

Mishnat Hashavua': Shabbat 6:4

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What may one carry on Shabbat? Are weapons like jewelry or like tools?

A man must not go out [of the house on Shabbat] bearing a sword, nor a bow, nor a shield, nor a lance nor a spear. And if he did go out [with one of these] he is liable for a sin offering [because he has violated the final Shabbat labor, carrying]. Rabbi Eliezer says, "these are his ornaments" [like clothing or jewelry, and therefore he should be allowed to wear them]. But the Sages say [he is liable, because these are not ornaments. Rather,] these [weapons] are shameful; as it says, (Isaiah 2:4), "they shall beat their swords into plough shares and their spears into pruning-hooks, and nation shall not lift up sword against nation, and they will not learn war any more."

Comments

The Torah is maddeningly vague about the definition of the "work" which is forbidden on Shabbat. It explicitly forbids burning fires (Exodus 35:2), and relates the story of a man executed for gathering firewood on Shabbat (Numbers 15:32). Beyond that, the Rabbis were left to interpret the juxtaposition of verses for hints of what precisely was considered work. By studying the construction of the Tabernacle, they discovered thirty-nine forms of work that were, by comparison, therefore forbidden on Shabbat. These categories are listed in Mishnah Shabbat 7:2. The final of the thirty-nine categories is carrying an object more than four cubits (about seven feet) from one domain to another (e.g., from the house to the street).

One of the many challenges in defining work is that a person's intention can determine whether an activity is permitted or forbidden. Our Mishnah seeks to determine whether carrying a weapon is like wearing an ornament, and therefore permitted, or more like carrying a tool, and therefore forbidden. Rabbi Eliezer takes the former position, but the sages reject the notion that weapons can ever be considered ornaments for a Jew.

Questions

Does the Isaiah verse prove the sages' point? How so? Would it help Rabbi Eliezer's position if the weapon were non-utilitarian (e.g., a symbolic sword like the *Kirpan* worn by Sikh men today)? What about a soldier or guard? Is his or her weapon permitted as an ornament, or is it permitted because of *pikuah nefesh*, the obligation to protect life? During the Hasmonean revolt, the pious Maccabees initially refused to fight on Shabbat. After their towns were massacred, they decided that fighting in self-defense was permitted. This same policy is followed today by the Israel Defense Forces. Should soldiers be allowed to carry their weapons into synagogue on Shabbat?

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Torah from JTS

Parashat Va-y'hi
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Parashah Commentary

This week's commentary was written by Rabbi Charles Savenor, Associate Dean, The Rabbinical School, JTS.

Laying on his deathbed, Jacob beckons for his grandchildren, Ephraim and Manasseh. He wants to bless the sons of his beloved Joseph even before his own children, affirming the covenant of Abraham with the next generation.

Joseph brings in his sons and places them in their birth order to receive their blessings. Creating a scene reenacted every Shabbat, Jacob places his hands on these boys and commences his words of prayer.

The Torah reads: "But Israel stretched out his right hand and laid it on Ephraim's head, though he was the younger, and his left hand on Manasseh's head—thus crossing his hands—although Manasseh was the first born" (*Etz Hayim*, Gen. 48:14).

Joseph urgently points out that Jacob has seemingly misplaced his hands by laying his right hand, the prominent hand, on the younger son. Joseph's correction echoes Laban's words to Jacob when he sought to marry Rachel before her older sister, Leah. Laban says, "It is not the practice in our place to marry off the younger before the older" (*Etz Hayim*, Gen. 29:26). Similarly, common practice dictates that the oldest son receives the first, and perhaps the best, blessing.

One might speculate that Jacob's actions are related to his failing eyesight. We recall that this was one reason that Jacob himself was able to acquire the birthright blessing from Isaac. However, it would be myopic to understand this awkward moment tied to bad eyesight, when Jacob says: "I know, my son, I know. He [Manasseh] too shall become a people, and he too shall be great. Yet his younger brother shall be greater than he, and his offspring shall be plentiful enough for nations" (*Etz Hayim*, Gen. 48:19). The Midrash relates that Jacob's actions are connected to a sudden prophetic encounter foreseeing the greater actions of Ephraim's descendants than Manasseh's.

This exchange between Jacob and Joseph is more than a family struggle about authority. Repeated words, even letters, in the Torah inform us that more is taking place within our sacred text than meets the eye. In the aforementioned verse, when

setting Joseph straight, Jacob says: “*Yadati beni yadati*,” which translates as “I know, my son, I know.” From the rest of the verse we comprehend this dying patriarch is explicitly aware of his action and the players around him. Yet he could have communicated this without saying “I know” twice.

This seemingly unnecessary repetition begs the question: why did Jacob say “*yadati*” twice? Furthermore, since *yadati* means “I know,” what does Jacob know that he wants to share with his family?

In our physical, mortal world, natural laws—physics, time, and even family birth orders—matter. In the ancient world, and even in many cultures today, birth order determines one’s familial and societal rights and obligations. Similarly, in Judaism the *bachor* (the first born) occupies an esteemed position. When the Temple stood, first-born fruits and animals were considered the best sacrifices. Moreover, before the installation of the tribe of Levi as the caretakers of the Tabernacle, the firstborns had been originally intended to serve in this role.

By blessing the younger child first, Jacob teaches future generations a valuable lesson. On one level, Jacob imparts that one’s actions and character matter more than birth order in achieving success and determining one’s blessings in life. Not even their being blessed first guarantees their future success, for this episode is not limited to striving for a meritocracy.

Jacob’s first *yadati* (I know) refers to his firsthand knowledge and experience that life does not always unfold along a linear trajectory. As the psalmist proclaims, God’s greatness is *ein heker*, beyond our comprehension (Psalm 145). We see this pattern evidenced repeatedly in Genesis. Abraham, the youngest of three, receives the call from God. Isaac inherits the birthright over his older half brother, Ishmael. Jacob himself receives the birthright over his older twin brother, Esau. And Joseph, the son of the second wife, Rachel, is at the helm of the family, literally lording over his brothers, including Reuven, Jacob’s oldest son.

When dealing with faith and the covenant with the children of Abraham, human birth order and the normal rules of nature are not applicable. In other words, one’s birthright is not determined by one’s birth order. This represents the fundamental message of the entire Torah on familial and national levels.

That Jacob utters “*yadati*” twice also signals to his descendants that the covenant of Abraham has entered a new phase. Earlier in Genesis, we find Abram—childless at that time—being addressed by God: “And He said to him, ‘Know well that your offspring shall be strangers in a land not theirs, and they shall be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years’” (*Etz Hayim*, Gen. 15:13). It is important to note that the expression “know well” actually appears as two words, “*yado’a tayda*,” in the Hebrew text. In both this verse and the one in *Parshat Va-y’hi*, the Hebrew word for “know” appears twice when once would have sufficed.

The second *yadati* serves as a segue into the next chapter for the burgeoning Israelite nation. What Jacob knows is that the path ahead will be filled with hardship, slavery, and affliction, but salvation lies beyond that. Who could ever imagine that a slave people could leave, let alone be liberated from, their masters, the world’s superpower of the era? Yet the covenant of Abraham does not operate by the ordinary rules of political science.

In his 1898 essay “Concerning the Jews,” Mark Twain affirms this observation:

The Egyptian, the Babylonian, and the Persian rose, filled the planet with

sound and splendor, then . . . passed away. The Greek and the Roman followed. The Jew saw them all, beat them all, and is now what he always was, exhibiting no decadence, no infirmities of age, no weakening of his parts . . . All things are mortal but the Jew; all other forces pass, but he remains. What is the secret of his immortality?

Two thousand years after Jacob’s deathbed scene, Twain marvels at the unfathomable sustained presence of the Jewish people, despite our tragedies and travails. Fifty years later, with the founding of the State of Israel, David Ben Gurion provides an answer to Twain’s query: “In Israel, in order to be a realist, you must believe in miracles.”

Every Friday night, as Jewish parents reenact this ancient scene by embracing and blessing their children, they communicate that our deeds will shape the blessings we receive. Equally important, they share our patriarch Jacob’s knowledge that the covenant of Abraham means that the unexpected can happen at any time and bring salvation to our people and the whole world.

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A Taste of Torah

A Comment on Rashi by Rabbi Marc Wolf

His brothers went to him themselves, flung themselves before him, and said, “We are prepared to be your slaves.” But Joseph said to them, “Have no fear! Am I a substitute for God? Besides, although you intended me harm, God intended it for good, so as to bring about the present result—the survival of many people. And so, fear not. I will sustain you and your children.” Thus he reassured them, speaking kindly to them (Gen. 50:18–21).

Rashi

Am I a substitute for God? Am I perhaps in God’s place? The prefixed “*hey*” denotes marvel. If I wanted to harm you, would I be able? Did not all of you plan evil against me? The Holy Blessed One, however, designed it for good. So how can I alone harm you?

Comment

With the death of Jacob, the brothers have the same concern with Joseph that Jacob must have had about Esau at the death of Isaac. What is to stop him from exacting retribution now? They wonder, with all the power that Joseph now has, it must have only been out of respect for their father that he waited to mete out their punishment. Rashi’s comment is intriguing. Are we to understand that if he could, Joseph would harm the brothers? Is his comment resignation, or possibly something worse, a promise of retribution by God?

Sarna, in his commentary in the *JPS Torah Commentary* on Genesis takes our reading of Rashi and states, “Man dares not usurp the prerogative of God to whom alone belongs the right of punitive vindication” (350). Another read of Rashi leads me to understand Joseph’s comment as a voice of moral clarity that both he and the brothers heard. They could have “done him in” when they threw him in the pit, but the sacrificial ram was as far as they could go. Here Joseph is recognizing that both the brothers and he were guided by God as their moral compass.

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