



PRIORITIES

HOW DOES ONE DEAL WITH CONFLICTING demands? The focus of the Sedra¹ is on the life of Jacob. In this we gain an insight about the need to be concerned about a very precious issue: the education of one's children.

Fleeing Esau's wrath, Jacob made his way to Haran, outside the future land of Israel. There he married and raised a large family. The Sages point out that his success in bringing up children in the Jewish way exceeded that of Abraham and Isaac. After all, Abraham fathered Ishmael, and Isaac bore the cruel hunter Esau. But Jacob, in spite of living in a latter day Exile, outside the Holy Land, experiencing in-law problems, financial difficulties and a hostile environment, nonetheless managed to raise a family in which every single member was loyal to Judaism².

This is the age-old challenge for the Jew. What can we learn from Jacob? According to the Sages, a key to his success was his involvement with his children's education. We find references in the Talmud to his having regular study sessions with his son Joseph³.

At the same time, however, Jacob is known for his own mastery of Torah. The Torah calls him a "dweller in tents" to hint to us about his tremendous dedication to Torah learning on the most profound level⁴. How did Jacob sort out his priorities - the obligation to perfect himself and the obligation to teach his children?

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There is a story which might help us understand the answer. For a time Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi⁵ lived on the upper floor in the same house as his married son Rabbi Dov Ber. The latter had been blessed with a baby who was sleeping in a cot in his parents' home, on the ground floor. Both Rabbis were engrossed in profound study of Torah in their respective apartments, Rabbi Shneur Zalman upstairs and Rabbi Dov Ber downstairs.

Suddenly, the sound of the baby's cries could be heard. The baby had fallen from his cot!

His father Rabbi Dov Ber was so totally immersed in his learning that he simply did not hear the cries. The child's grandfather, Rabbi Shneur Zalman, however, although similarly engrossed, was able to extract himself from his deep concentration, and went down to soothe the baby.

Later, he remarked to the baby's father Rabbi Dov Ber: "However engrossed you are in exalted spiritual matters, you must always be able to hear the cry of a child." This became the byword of the Chabad approach to life. "The cry of a child" represents any call for help. However tempting it is to concentrate on one's own ambition for self-development, that cry cannot be ignored.

Yet in fact, devoted concern for one's own children and also for other people helps one attain a higher spiritual level for oneself. We see that when Jacob embarked on his journey, alone, at the beginning of the Sedra, he had a spiritual experience: the dream of the ladder, with angels ascending and descending. But at the end of the Sedra, when he had brought a large family into the world, and had worked to support them and to create a monotheistic Jewish consciousness in them, he had a greater experience, described as being met by angels: and this time he was awake, denoting a higher level of spiritual vision⁶.

When we respond to the deepest needs of those around us, beginning with our own family, we reach the highest spiritual levels for ourselves as well. Through this, let us hope, we will be true successors to our great grandfather Jacob!

1. Genesis 28:10-32:2. 2. See Pesachim 56a. 3. See Rashi to Gen.45:27. 4. See Rashi and Sforno to Gen.25:27. 5. The founder of Chabad-Lubavitch (d. 1813). 6. See the Lubavitcher Rebbe's *Likkutei Sichot* vol.3. pp.788-9.

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SEDRA VAYEITZEI

LEARNING TO SAY 'NO'

"Sorry honey, but you can't go. It's not the right place for a twelve year old girl to be."

Leah glared at her mother. She didn't mean to be rude but she just couldn't hide her anger and annoyance.

"But Mum, it's not fair! My friend is going!" she said stamping her foot. She really wanted to go to that party in a neighbour's house down the road and she didn't think her mother was being nice about it one bit. An attractive coloured invitation had come through their letter-box. What could be wrong?

"Leah, the point isn't whether or not your friend is going. It's not the right place for a young Jewish girl to be."

"But Mum," she complained, "it's not like I'm going to do anything wrong. If I see something going on there that I know I shouldn't do then I won't do it. Why don't you trust me?"

"Leah, it's not that I don't trust you. But a person shouldn't put themselves in a situation where there are negative things without some sort of protection."

Leah looked puzzled. For a moment she lost the look of anger in her face. "What do you mean *protection*?"

“Well in this week’s Sedra, we read about how Jacob left his parents’ home and went to Haran. When he had to rest on the way, he put twelve rocks around his head to protect him. Why do you think he needed to put them there?” Leah’s mother looked at her questioningly.

“I remember learning about that!” said Leah. “To protect himself from the creatures around him.”

“Well, that may be true. But, didn’t Jacob know that G-d would protect him?”

“Yeah, I guess...” Leah had no clue where this was going, but by now she’d figured that she wouldn’t be able to go to the party. Secretly, she knew her mum was right but...

“Jacob knew he was heading into a place which was full of negative things and he didn’t want any of it to affect him. These rocks were, in a sense, showing that he was separate from the negative. He was going there because he had to, but he was determined not to be influenced by his surroundings.”

“Yeah,” Leah nodded thoughtfully, “and I guess if such a holy man like Jacob felt the need to protect himself, then I definitely should... and that means I shouldn’t put myself in a situation like that.”

She looked up at her mother, and a warm feeling washed over her. The look in her mother’s face made it all the more worth it. Was it friendship, love? Or somehow pride, that her daughter knew how to say ‘no’? Something.

“Well I think I’m going to go call Shira and ask her if she wants to come over here instead of going to that party,” Leah said, reaching for the phone. Maybe there would be other, more appropriate ways of having fun.

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