

VAYISHLACH (GENESIS 32:4-36:43)

Straight Pins and Paszkes

2009 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz

This week's Torah reading addresses the idea of interaction with those who are different.

Jacob was about to see his brother Esau for the first time in years. Esau was angry with Jacob over the fact that Isaac had blessed Jacob instead of Esau. Esau had vowed to kill his younger brother.

*Jacob sent messengers ... to his brother Esau... He told them, “tell my brother ... ‘I lived with Laban — and observed the 613 Commandments. I didn’t pick up any of his evil ways. Therefore, you will not be able to defeat me because G-d will continue to protect me.’ ” (*A synopsis of Genesis, 32:4-5 and the commentaries of Rashi and Sifsei Chachomim.)

The Torah teaches us to be sure not to learn the negative lessons from those who surround us. Jacob was telling his brother that over the years he had been very careful to avoid being influenced negatively by his environment.

A few years ago, my family spent a few days vacationing in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, AKA Amish country. (Much has been said about the apparent similarities between Chassidim



and the Amish.



these similarities are superficial.)

Like typical tourists we viewed a model of a typical Amish home and hired a typical Amish buggy ride. We learned quite a bit about the Amish lifestyle.

I am not referring to religion. Many people are curious about what exactly the Amish believe. I am not. There are books available on the theology of the Amish, but that does not interest me. I respect Catholics and Protestants, regardless of the nuances of how they practice. I am not into comparative religion. Orthodox Jews do not participate in ecumenical councils. (See “The Pope and the Designated Hitter.”)

That being said, there is much about the Amish that fascinated me. I found many things that I could relate to, and quite a few things with which I disagreed. I understand the desire to limit the amount of influence that “English” – the Amish term for anything non-Amish – society has on one’s growing children. I certainly admire their sense of working together and taking care of each other. However, their insistence on the use of straight pins – rather than snaps and buttons – to fasten clothes was lost on me.

There was a cute coincidence that brought a smile to my face.

We, too, place limits on our contact with the outside world. For example, many Torah educators have come out very strongly on the potential dangers of uncontrolled access to the Internet. Our Sages long ago placed limitations on social interaction with those who believe differently than we.

We respect all people. We are all created in the Image of G-d. That has nothing to do with the fact that Jews are supposed to marry Jews. Our Sages, therefore, placed limits on the “innocent” social contacts that could lead to intermarriage. Wine, a beverage which is used extensively in religious as well as social situations, has special rules that go beyond the requirement of Kosher ingredients. So does bread.

Wine can, and often has, led to breaking down social barriers. Therefore, wine that has been handled by gentiles is to be avoided. (There are exceptions to this rule, which are beyond the scope of this article.) I can like and respect a non-Jewish business associate without our going to the bar together!

A similar rule was enacted about bread and other baked items. There is a company, Paszkes, (pronounced “Pash-kes”) that distributes cookies and candies under strict Kosher supervision. Paszkes products are usually available only in neighborhoods that are heavily populated by strictly orthodox Jews. It was interesting to notice, as we viewed a model Amish home, that there was a package of Paszkes cookies on the table!

So much for avoiding “English” influence! :)

We stayed in a hotel within walking distance of Lancaster's orthodox synagogue so we could attend Shabbos Services. A Chassidic member of the congregation (yes, I'm sure he's not Amish!!) shared with me an interesting observation about the Amish.

The Amish, he said, could teach us a few things. He reminded me about the statement of the Talmud that there were three things that led G-d to take the Israelites out of Egypt. In reality, our ancestors were not that different from their masters. However, there were three Mitzvahs that they did: They maintained their own language, names, and style of dress. In this way, they were able to preserve their distinctly Jewish identity. *L'havdil*, in a similar vein, the Amish too, continue to speak a German dialect in the home (that's Pennsylvania *DEITCH*, not Dutch). They obviously dress in their own way, and continue to use Biblical names.

There is another thing we can learn from them, he said. One of the greatest sins an Amish person can commit is to act with *Hochmut*, Pride. Their simple lifestyle speaks to the concept that it is wrong to act in a way that calls attention to one's status as wealthy or otherwise accomplished. There is no "keeping up with the Joneses" in the Amish community.

As I prepared to leave Lancaster and head home on Sunday afternoon, I realized that I would not make it home until well after sundown. Normally, I would attend Mincha Services (see "Time to Pray!") at a synagogue, but this time, there would be no synagogue to go to.

Therefore, I decided that it would be best to recite the Mincha Service before I left. I stood in a parking lot next to my car, reading the prayers off an app on my smartphone. There I was, in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, Davening Mincha. I would be lying if I told you that I didn't feel self-conscious. I felt rather distracted from my prayers because I was hoping that no one would notice me.

Suddenly, it hit me! Right there, in the middle of the Mincha service, I remembered where I was. This is Amish country! If these peculiar looking, big-black-hatted, straight-pinned, buggy-driving people go about their lives and couldn't care less what you or I think of them, what do I care if some people stare at a Jewish guy in a parking lot *Davening Mincha*?!

My ancestor Jacob made it a point to tell his brother that he observed every Mitzvah while living near his corrupt father-in-law Laban. Jacob was totally unfazed by the fact that Laban ridiculed his beliefs. Jacob was not self-conscious; he was doing the right thing! It took a Chossid from Lancaster with an observation about the Amish to remind me to learn an important lesson from Jacob!

As the story goes, a secular Jew got on a subway in New York City. This fellow, who had come to America from Poland, shuddered when he found himself face to face with two VERY Jewish looking fellows with long beards and big black hats.

Our “hero” had spent the last 40 years doing everything in his power to “fit in” among the gentiles and assimilated Jews in his neighborhood. He wanted to distance himself as much as possible from anything that remotely resembled the “*Shtetel*.” This was America! Europe belonged to the past! And now he was confronted by two walking anachronisms known as *Chassidim*.

He was repulsed. He could barely hold back the venom in his voice. “What’s the matter with you *Chassidim*?” he demanded in his still-Yiddish-accented English. “Why must you call attention to yourselves in front of the *Goyim*? This is America, not Poland! I’m embarrassed to be seen with you!”

The two “*Chassidim*” looked at each other and then at him with confusion. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” said one of them. “What’s a ‘*Goyim*?’ We’re not from Poland. We’re from Pennsylvania Dutch country. We’re Amish.”

Our belligerent Jewish anti-Semite instantly became an advocate of diversity. “Oh, I’m so-o-o-o sorry!” he gushed with a scarlet face. “I have so much respect for you people. I think it’s so wonderful that you continue to follow your traditions and don’t let modern society influence your lifestyle!”

The “Amish” fellow looked back at him with a smile, and asked him, in Yiddish, “So why was it so terrible when I was *Chassidic*?”

Have a great Shabbos. Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

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