

## A Weekly Byte... from Isralight

(Portion of Vayishlach)

*Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality*  
From **Rav Binny Freedman**

*Jebalya; anyone who has been there has no desire to go back. A nasty piece of real estate in the Gaza strip, Je'balya is a densely overpopulated refugee camp that is always waiting to explode, which is exactly what happened back in 1987, when an Israeli truck driver ploughed into a crowd of Arabs, killing three and wounding many more.*

*The subsequent rioting that eventually spread all through Gaza, Judea and Samaria, has since become known as the 'Intifada', and in the spring of 88', on my first reserve duty, we were right smack in the middle of it.*

*Every day was a different story, and to be honest, the Israeli Army was completely unprepared for this type of warfare. How do you deal with women and children throwing Molotov cocktails and heaving cinderblocks off of apartment buildings?*

*You never knew what was waiting for you around any given street corner, and you were as concerned about not ending up in military court for giving the wrong order as you were about ending up in a hospital for the same reason.*

*One morning, we were on a twelve-man patrol in the heart of Je'balya, trying to get through another day. We were maintaining day distances (about 40 feet between each man and the man behind him, to prevent anyone taking out an entire patrol with one volley or one grenade) in two columns of six men, traversing both sides of the street.*

*To this day, I am not sure how he sneaked up on us, but the only warning we got was the "Allah'hu Akbar" ("G-d is great") scream yelled by the terrorist wielding an axe as he jumped on one of the men in the rear of the column.*

*No-one had any time to react, and as one of my men described it to me afterwards, all he saw was an axe swinging down with full force at the back of his buddy in the rear, and he was absolutely certain that Shmuel, a father of three children, was about to die.*

*A the last minute, Shmuel, who was carrying a ten liter Jerry can on his back, bent over forward to avoid the axe, and it embedded itself in the jerry can. As the water exploded in all directions, and this Arab terrorist attempted to pull the axe back out for another swing, he was quickly surrounded and overpowered by the soldiers on either side.*

*Standard operating procedure at the time was not to publicly arrest, handcuff, and blindfold a suspect in front of everyone on the street, for fear of starting a riot. So we took him to an alley off the street to tie his hands, blindfold him, and wait for the battalion vehicle that would come and take him off our hands.*

*So there we were in an alley in the middle of the Gaza strip, with an Arab terrorist, blindfolded (so he wouldn't see details of the army base he was driven into for holding...) and with his hands tied behind his back, waiting....*

*And one of the guys, a long time veteran of the unit, just went nuts. He walked over to this terrorist, sitting on the ground and started screaming at him:*

*"Kill my buddy? Make his children orphans? Tell us whether we can live here? I'll show you what it means to kill an Israeli soldier...!"*

*And, before I could do anything, he raised his arm and brought his open palm down hard on the head of this Arab terrorist. And then, yelling, he raised his hand to do it again, and I grabbed his arm.*

*Now, don't misunderstand: I not only understood this soldier; I empathized with him. This Arab, sitting on the ground looking so innocent, had just tried to kill his best buddy with an axe. I was new to this unit (it was my first reserve duty), but these men had served together since before the six-day war.*

*So I understood what was challenging this guy; but not on my watch. Rules are rules, and if you lose sight of what you are fighting for, then what is the point? And the rules here couldn't be clearer: You can use whatever force is necessary to subdue a terrorist, even kill him if your life is in danger. But once he's captured and bound, the law protects him.*

*So I grabbed this guy's arm, and a small argument ensued (remember, I was new to this unit, but in the end the responsibility for what might have happened would have been mine) but a couple of the guys backed me up, and everyone calmed down.*

*And so many years later, you wonder, who was right?*

As the community in *Har Nof* recovers from what effectively amounts to a pogrom in Jerusalem that saw four rabbis killed in their Tefillin and prayer shawls, leaving 23 orphans, you wonder, where is that axe-wielding terrorist today? Why do we follow rules of civilization with terrorists? Maybe we should play by *their* rules?

There is a desire for retribution, a need to ensure that what goes around comes around, and yet, we are better than that, aren't we?

This struggle, of course, is not a new phenomenon; Yaakov and his children were grappling with the same issues four thousand years ago, in this week's portion of *Vayishlach*.

*"And Dinah, daughter of Leah who bore her for Yaakov, went out to see the daughters of the land."* (Genesis 34:1)

Dinah, the daughter of Leah and Yaakov, sets out for a day's outing. And Shechem, the son of Chamor, (a local prince,) kidnaps and possibly rapes her, and then (apparently) falls in love with her. (34:1-3)

So he asks his father (Chamor) to arrange for him to marry her, and Chamor indeed comes to negotiate a dowry with Yaakov. Of course, Yaakov's family is outraged (34: 4-7), and deeply saddened by what has befallen their sister.

Chamor, however, seemingly oblivious to how his son's behavior is being perceived, suggests a match. And not just Dinah and Chamor, but:

*"... And give her, please, to him (Shechem) as a wife. And marry us; give us your daughters, and we will give you ours, and dwell with us, and the land will be before you. Dwell in it, and trade and take hold of it."* (34: 8-10)

Chamor is suggesting much more than just a marriage. This will be the glue around which our people's destinies will be bonded together in this land. Sounds wonderful, right? And what's so terrible? A wayward act, and an unfortunate episode, but let us turn this into something positive.

So now Yaakov and the family have a number of different options. But the one they choose seems to be way out of left field. Their issue is that Shechem and Chamor, and indeed the whole town are just not Jewish; they aren't circumcised. But if they will agree to be circumcised, then life will be wonderful, and their children can marry each other, and they can all live together forever. (34: 13-17) And this is the dream isn't it? We'll all live together and the Canaanites will become Jewish to boot!

And incredibly, Chamor and Shechem *love* this idea, (34:18-24) and immediately go back to their hometown and convince all the men to actually do this, and they all get circumcised! And what does this really mean that they all get circumcised? Essentially, as the Talmud (Yevamot 46a) makes clear, a man must be circumcised in order to convert to Judaism, so the entire town is converting to Judaism! What an incredible moment this must be for Yaakov, as he sees the unfolding of his grandfather Abraham's dream before his eyes. The world is finally seeing the light, and an entire Canaanite town is ready to join the Jewish fold.

But something goes terribly wrong. Because on the third day after their circumcision (34:25-29), when the men are at their weakest, recovering from the operation, two of the brothers, Shimon and Levi come back and massacre the entire town. They kill all the men, and loot the city, essentially destroying everything.

And Yaakov, so it seems cannot believe it. An entire city, butchered while they lie, essentially, in their hospital beds, and the dream lies in tatters on the blood soaked Canaanite earth.

Yaakov wants to negotiate, and what might have been peace, has become war clouds on the horizon.

Indeed, at the end of his life, some twenty-five years later, Yaakov will remember this moment, and curse the brothers Shimon and Levi for this deed.

*"... Arur Apam Ki' Az...."* *"Cursed is their anger which is strong...."* (Genesis 49:6)

And yet, despite this terrible deed, Shimon and Levi are not excised from the family, and in fact their tribes become the spiritual leaders of the Jewish people. The tribe of Shimon produces the Roshei Yeshivot, or Torah leaders of the institutes of learning, and Levi is the tribe that will merit serving in the Temple. From this tribe will come the Kohanim, the priests, who also are the teachers and role models of the nation!

What is going on here?

Perhaps the clue to this question lies with Dina; where was Dina when all this was going on?

Only after the brothers lay waste to the entire city does the Torah tell us (34:26) “...and they (the brothers) took Dina and left.”

In other words, all the while Yaakov is negotiating with Shechem and Chamor, *Dina is still being held captive* in the Canaanite city!

Perhaps Yaakov and his sons simply represent two different approaches to a very challenging situation.

Yaakov wants to negotiate; his sons want to fight. Yaakov is ready to live with these Canaanites; Shimon and Levi want to destroy them.

Maybe what the brothers are seeing here is a lot more than just what might become of their sister; maybe they perceive that what is at stake here is a lot more than that.

Yaakov had made a treaty with the Canaanites, rightly or wrongly, and the name of Israel hung in the balance. But Shimon and Levi's point was that it shouldn't come cheap. If we are negotiating while our sister is being held in Shechem's palace (because after all, why didn't Chamor come with Dina to speak with Yaakov?), then something is wrong; and if we sit quietly today, our way of life will disappear tomorrow.

We have to remain open to all the possibilities, but we also have to be sure we are seeing the reality around us.

Four thousand years later, Shechem and Chamor are still holding Dina hostage, and the future lies in the balance. And we still somehow struggle, with the dream of finding a real partner for peace, and the reality of those who are before us.

Maybe the State of Israel, responsible to hold up the name and reputation of the Jewish people needs sometimes to be willing to sit and talk. But Shimon and Levi, with the facts on the ground, need to be sure we do not pay a price too steep for that negotiation.

And isn't it powerful that Yaakov curses not the actions of his sons, but their anger, which in the end is the greatest danger.

When we look around and see the horrible images of mothers and babies lying on the streets of our Israeli cities in pools of blood, we need to find the strength to consider, to think, and to decide how to respond, and we need to take great care that anger does not engulf us, because it is so hard after all we have given and all that they have done, not to

be filled with anger. Yet that is our challenge, because if we are filled only with anger, then they have won.

At the same time, we must take care not to spend so much time at the table, that the battle is lost. At the end of the day, Chamor does come to talk; and Yaakov listens. But there comes a time when a person loses the right to talk; when their words ring hollow when held against their deeds. And you cannot negotiate without someone to talk to. Sometimes, it is not words that will bring peace, but actions.

The Torah does not always make it so clear, and in truth, it is not difficult to see in this and many other stories in the torah that which we really want to see. If nothing else, the Torah is as relevant and crucial to who we are and where we are headed, as it was when we first received it over three thousand years ago.

May Hashem bless those who are entrusted with the awesome responsibility of making these crucial decisions, with the wisdom and strength to find the path to peace, with all the difficult and painful decisions it may entail.

Shabbat Shalom, from Jerusalem,

Binny freedman