

Tze U'Imad—Go and Learn

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

שבת קמו, ב

משנה: מי שנשרו כליו בדרך במים מהלך בהן ואינו חושש הגיע לחצר החיצונה שוטחן בחמה אבל לא כנגד העם
גמרא: אמר רב יהודה אמר רב כל מקום שאסרו חכמים מפני מראית העין אפילו בחדרי חדרים אסור תנן

Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 146b

Mishnah: One whose clothes get wet from water on the road may continue walking in them without concern [of violating Shabbat]. When he arrives at his courtyard he may lay them in the sun [to dry] but not in front of [other] people.

Talmud: Rav Yehuda reported, "Rav said, 'Anytime that the Sages made a prohibition because of *marit ayin* (for the sake of appearance) it applies even in the most private of settings.'"

There is another type of prohibition that applies not only to the rules of Shabbat, but to all other areas of Jewish living as well. *Marit ayin*—literally *in sight of eye*—is a principle that demands not only that our actions accord with what is right, but that the appearance of all those actions be above suspicion. The Mishnah, in tractate Sheqalim (3:2), explains, "One must fulfill human expectations, just as one does Divine." Our Sages understood that religious communities are human communities. We believe that living in a human community requires that we take other people's needs and concerns into account.

In the above passage, our mishnah explains, though one need not worry that walking in the rain or fording a body of water is prohibited on Shabbat (a prohibition that could be suggested by the similarity to laundering clothes), nonetheless, on arriving home, one must not hang those clothes up to dry in plain sight. Those who see wet clothes hanging to dry might think that the owner of the clothes laundered them on Shabbat. Rav Yehuda takes this prohibition one step further. Based on earlier authorities he demands that we not perform acts prohibited because of *marit ayin* even in private. He seems to believe that all of our actions, public and private should be in consonance. May we all strive for this high level of integrity in days to come.

Questions:

1. Does Rav Yehuda take his demand for integrity a step too far? Do you agree or disagree with him? Why?
2. To what extent should we allow the expectations of others to determine our actions? A bit, a great deal, totally, or not at all?

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Torah from JTS

Parashat Va-y'hi

Genesis 47:28–50:26

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Parashah Commentary

This week's commentary was written by Rabbi David Hoffman, scholar-in-residence, Department of Development, and lecturer in the Department of Talmud and Rabbinics, JTS

Indifference to the sublime wonder of living is the root of sin.

—Abraham Joshua Heschel

I want to tell you about a person close to me, whom I think some of you may recognize, not in name but in disposition. Let's call him Uncle Lenny.

A number of years ago, I was at the wedding of one of Uncle Lenny's grandchildren, and I remember someone asking him, "How's it going?" An innocent question, but to this day I remember Uncle Lenny's response: "Not so bad." I remember feeling deeply upset by Uncle Lenny's words. Here we were at this wonderful, joyous moment where he was able to see his first grandchild get married to a fabulous woman. Uncle Lenny was with his family; he enjoyed good health; and all he was able to muster was, "Not so bad." His response struck me almost as outrageous.

Now, I have not been completely forthright. A number of years earlier, Uncle Lenny's wife of fifty years had a debilitating stroke that left her a fraction of the woman she once was. So, Uncle Lenny had come on hard times. But even so, his response bothered me because I had heard these same words for years, even when Uncle Lenny and his wife shared the blessings of good health.

Every year when I read the parashiyot Va-yiggash and Va-y'hi, I think of Uncle Lenny.

Jacob has learned that his beloved son Joseph is still alive. Not only alive, but second in command of a superpower. And not only that, but Joseph was about to save all of Jacob's family from famine and give them food and wealth.

It is at this moment, when Jacob has come down to Egypt, that Joseph introduces his elderly father to his boss, Pharaoh. Upon meeting Jacob,

Pharaoh asks him, "How many are the years of your life?" Jacob's response always hurts me: "The years of my sojourn are one hundred and thirty. Few and bad have been the years of my life, nor do they come up to the life spans of my fathers" (Genesis 47:9). One can only imagine the expression on Pharaoh's face.

At this moment, when we would like to imagine Jacob feeling great pride in his son Joseph, when we imagine he must have been overcome by feelings of blessings and fortune, he replies, in essence, "My life is terrible! Sit down, Pharaoh and let me tell you of my hardships."

And yes, it is true. Jacob has had a hard life. He had to run away from his home because his brother wanted to kill him. He was tricked and had to work extra years to marry the love of his life; she then died before him. His daughter was raped. He knew there was much dissension among his sons. His favorite son, firstborn of his favorite wife, disappeared. Yet still, I find Jacob's response almost blasphemous.

And I am not alone. There is a midrash that says, "How dare Jacob represent his life as such. I (God) saved Jacob from Esau and Lavan, I returned Dinah and Joseph to him and Jacob dares represent his life as 'Few and bad years?!' For each of the words Jacob uttered to Pharaoh I will take a year of his life away. He really will not reach the years of his father and grandfather!"

I think this midrash is amazing. It indicts Jacob for his inability to experience *hakarat hatov*, the recognition of the good and blessings in one's life. Even acknowledging that Jacob has undergone so much pain and difficulty, the midrash condemns his incapacity to recognize the blessings he has received. This inability is a tragic flaw of Jacob's character.

But we should not give up on Jacob. In this week's Parashat Va-y'hi, Jacob presents us with a completely different attitude toward life.

As he is about to die, he gathers his family around him and leaves them a precious ethical will. Jacob says to Joseph, "I never expected to see you again, and here God has let me see your children as well" (Genesis 48:11). Jacob finally expresses awareness of his life's blessings.

Then Jacob offers his grandchildren the most profound blessing: "The God who has been my shepherd from my birth to this day, the Angel who has redeemed me from all harm—bless these lads" (Gen. 48:15). Jacob acknowledges the blessings that God has bestowed upon him and recalls them even as he is dying.

Jacob leaves his children and us with the greatest of legacies—*hakarat hatov* for the blessings that he has received. I like to think that within Jacob's words to his family is his hope that they too will be able to feel deep down, even at hard moments, that life is more than "not so bad."

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A Taste of Torah

A Comment on Ramban by Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz

Genesis 48:7 [Jacob says to Joseph], "And I, when I was returning from Paddan, Rachel died to my sorrow, while I was journeying in the Land of Canaan, when still some distance short of Ephrath; and I buried her there on the road to Ephrath—now Bethlehem."

Ramban, "and I buried her there." In line with the plain [*peshat*] meaning of Torah, it is understood that Jacob spoke to Joseph in an apologetic vein so that when he discerned his father's wish to be buried in the cave of Machpelah, Joseph should not be angered about his [Jacob's] failure to bury Rachel, Joseph's mother, there just as he later buried Leah there.

This week's parashah, Va-y'hi, opens with the final days of Jacob. Having sought a sense of rootedness and peace, he now summons his strength to express his dying wishes before his beloved son Joseph. As he calls Joseph and his grandsons, Ephraim and Menashe, before him, Jacob mentions two critical moments in his life. Curiously, he raises the burial of Joseph's mother, Rachel—that is to say, he tells Joseph that she was buried on the way to Ephrath. What is the significance of this moment? Why, as Jacob is about to bless his grandsons, does he mention this particular episode?

Nahmanides, along with other commentators, explains that Jacob sought to apologize to Joseph. As he is about to request that his son bury him in the ancestral grave of Machpelah, Jacob apologizes for not having buried Rachel, Joseph's mother and Jacob's most beloved wife, in that sacred place. Ramban senses a subtext of resentment on Joseph's part and so he proposes that Jacob's words are spoken in an apologetic tone in an effort to heal their relationship. Rashi expresses this even more explicitly (see Jeremiah 31:15):

Now I know that there is some resentment in your heart against me [for not having buried her in the Cave of Machpelah]. But you should know that I buried her by the word of God, that she might help her children when Nebuhadnezzar would exile them, for when they passed along that road, Rachel came forth from her grave and stood by her tomb beseeching mercy for them . . .

According to this interpretation, it was not Jacob's own initiative, but God's plan to bury Rachel along the roadside. The image, based on the prophet Jeremiah's vision, is dramatic and emotional. Rachel weeps as her children are sent into exile; but she is promised by God that she will witness their return. And so she is buried on the road to Ephrath which will be the way home.

Though Jeremiah's vision relates explicitly to the destruction of the First Temple, one cannot help but connect this image of Rachel weeping to the events in Israel over the past week. As Israel is forced into battle by those who seek to send us once again into exile, we hope and pray Rachel will once again welcome her children back to their homeland—in peace and in security. And that the foundations laid by our more recent ancestors in rebuilding our homeland will prove to be as well-timed and prescient as those taken by Jacob.

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