

Va-Yishlach December 10, 2011 14 Kislev 5772
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Last Shabbos we continued our discussion about empathy, about having the courage to care - to see life through another person's eyes - to walk in their shoes.... Today I want to talk about the flip side of empathy, which is self-awareness and self-acceptance. Empathy is when you become focused and aware of another and try hard to understand what they must be thinking and feeling. But you can't have empathy -- you can't really be concerned about another person enough to see the world through their eyes -- until you understand yourself.

So today I want to talk about one of the greatest challenges in life. The challenge of being yourself. We usually think of this as relating just to kids; we know that kids struggle for individuation, to establish their own identity. But the truth is that this challenge comes up again and again throughout our own lives as we continue to grow and to evolve. So many people have so many expectations of us; we take on so many roles in this life. We are constantly thinking about how we are doing from their perspective. At every age and every stage we ask, "How do I have the courage to really be me?"

This week's Torah portion marks the turning point in Jacob's life. He's now an older man, well established with a large family. He is prosperous and successful. Everything seems to be going his way, except that he has some unfinished business and it is eating him alive. He has to face up to his past by meeting his brother Esau after being on the run for twenty years. And the Torah uses a special word for what he is feeling inside. The text says, "Va-Yirah" -And he was afraid - , "Va-Yetzer Lo" and he was distressed". And the commentators jump on this. Sure he was afraid, but why was he "distressed"???

Fear is easy enough to understand. He is afraid that his brother would hurt him. But the word "Va-Yetzer" is more curious... It is actually a play on words. Many of us know this word "Yetzer", we have heard it before. We all have, according to our tradition, a "Yetzer Ha-Rah", an urge to follow our negative side. Fear comes from the heart, but true distress comes from the mind. Jacob's mind started playing tricks on him. He started thinking that he was inadequate morally and physically to face up to his brother. And that's why he wrestles with this mysterious figure. He needs to subdue those thoughts of inadequacy; he needs to come to grips with his past; he needs to find

peace and quiet in his own head. And we actually see him wrestling with himself, in a way I think we can all relate to. We all have those experiences when the negative voices from our Yetzer Ha-Rah start telling us that we don't measure up, that we don't have what it takes to be judged favorably by others. Jacob psyched himself out and that's why he wrestles with his Yetzer, his conscience. He needs to figure out who he really is. That's why when he pins this "angel/figure", that is really his own conscience, he yells, "Tell me your name!"...

So how do I know that Jacob was wrestling with himself and not with some other person who came to attack him? Because the Torah itself says, "Va-yivater Yaakov Li-Vadoe" - and Jacob was alone - L'Vadoe. And this word does not simply mean "alone", it means unique, distinct, and self-sufficient. It is most frequently used to describe Gd. Gd is also called "L'vadoe" - the One that is unlike any other. Jacob was wrestling with his L'Vadoe, defining his uniqueness, his distinctiveness, his self-sufficiency.

Jewish tradition teaches us that the key to peace and happiness, to wealth and power lie in understanding your "L'vadoe" - your uniqueness as a creation of Gd. Recall the famous Mishna in Pirkei Avot (4:1) that defines the qualities of wisdom, might, wealth and honor: (You'll find it printed in the sermon notes of the Shabbos brochure) "Who is wise? He who learns from all people...Who is mighty? He who restrains his inclinations... Who is wealthy? He who is content with his lot... Who is honored? He who honors people." What do these four have in common? The common denominator between all these definitions is that they allow a person to achieve these qualities, these lofty goals, in any and all circumstance. By the Jewish definition YOU can achieve wisdom even without being exposed to scholars in expensive universities - when you learn something from everyone; YOU can display might and power even if others are blessed with greater physical strength - when you learn to control your negative drives; true wealth depends solely on YOUR perspective and attitude, regardless of how much or little money you have in relation to others - when you are satisfied with what you've got; and your honor does not depend on how others look upon you, but rather on how YOU look upon others. The honor extended to them will most likely be returned in kind.

L'vadoe - Not so much alone, but independent, unique and self-sustaining. Not arrogance, but quiet strength - confidence, self-assurance. That's the WHY of Jewish life, it's the secret to happiness

and inner-peace. Jacob shows that for some people, perhaps for most people, it does not come easy. You have to fight for your life, for your inner life, for a good thought life. It all hinges on what you think about; about yourself, about your world, about your future. Our thoughts shape our attitudes, which in turn shape our decisions and actions. And that is why so many of you make a commitment, a personal commitment - not for your kids, or anyone else, but for you. Because this is the place that you can be alone with your thoughts. No cell phones, no e-mail, just you and Gd finding the quiet place inside your heart where the two of you can come together. It is in that precious quiet that we can focus on who we really are... because that is the only way we can begin to move forward toward becoming the people we truly want to be. Please join our Hazzan as we rise in heartfelt prayer...