

Parashat Vayeshev

Does the Torah have clear Parameters for Relationships?

Does Moral Relativism in Relationship Coincide with the Torah?

Lately, I have been very involved in dealing with relationships between siblings. This parallels the Torah portions that we have been reading in *Bereishit* – the first book of the Torah. We learn about the relationships of Ya'acov and Esav, Rachel and Leah and Yosef and his brothers because the foundation of the Torah is built upon rectified relationship between sisters and brothers. In my spiritual healing work I recently asked advice from a *chareidi* (ultra-orthodox) Dr. of Psychology and a mentor of numerous women. I asked her how to help bring about a loving reconciliation between two very close sisters who had a falling out. One of them wanted to work on the problems but the other reserved her right to withhold expressing what was bothering her in the relationship. She also didn't want to hear what bothered her sister. I was very surprised when I received the following response: "There is no objective right and wrong in relationships. Everyone has a right to choose the kind of relationship that makes him comfortable. The sister is therefore entitled to decline having a deep conversation to air out the conflict. A true relationship can only be based on the elements of relationship that both partners agree on." Now I'm questioning whether this psychology of relationship applies to the Torah law and ethics. According to this view of moral relativism, why should it bother anyone if two homosexuals both agree to their relationship? This view of moral relativism stems from the Western outlook based on Greek philosophy that logic and science override morality. It is not by chance that we read about the problems between Yosef and his brothers around Chanukah time, when we clarify the difference between the Greek and the Torah outlook, which pertains no less to relationship. The ancient origins of moral relativism that has become so prominent in the twentieth century derives from the classical Greek world. Both the historian Herodotus and the sophist Protagoras appeared to endorse relativism. The view that moral truth or justification is relative to a culture or society continued through most of the history of Western philosophy (<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/moral-relativism/>). If we don't believe in the Torah of the Almighty G-d, moral relativism makes perfect sense. Why should one person's belief and morals override another's? However, being a Torah-true Jew includes believing in the ultimate values of the Torah, which have clear parameters for relationships between siblings, children and parents as well as husband and wife. The absurdity of the Dr.'s view on relationship is evident, if for example, we apply it to a marriage in which the husband wants physical intimacy, but the wife wants just to talk. Should the husband be happy with what they both agree on which is to have an intellectual and emotional relationship but not a physical relationship, because that is not what they both want? We all know that a marriage without physical intimacy is not called a marriage in the Torah, so are there no parameters of rectified relationship between siblings? Perhaps the story of Yosef and his brothers can give us some clues.

The Brothers did not Hide their Negative Feelings in their Heart

The underlying issues behind all problems in the world are based on sibling relationships. The Arabs' hatred and continuous murder stems from Yishmael's jealousy of Avraham selecting Yitzchak to become his spiritual heir which includes the Divine promise of eternal inheritance of the Land of Israel (See Rashi, *Bereishit* 21:10). The Zohar teaches that the cause of antisemitism in the entire world is Esav's deep-seated jealousy and pain over the way his brother Ya'acov's took the birthright (*Zohar, Parashat Mishpatim* 111a). In this week's *parasha* we learn how the Egyptian exile was elicited by the brothers' jealousy of Yosef.

ספר בראשית פרק לז (ד) וַיִּרְאוּ אֶחָיו כִּי אֶתּוֹ אָהַב אָבִיהֶם מִכָּל אֶחָיו וַיִּשְׁנְאוּ אוֹתוֹ וְלֹא יָכְלוּ דַבְּרוֹ לְשָׁלוֹם:
 "When his brothers saw that their father loved him more than any of his brothers, they hated him so that they could not speak a friendly word to him" (*Bereishit* 37:4).

The underlying cause of most hatred is jealousy. The brothers hated Yosef because their father loved him more than all the other brothers (Rabbeinu Bachaya, *Bereishit* 37:11).

Although it is wrong to feel hatred and jealousy, at least the brothers didn't try to hide their feelings, and pretend that they had no negative feelings towards him.

רש"י על בראשית פרק לז פסוק ד

ולא יכלו דברו לשלום – מתוך גנותם למדנו שבחם שלא דברו אחת בפה ואחת בלב:

"From what is stated to their discredit, we may infer something to their credit. They did not speak one thing in their mouth having another thing quite different in their heart" (Rashi). "They had a good character trait that they expressed the feelings in their heart and did not flatter. Thus, King Solomon writes, 'A man that flatters his fellow, spreads a net for his feet' (*Mishley* 29:5)..." (Rabbeinu Bachaya). This teaches us a primary Torah principle in relationship, especially when it comes to sibling relationship. If we feel negatively towards another, it is preferable to express the negativity rather than pretending that everything is fine, while feeling otherwise in our heart. In fact, we learn from another Torah verse that this is not only preferable; it is actually a Torah requirement:

ספר ויקרא פרק יט (יז) לֹא תִשְׂנֵא אֶת אַחִיךָ בְּלִבְךָ הֹכִיחַ תּוֹכִיחַ אֶת עַמִּיתְךָ וְלֹא תִשָּׂא עָלָיו חָטָא:
 "You shall not hate your brother in your heart, you shall surely rebuke your neighbor and not suffer sin on his account" (*Vayikra* 19:17).

From this, we learn that even if we are not comfortable expressing what bothers us in a relationship, as Jews we may not keep negative feelings towards other Jews in our heart. Rather, we have a mitzvah to express them privately and lovingly and even more so to our own sibling.

Is Emotional Distance a Torah Prohibition?

Ohr Hachayim goes even further to define the kind of "hatred in the heart" that the Torah prohibits. It is not limited to complete hatred desiring that evil befall another Jew. Even feeling a slight distance in our heart is included in the prohibition **לֹא תִשְׂנֵא/lo tisna**, which he explains refers to *emotional distance* rather than *hatred*. The Torah wisely juxtaposes this prohibition with the word **אַחִיךָ** – "your brother," to teach us that the measure of **שִׂנְאָה/sinah** that the Torah prohibits includes even a slight emotional distance that only a sibling would sense. Perhaps the Torah recognizes that no matter how much we work on ourselves, if we do not air out our negative feelings it will cause us to lose the level of love and relationship that is proper between siblings (Ohr HaChayim, *Vayikra* 19:17).

"You Shall Surely Rebuke"

According to Jewish law, "Anyone who feels *שנאה/sinah* in his heart for another Jew is transgressing the negative commandment, 'You shall not hate (or distance yourself from) your brother in your heart.' If a person feels wronged, he is not permitted to remain silent. Rather it is a mitzvah to discuss his feelings, asking, 'Why did you do such and such,' as the continuation of our Torah verse states, '...you shall surely rebuke your neighbor and not suffer sin on his account.'" (*Kitzur Shulchan Aruch* 29:13). Bringing up the issues, asking our friend why she acted a certain way is bound to clear out any negative feelings. As the Torah teaches and my life experience confirms, when discussing negative feelings one of two things is likely to happen: A. The misunderstanding is cleared up and you realize that the negative feelings don't have any basis. B. The person apologizes and agrees to work on the issues that bother you. This removes your negative feelings (*Ohr HaChayim, Vayikra* 19:17). In the conflict between Yosef and his brothers, it is not clear who is right and who is wrong. Both sides were righteous individuals. Both sides had rationales for their actions. Yet, had they had a deep discussion between them in a respectful and loving way "airing out" their respective views and feelings, perhaps their conflict would not have led Yosef to bring their evil report to their father" (*Bereishit* 37:2), and his brothers to throw him into the pit (*Bereishit* 37:24).

Fear of Facing their Lower Selves

The brothers' jealousy over their father's love for Yosef is not an easy matter to air out. Rabbi Dr. Abraham J. Twerski explains that we often have base feelings that stem from the shadow sides of our personalities. The brothers sensed that they were jealous of Yosef but they could not just come out and say, "We hate Yosef because our father likes him better." When people are afraid to face their own shadow-side, they rationalize their behavior and try to elevate their base emotions. Therefore, the brothers concluded, "it does not bother me that Ya'acov loves Yosef more than ME, what bothers me is that 'Ya'acov loves Yosef more than ALL HIS BROTHERS (יְהִי לִי מְכֹל/m'kol Echav).'" Yosef's brothers were not willing to admit to themselves that they were motivated by petty jealousy but rather saw themselves as people of high character who were defending the rights of their downtrodden brothers. Therefore, they failed to understand that it was not Yosef's fault that his father loved him more. The irony is that the same brothers, who felt that Yosef was worthy of their hatred because he caused the other brothers to be looked down upon by Ya'acov, looked down upon their other brothers the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah (*Rav Frand, Parshas Vayeishev Yaakov Loved Yosef More Than All His Brothers*). Who knows if the Mashiach would have already been here had the brothers been willing to go deep down into their own psyche to face their shadow-selves and realize from where their negative feelings towards Yosef derived? Perhaps some family therapy would have helped facilitate this process?

Never Give Up on Your Brother

In spite of the negative feelings of his brothers, Yosef never gave up on returning the brotherly loving relationship that the Torah expects from siblings. Although he was well aware that his brothers hated him, Yosef nevertheless agreed to search for them in Shechem all alone (Rashi, *Bereishit* 37:13). Even as he got lost and had a great excuse to return back to the safety of his father's home, he never gave up on finding his brothers – he never gave up on regaining a

Life Lessons from Rebbetzin's Heart

relationship with them of mutual peace, love and brotherhood. This is what he told the man that he met on the way after having gotten lost, "It is my brothers that I seek..."

ספר בראשית פרק לז (טז) וַיֹּאמֶר אֶת אַחֵי אֲנֹכִי מִבְּקֶשׁ

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wlf-Tr5y2RU>, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m7ACxVaMcWg>.

Perhaps we can learn from the emphasis on the word "brothers" in the beginning of the verse that Yosef was asking and praying for his true loving brothers. His intense desire to rectify his relationship with his brothers and return the deepest emotional loving closeness of brotherhood, eventually bore fruit when Yosef revealed himself to his brothers in Egypt. "He kissed all his brothers, and wept upon them; only then were his brothers able to talk with him" (*Bereishit* 45:15). Finally, Yosef achieved his longed for loving reconciliation with his brothers. Ohr HaChaim explains that it was only when the brothers saw that Yosef wept over his separation from them that they recognized his good *midah* (character) of a loyal brother. Then they were finally able to speak with him again. Yosef's yearning for absolving all hatred and jealousy reverberated as well for his future descendants as it states,

ספר ישעיה פרק יא (יג)

וְיִסְרָה קִנְאֵת אֶפְרַיִם וְצַרְרֵי יְהוּדָה יִכְרְתוּ אֶפְרַיִם לֹא יִקְנֵא אֶת יְהוּדָה וְיְהוּדָה לֹא יִצַּר אֶת אֶפְרַיִם:

"Then Ephraim's jealousy shall cease and Yehuda's harassment shall end. Ephraim shall not be jealous of Yehuda and Yehuda shall not harass Ephraim" (*Yesha'yahu* 11:13).

Yosef's deep desire for a loving reconciliation with his brothers had repercussions for the future and it is available for us to tap into whenever we go through difficulties with our siblings. May we always seek our brothers and sisters in the very deepest way and never give up on them!