dream-promise from God, to a young man who is, after all, fleeing for his life, Jacob has the temerity to say, "IF God remains with me, IF, IF, IF . . . THEN THE Lord shall be my God." What could Jacob possibly have meant when he repeatedly spoke that *IF*?

One of the earliest rabbinic commentaries on the Torah, *Sifre Devarim* (number 31), dating from the third century of our Common Era, imagines the scene by coming at it from an obtuse angle:

"Did you ever wonder why it always says in Scripture, Speak to the Children of ISRAEL? Why not Speak to the Children of Abraham or Speak to the Children of Isaac? What did Jacob do that God's word was always directed at him, with literally hundreds of verses saying, Speak to the Children of ISRAEL??"

The midrash answers its own question thus: “The distinction of having God’s commandments directed at HIS offspring came to Jacob because he was a neurotic Jewish parent! Jacob worried all his life: Oy, what if one of my kids turns out to be a bum? After all, my Grandfather Abraham had Ishmael (and he was a bum), and my father Isaac had my brother Esau (and he was a bum). What if one of my kids turns out to be a bum?”

Now we have the necessary background to Jacob’s vow in this week’s Torah reading: “Jacob then made a vow saying, IF God remains with me . . .” The midrash asks, “Can it be that Jacob might actually think for a moment that if God doesn’t remain with me, God won’t be God?” After all, our midrash notes, the biblical passage ends, “THEN the Lord shall be my God . . .,” and so our midrash comments that what Jacob really meant was, “no matter what happens, God will be my God.”

So why does Jacob even bother saying it? The midrash answers its own question: “What Jacob was actually saying in this verse of Scripture was a request of God. Jacob was asking, ‘*Would that God might join His name to me, so that my kids just turn out to be okay and not be bums.*’” “Please God,” Jacob is imagined as praying, “Let the kids just be good boys....”

As the story unfolds, God does “join His name” to Jacob, because when Jacob wrestles with the angel next week, Jacob’s name is changed to Israel. That last syllable, *el*, is God’s name—joined to Jacob’s new name, Israel.

Our third-century midrash continues its fantasy. It imagines Jacob on his deathbed, gathering his sons to him to give them blessing (as he will at the end of Genesis a few weeks down the road). He calls each son individually, and then brings them all together for his final exhortation. He tells them, “Boys, ‘Yes there are two paths you can go by, but in the long run, There’s still time to change the road you’re on.’”

Having encouraged them to do *teshuvah*, he asks them, “Sons of mine, are you okay with God?? I mean REALLY okay with God?”

To which they reply, “Listen, Israel, our father—just as you are at One with God, so too, the Lord our God the Lord is One.”

Or as we say it in Hebrew: *Shema’ Yisrael, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonei Ehad.*

So, from Jacob’s dream in this week’s Torah reading, we learn three things:

1. That he earned the right to have God’s word spoken “to the children of Israel” by virtue of the fact that he was a neurotic Jewish parent who daily worried that his kids would turn out all right.
2. That his dream not only foreshadowed his fruitful offspring, but on his very deathbed, our ancestor Jacob would quote Led Zeppelin’s famous “Stairway to Heaven” to his children (“Yes there are two paths you can go by, but in the long run, There’s still time to change the road you’re on.”).
3. That every time we recite the Shema’, we should not only hear a call to us as a people, “Hear O Israel,” but should also hear the reassurance that our father Jacob heard in the final moments of his life: there will be continuity, you’ve done your job as a parent, the Lord our God, the Lord is One.

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A Taste of Torah

A Commentary on Ramban by Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz

“When Rachel saw that she had borne Jacob no children, she became envious of his sister; and Rachel said to Jacob, “Give me children, or I will die.” Jacob was incensed at Rachel . . .” (Gen. 30:1-2).

Ramban

“Give me children”—It would appear that on account of Jacob’s answer, our Rabbis took him to task, saying in Genesis Rabbah, “God said to Jacob, ‘Is this the way to answer a woman who is oppressed by her barrenness? By your life, your children are destined to stand before her son [Joseph]!’” In line with the plain meaning of the text, Rachel asked Jacob to give her children but the intent was to say that he should pray on her behalf and continue to pray until God will grant her children and if not, he would mourn because of her distress.

In Parashat Va-yetzei, we continue to follow the narrative of the turbulent life of Jacob. Having deceived his father and brother, he journeys to Haran, his Uncle Lavan’s home, in the hope of finding a wife. Within seven years and one week’s time, Jacob finds himself married to two sisters, Leah and Rachel. While Leah is quick to conceive and bear many children for Jacob, Rachel is forced to wrestle with the pain of infertility. Out of a sense of deep pain, Rachel cries out to her husband, “Give me children, or I will die.” While Jacob becomes enraged over Rachel’s outburst, the exchange is rich in lessons on listening and effective communication. What does Nahmanides teach us concerning this pivotal episode in the lives our ancestors?

Far from supporting Jacob in his reckless response, Ramban quotes a midrash that criticizes the patriarch for responding with great insensitivity. While it may be the case that Jacob is angered by his own sense of helplessness, the *peshat* leads one to believe that Jacob responds simply to the words he hears and not to the emotions underlying those words. There is no doubt that Rachel understood the complexity of her dilemma and that Jacob was in no position to grant her children. From the depth of her heart and her soul, Rachel sought something else entirely. She wanted a true partner in life’s endeavor. She wanted to feel that Jacob joined her in her pain; and with that, she wanted to see Jacob in a more proactive role—perhaps entreating God as his father Isaac did when Rebekah was barren.

Torah and the rabbis teach us an important lesson in effective communication and listening skills. More important than hearing words, one must train one’s ear to be sensitive to the emotion embedded in the words. The means by which we communicate with one another is anything but one dimensional. Body language, emotion, and language interplay with one another, encouraging us to be more sensitive in how we listen and interface with the other. Both Ramban and the rabbis of Genesis Rabbah have little patience for Jacob’s quip. If only he had listened, with ears *and* with heart to Rachel, he could have been an important model to generations of Jewish spouses.

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