

VAYEITZEI (GENESIS 28:10-32:3)

How To Say 'You're Wrong

2009 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

Polygamy and "Tzores"

I once saw a picture in National Geographic that struck me as strange. The article was about life in Utah, and included a picture of a Mormon family. The father posed with his children and their four mothers. Polygamy, although in violation of state (and currently, Mormon) law, continues to exist in Utah.

As an Ashkenazic Jew and member of Western Civilization, I find it very difficult to envision the concept of having more than one wife. Successful polygamy requires a level of "sharing" and cooperation that goes beyond the mores of our culture. It is not a good system.

That is why Ashkenazic Jewry banned it over a thousand years ago. The Torah has an interesting word for a co-wife. If two women are married to the same man, how are they related to each other? The Torah calls them "*Tzoros*," literally, "pains." Rachel and Leah shared a husband; Leah was Rachel's "*tzorah*" – her source of pain. When two women have to vie for the attention and love of the same man, it is a painful situation for everyone.

Rachel was distraught. Her sister Leah had borne four sons to Jacob, while she remained barren. The pain was too great to bear. She confronted her husband: "*Give me children – otherwise I am dead!*" (Genesis, 30:1)

In her desperation, Rachel had made an inappropriate request. Rachel's frustration in turn frustrated her husband: *Jacob became furious with Rachel. He said, "Am I in the place of G-d who is withholding children from you?!"* (Ibid, verse 2)

Part of the job of a spouse is to provide constructive criticism as necessary. Rachel seemed to be demanding that Jacob give her children. He corrected her by instructing her to direct her request to G-d instead.

A simple reading of the text seems to indicate that Rachel was wrong and Jacob was right. Yet, the Midrash tells us that Jacob was taken to task for his response. G-d asked him, "Is this the way you respond to someone who is despondent?"

Note that the Midrash is not defending Rachel's question. Apparently, she WAS wrong. Rather than complaining to her husband, she should have recognized that her infertility was the result of a divine decree. Rachel should have directed her pleas Heavenward. Jacob is criticized, not for what he said, but rather, for how he said it.

Rachel wasn't asking Jacob to perform a miracle. She was asking him to pray for her. Jacob's response was that it would be more appropriate for her to pray for herself. (The Talmud tells us that when a sick person prays for his own recovery, G-d listens to that prayer more closely than to the prayers offered by others in his behalf.) They were having a theological debate over whose prayers would be more important. Rachel had her opinion and Jacob had his. What was the problem? The problem was, as the Torah tells us, *Jacob became furious with Rachel...*

The great rabbi Hillel told a prospective convert that the main message of Judaism is to be sure not to do anything to someone else that we wouldn't want done to us. Actually, we shouldn't stop there. What if I have a thick skin? What if I don't mind if people are harsh in speaking to me?

What's the matter, we may ask. Can't take a joke? Can't take a little criticism? It wouldn't bother ME if someone spoke to me that way. Why are you so sensitive?

Perhaps Jacob, having grown up with a brother who was cruel and abusive, was used to being criticized. Perhaps, being the totally honest person that he was, Jacob called things as he saw them. If his wife said something unbecoming, he told her off.

G-d reprimanded Jacob. He could have responded with more empathy. He had asked rhetorically, "*Am I in place of G-d?*" Rachel was heartbroken. This was not the time for angry criticism. (Even though she was wrong!) Now was the time for compassion and understanding. Perhaps a more acceptable response would have been, "I know how upset you must be. It's very important for you to pray too. Let's pray together."

I used to be an elementary school teacher. A little third grader came over to me with tears in her eyes. I don't remember what the trouble was, but I do recall that it was absolutely trivial. She was crying over a matter of no significance whatsoever. But she taught me a very important lesson. To me, the problem was nonsense. To her, it was an overwhelming crisis. I could have told her how silly she was being. That would have upset her even more. By sharing the pain of her problem, I was able to help her resolve the issue and replace the tears with a smile.

She actually taught me two important, almost opposite lessons:

1. The other person's problems, even if we know them to be inconsequential, are real problems in THEIR eyes, and we should address them as such. Just because something doesn't bother me, that doesn't mean that it doesn't bother YOU!
2. In the major scheme of things, many of the "problems" that WE consider to be insurmountable are, like the school I was teaching in, elementary.

Have a great Shabbos. Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz

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