

The Power of Words

Parashat Vayeshev



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This Shabbat we are discussing Parashat Vayeshev (“Jacob dwelt”). In this week’s Torah portion, Jacob sought to sit and rest, you might call this retirement. Be that as it may, in reality, this parasha begins another chapter in Jacob’s hectic life full of instability.

First, we come across a very problematic issue, Jacob’s sons’ evil intention and plan to murder their brother Joseph in cold blood. Murder appears in Genesis several times:

Cain killed Abel, Esau planned and intended to murder Jacob... However, these incidences were not initiated by the patriarchs, the heads of the tribes of Israel. In this portion we will discover the darker sides of our forefathers.

The Dark Side of Our Forefathers

The Bible points to a possible cause of this abysmal hatred seen in the following verse:

But they saw him in the distance, and before he reached them, they plotted to kill him. 'Here comes that dreamer!' they said to each other. 'Come now, let's kill him and throw him into one of these cisterns and say that a ferocious animal devoured him. Then we'll see what comes of his dreams.' – Genesis 37:18-20 [NIV]

Any reasonable person might ask, is having one or two dreams a worthy cause for murder? Clearly in this situation there was more going on than what meets the eye. The sons of Jacob knew and understood that there were two types of classes in their house, there were the beloved sons of Rachel and then there was the rest of them. There was nothing to be done about it, and in truth, it wasn't even Joseph's fault. (Although it was Joseph's dreams that started to open the eyes of his brothers towards the inequality in their household.)

Joseph's dreams came from the ruminations of his heart. They revealed the fact that his father Jacob favored him, and also showed how Joseph was aware of it. He dreamt that his brothers started bowing down to him and he quickly informed his family of this revelation.

In the wake of these dreams, the brothers' frustration turned into a deeply-rooted hatred, and this loathing eventually led to their plan for murder. After discussing the matter, they decided to compromise and instead of killing Joseph, they would sell him into slavery.

Today I would like to focus on the meaning of the spoken word. Speaking comes as naturally as breathing. Furthermore, we need speech as much as we need air to breathe. We use language in every step of our daily lives, which goes to show its vast importance. Many verses in the Old and New Testaments warn us to be careful about what we say, as it is written:

*...keep your tongue from evil and your lips from telling lies. –
Psalms 34:13 [NIV]*

Words can build or destroy us. For instance, if we are told that we look bad, our mood drastically drops. In fact, it can actually ruin our entire day. When we are told how negative we are, it automatically drags us down. The attitude of the environment affects us as well as our behavior.

With speech, we have great power and great responsibility. If we emphasize only the bad and negative aspects, it will gain momentum. With our words, we have the ability and power to cast people into dark pits.

Positive words can also penetrate deeply. They have the power to elevate a person out of a negative self-image and empower them. Emphasizing goodness is a life-saving remedy.

If we honestly examine the reasons why we speak evil, we will find that this is often due to our need to elevate ourselves and to feel good about who we are. We have a tendency to diminish the other, because we are egotistical beings and it is within our nature to compare ourselves to those around us.

Here is an example of what the Jewish Sages had to say about this matter:

He who wants to lift himself up should build a hill for his neighbor, and not dig a pit.

We often speak badly about those we envy, out of the need to bring them down and elevate ourselves.

The Power of Words

James Chapter 3 focuses on the tongue and our communication with the environment. I think verse 2 in Chapter 3 is a key verse:

We all stumble in many ways. Anyone who is never at fault in what they say is perfect, able to keep their whole body in check. – James 3:2 [NIV]

James goes on to expand this picture and gives us images from the natural world – such as a horse, a ship, and even fire:

When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go. – James 3:3,4 [NIV]

James began with the bridle and the rudder as excellent examples of guidance and direction, the rudder and the bridle are both relatively small, but control the direction of a large body. He used these examples to illustrate the power of the tongue. With speech we can influence others for better or worse:

... Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one's life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell. – James 3:5b,6 [NIV]

James continued by comparing the tongue to fire. Everyone knows how important and how beneficial fire is. In fact, none of us would be able to go a day without it. At the same time, we also know how dangerous fire can be and how we must be cautious with it. Likewise, with the tongue, we can see its beneficial daily use while at the same time the need for caution.

In this example, James explains to us that no matter how big the forest, the smallest flame can burn it down completely. So too the tongue is a very dangerous organ, especially because we typically underestimate its importance. The unbridled tongue can cause death and even plan murder, as is the case in this week's parasha:

Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him all the more. He said to them, 'Listen to this dream I had: We were binding sheaves of grain out in the field when suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright, while your sheaves gathered around mine and bowed down to it.' His brothers said to him, 'Do you intend to reign over us? Will you actually rule us?' And they hated him all the more because of his dream and what he had said. – Genesis 37:5-8 [NIV]

Why in the world does Joseph tell his brothers, who are already jealous of him, such a dream? Furthermore, what reason did he have to continue telling them about his dreams?

At the beginning of this week's portion, the Torah tells us that Joseph was an informer who liked to tattle on his brothers to his father. This can be seen

in the following text:

...and he brought their father a bad report about them. – Genesis 37:2b [NIV]

There are commentators who try to explain this verse by saying that Joseph cared for his brothers and therefore told his father about their negative behavior. In this way he supposedly had his brothers' best interest in mind. However, as a result, his brothers hated him all the more, threw him into a pit, and sold him as a slave.

Talking about doing evil made their actions turn into evil as well. This serves as an important reminder to us to be wise when we use our tongues. It is not always sensible to speak, even if we try to help or have good intentions. The results are what matter in the end.

In Conclusion

Consider this example: You telling someone that they gained weight. This does not help. In fact, it has the opposite effect. Such a comment, even if it comes from a place of good intentions, will cause strife and will certainly not lead to positive results in the relationship.

The Old and New Testaments require of us to have wisdom and judgment in the words we utter from our mouths. So much so that Yeshua came out with a dramatic statement by saying the following:

But I tell you that everyone will have to give account on the day of judgment for every empty word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned. – Matthew 12:36,37 [NIV]

As James teaches, let us decide to be springs of living water:

Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be. Can both freshwater and saltwater flow from the same spring? My brothers and sisters, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water. – James 3:10-12 [NIV]

At some point we will have to decide, are we going to be a spring of life – a source of living water, a hope, an encouragement, and speaking the truth with love? We must strive to answer yes to this question.

**The Teachings of
Messiah Yeshua
*in a Jewish Context***

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