

VAYISHLACH (GENESIS 32:4-36:43)

The Inferior Decorator", or, "Stay Out Of My Bedroom!

2002 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

Reuben was not happy with his parents' furniture arrangements. So he took it upon himself to do some rearranging. He was rewarded for his interior decorating by forfeiting his birthright.

What happened?

Reuben was upset. For years he had tolerated seeing his mother as the "second wife" of his father. After all, Jacob had planned to marry only Rachel, and was tricked into marrying Leah first. A week later, Jacob married Rachel. Rachel was clearly the favorite.

(It is important to point out that Leah was not ignored. She too, was treated with love and honor by her husband. She eventually bore Jacob six sons and at least one daughter. Rachel, however, was the preferred wife.)

Rachel died. Now, thought Reuben, his mother could take her place as Jacob's "leading lady." But, it was not to be.

Rachel and Leah were not Jacob's only wives. When Leah married Jacob, her father gave her his maidservant Zilpah to attend to her needs. When Rachel married Jacob the following week, she too received a maidservant. Her name was Bilhah. Bilhah and Zilpah both became wives of Jacob, each one bearing him two sons. (Rashi mentions that Bilhah and Zilpah were also daughters of Laban, born to a maidservant – He treated his own flesh and blood like slaves. Nice guy!)

Reuben now expected his father to move into Leah's tent. To his shock, Jacob added insult to injury by moving in with Bilhah, Rachel's maid!!

To Reuben, such action was unacceptable. He would not stand by silently and watch his mother play second fiddle to her sister's maid! He removed his father's bed from Bilhah's tent, and placed it in Leah's tent, where it belonged!

Jacob was furious. How dare Reuben involve himself in his father's personal life! It was none of his business! (This was not the first time Reuben had tried to "play matchmaker" – see Genesis 30:14-17) Jacob never forgot Reuben's actions. Even as Jacob blessed his sons on his deathbed, he reprimanded his firstborn for being *"unstab**le as water...You profaned my couch!"* (Ibid, 49:4)

As a result of Reuben's impetuous behavior, he was stripped of the various functions of his Firstborn status – Joseph received the Firstborn's double inheritance, Levi became the Priest, and Judah became the king.

Reuben regretted his actions. He repented. Although he lost his leadership role in Israel, he remained the founder of a Tribe of Israel. As the Torah tells us immediately following this episode ...the *sons of Jacob were twelve*. (Ibid, 35:23) In the same sentence where the Torah tells us about Reuben's sin, it tells us that Jacob still had twelve sons. Reuben, in spite of what he did, was not expelled from the Tribes of Israel. (Contrast Reuben's situation with that of his Uncle Esau, and his Great-Uncle Ishmael, who were excluded from the Nation of Israel.)

Wait a minute! What did Reuben do that was so terrible? All he wanted was for his mother to get more attention from his father. Is that a crime? Is that a sin?!

Reuben was dedicated to his mother. But that dedication was overplayed when he meddled into his parents' intimate relationships. (We should keep in mind that the dynamics of polygamy don't make a great deal of sense to those of us who are not used to it. That's one of the reasons Ashkenazic Jewry banned it over a thousand years ago. (See "How to Say 'You're Wrong'".))

Yes, Leah was Jacob's wife and the mother of his children. So was Bilhah! For that matter, so was Zilpah! If everyone had acted like Reuben, the ten sons of Leah, Bilhah, and Zilpah would have been having a tug-of-war, moving their father's bed from tent to tent!

Not everything that goes on in one's personal life needs to be a matter of public discussion. Jacob was a prophet, a holy man. There was nothing that Jacob did that wasn't for a very good reason. Reuben saw something he didn't like, and decided he had to fix it. He should have left it alone.

Jacob reacted angrily to Reuben's actions. The Torah itself responds even more harshly. In describing what Reuben did, the Torah writes: ...*vayishkav es Bilhah pilegesh aviv*... In Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan's "*Living Torah*," he translates this phrase to mean that Reuben ...*disturbed the sleeping arrangements of Bilhah, his father's concubine*...

Rabbi Kaplan's translation accurately reports what Reuben did. However, a painfully literal reading of the text gives us an additional insight. The actual translation implies that Reuben had committed adultery with his father's wife!

When one intercedes in the intimate details of another person's life, in a sense, that person is violated. Reuben was not happy with the relationship between Jacob and Bilhah. He stepped in. It was not his business. He violated a sacred relationship by intervening and suggesting alterations.

No, it wasn't adultery. But, in a sense, it was close. He passed judgment on his father's personal life. It was repulsive. It was wrong.

How many times do we open the newspaper and close it just as quickly, so as not to expose our children to the raunchy headlines? Why is it that the more trash a tabloid can print about a famous person's life, the more papers sell? Who cares? What's it OUR business if...?

Where is society's shame? Where is our sense of what's private and what's public? Why can't I pay for a quart of milk at the checkout counter without reading about every dysfunctional actor, politician, and athlete? Why can't I open my email without being bombarded with trash of the worst kind? Today we vote on issues, the discussion of which, as a child, might have earned me a bar of soap in the mouth!

In my former, pre-no-TV days, I grew up with the likes of Dennis, Beaver, and Bullwinkle. Television today is an absolute sewer. (To be kind.) I really don't understand how parents, religious or otherwise, can allow their children unfettered and unsupervised access to the television. What is available to today's TV audience makes the Reuben/Jacob/Bilhah "affair" look like Romper Room!

There is something called privacy. Not everything that goes on needs to be everyone else's business.

The sons of Jacob were twelve. Reuben changed his ways. He learned from his mistake. He learned the importance of respect and discretion. It's not too late for us to learn the same lesson.

Have a great Shabbos.

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