

## Life Lessons from Rebbetzin's Heart

*The holidays are behind us, and we are starting over anew. As we begin a new cycle of Weekly Torah readings, I am called to share a new parasha perspective with you. I thought this year to do something very different. Rather than engaging in lots of research, I wanted to share with you concepts from my heart, issues and matters that I care deeply about, that I will try to tie to each of the weekly Torah portions. I can't think of a good title yet, if you have any suggestions please share!*

### Parashat Bereishit

## Taking Responsibility for our Actions and their Effect

### A Saga of Two Grandmothers in Conflict

Coming out of Yom Kippur, one of the things on my mind lately is the importance of asking forgiveness, which includes apologizing to anyone we may have hurt or wronged in any way. It's hard to believe that the story I'm about to share with you is not about two teenage girls but rather about two middle-aged grandmothers. It is a saga between Tziporah and Miriam, who had been best friends for years. For more than 30 years, they had the most amazing relationship. In the beginning, Miriam was the one who helped and gave advice, but that shifted, and it was so special to for both of them to have a friend with whom they could share an equal relationship. For years, they both supported each other through hardships, each of them helping her friend deal with husbands, children, personal development issues and more. Over the summer a conflict developed between them, which Miriam very much wanted to work out, yet Tziporah kept retreating and avoiding her. Miriam – a leader type could be headstrong, and it was difficult to convince her in any discussion. Tziporah was more of a soft-spoken, people-pleaser type of person, so it is understandably that she was trying to avoid conflict with Miriam. For many years, Miriam had supported her in working on facing people and dealing with conflict, even if it may not always be comfortable. Based on this understanding of both of their personalities, it was clear that in order for them to work things out, they both had to come toward one another. Miriam needed to soften her approach, moving from *netzach* to *hod*, and put an effort into hearing Tziporah's perspective. Tziporah needed to move from *hod* to *netzach* in order to muster up courage to deal with what had come up between them rather than sweeping it under the rug, pretending that everything was just fine. If they were able to do this then they could both meet in *yesod*, ultimately learn from each other and truly grow. Our matriarchs Rachel and Leah who were such opposite personalities paved the way for us to follow their path of working out clashes, overcoming anger, jealousy and hurt feelings. Their true soul work and *tikun* (repair) are the bricks that build the walls of our eternal Temple. This is why the place of the Holy of Holies is on the border between the lands of Yehuda and Binyamin – the sons of Leah and Rachel.

### Taking Responsibility to Go Out of Our Way Not to Hurt Anyone Accidentally

Miriam cried and prayed, prayed and cried but Tziporah didn't respond when she suggested that they work things out through a Rabbi or therapist. No matter how much Miriam apologized for her part of the tango, Tziporah remained silent. The day preceding Yom Kippur, they finally had a good talk. The energy of the day definitely helped, and they both felt really heard by one another. It was such a good feeling for both of them to finally talk and hear each other out that Miriam was totally

ready to overlook that Tziporah still didn't apologize for causing her all that hurt for several months. She was satisfied that Tziporah seemed to understand that it was extremely painful for her when she closed off and retreated rather than having an open and honest discussion. Tziporah had been learning *The Work* of Byron Katie, and Miriam listened to her point that she should be less sensitive and not get hurt so easily, as often people do not mean to hurt us. Miriam did not answer her back what she had learned from Nechama Leibowitz z"l, who had told an anecdote about a person who stepped on someone else's toes in the bus, exclaiming, "Sorry, I didn't mean to hurt you!" Nechama explained, "It is not enough not to mean to hurt others, we need to go out of our way and take precautions to ensure that we don't hurt anyone inadvertently." Anyway, when Yom Kippur kicked in Miriam had forgiven Tziporah completely, never mind about the apology.

### **Are We Responsible for the Feelings of Others?**

The reason it is so hard to forgive people who don't ask for forgiveness, is that you don't know if they really truly understood, and you can never be sure that they may not repeat the offensive act. This is exactly what happened following Yom Kippur. After Miriam had just explained Tziporah how hurtful it was when she closed off the communication, Tziporah wanted to hang up again rather than communicating when something painful came up. It was painful for Miriam that Tziporah preferred visiting briefly Thursday afternoon rather than spending a Shabbat together, and when Miriam asked her to please say something that would help give her the feeling that Tziporah still loved her, Tziporah retorted, "It is almost Shabbat and I have to get off the phone. "But there is more than three hours before candlelight, please let's not end our conversation like this," begged Miriam. "If we hang up now it will be hard for me to stop crying." She added. Tziporah's response to this remark was like rubbing salt in Miriam's sore wound. "I am not responsible for your feelings," Tziporah remarked, before hanging up.

### **Blame Rather than Claim**

It takes spiritual maturity to take full responsibility for our actions, recognize and express that we are less than perfect, and our imperfections may sometimes be pitted against someone else's imperfections. When this happens, we may have a tendency to evade responsibility since we can easily blame it on someone else. This is what happened in the Garden of Eden when Hashem confronted Adam with eating from the Tree, and he blamed it on Chava saying, "The woman that you put at my side she gave me of the Tree and I ate" (*Bereishit* 3:12). Chava was no better when she blamed everything on the snake saying, "The serpent tempted me and I ate" (*Bereishit* 3:13). The tendency to blame rather than claim has been carried down from our first ancestors in the Garden of Eden to become ingrained in our spiritual genetics. Yet, it is precisely the ability to overcome this inclination to blame that eventually will repair the breach and return us to the Garden.

### **Extracting the Sparks from the Husks of *The Work***

Byron Katie teaches that we shouldn't judge our neighbor but look at things from a different perspective. This is definitely in line with the Torah that teaches us to give the benefit of the doubt (*Vayikra* 19:15). I have no doubt that *The Work* has helped countless people get closer to one another and pull themselves out of negativity, and I too try to apply its principles when appropriate. However, as with all systems that are not Torah-based, we cannot follow them to the

tee. Rather, we need to extract all their good sparks while discarding the husk. One of Byron Katie's principles is that no one can ever hurt you, as it is your own attitude that causes you to feel hurt. While there is truth to this principle to a certain extent and we can alleviate our pain with a positive attitude, it is not an absolute truth. There are actions, which can be objectively hurtful such as murder, rape etc. This applies on a lesser degree as well. If no one could ever hurt anyone else there would be no need to take responsibility for our actions, we could just blame the victim for feeling hurt, as Tziporah did. Miriam had just told her that she had a sore toe, and she was stepping on it while exclaiming that it was her own fault if this caused her pain. Miriam wished Tziporah would at least have said something like, "I know this is painful for you, but I just don't know what to say right now, I wish I could say something that would make you feel loved, but no words are coming to me. Perhaps after I process my feelings I will be able to better communicate..."

### **Getting Credit by Remaining a Victim**

It took some time for Miriam to realize that it was not her job to judge Tziporah, she too, needed to take responsibility for her own actions and feelings. She needed to apply the principle that everything that happens to us is from Hashem, for a purpose to help us grow. So Miriam tried to really look inside of herself and came up with the following: The pain Tziporah caused her is like a plant, if you stop watering the plant it will die, but if you keep brooding over your pain, you are choosing to remain a victim. Being a victim, the one who is hurt, is also a way of trying to get credit and empathy from others. It is like saying, "Poor me, look what others are doing to me, I'm so *miskena* (pitiable). I am right and others are wrong, I deserve love and kindness." Miriam realized that when she told Tziporah that she wouldn't be able to stop crying if they ended their conversation with a dead end like this, Tziporah must have felt that Miriam was blaming her, and that's why she reacted to what she perceived as a blame, although in truth Miriam was just describing her feelings at the moment. As Nechama taught, it is not enough not to intend to hurt Tziporah, even while feeling seriously hurt herself, Miriam also needed to learn to think of the other person rather than about her own pain. She too needed to go out of her way to ensure that she wouldn't say anything that may be even subtly hurtful to others. Knowing Tziporah as a people-pleaser, Miriam should have known better than to throw in her face that she was causing her pain. Miriam realized that Tziporah would never come to her. "What a pity to ruin a precious friendship," Miriam thought, and so she took a deep breath and called Tziporah to apologize for using her pain to cause Tziporah pain. Tziporah was very moved by the phone call, she too was truly sorry and they made plans to spend a Shabbat together.

### **Taking Full Responsibility Rectifies Adam and Eve**

When we ask for forgiveness, we need to take full responsibility for our actions, and not mention the extenuating circumstances why we acted as we did. An apology that goes something like, "I'm sorry for what I did, but it is because you did x, y, and z," is worse than no apology. Hashem allowed the other person to squeeze us to our limits in order to test whether we would remain composed and act righteously. If we lost it, even in an excruciatingly difficult situation, we still need to take full responsibility, as Hashem never gives us a test we cannot pass. It is hard to take responsibility for our actions because it makes us feel lower than the person we have wronged. It is especially hard if they have also wronged us. We need a good dose of self-confidence to admit our lowliness without going under. This is how Yehuda son of Ya'acov was able to take

responsibility for his actions and publicly exclaim, "She [Tamar] is more in the right than I!" (*Bereishit* 38:26). He could have blamed Tamar for dressing up as a prostitute and tempting him. He could have blamed her for the death of his two sons who were married to her. Instead, he chose to take all the blame on himself. Taking responsibility for our actions brings redemption. From Yehuda's words of acknowledging his fault and taking the blame on himself the seed of Mashiach sprang forth. Through Yehuda's apology, he merited that King David, the exemplar penitent, descended from him. When King David took full responsibility for taking Bat Sheva, exclaiming, "I recognize my transgressions, and am ever conscious of my sin" (*Tehillim* 51:5), he repaired the sin of Adam and became the progenitor of Mashiach. So next time we have an chance to take responsibility for our actions and apologize, let us not pass it by, perhaps it is the opportunity to repair the sin in the Garden and add a brick to the Temple wall.