

Shabbat Vayishlach – Genesis 33:1-17

Mussar Method: Limiting Conversation

P'SHAT

33 Looking up, Jacob saw Esau coming, accompanied by four hundred men. He divided the children among Leah, Rachel, and the two maids, ²putting the maids and their children first, Leah and her children next, and Rachel and Joseph last. ³He himself went on ahead and bowed low to the ground seven times until he was near his brother. ⁴Esau ran to greet him. He embraced him and, falling on his neck, he kissed him; and they wept. ⁵Looking about, he saw the

women and the children. “Who,” he asked, “are these with you?” He answered, “The children with whom God has favored your servant.” ⁶Then the maids, with their children, came forward and bowed low; ⁷next Leah, with her children, came forward and bowed low; and last, Joseph and Rachel came forward and bowed low; ⁸And he asked, “What do you mean by all this company which I have met?” He answered, “To gain my lord’s favor.” ⁹Esau said, “I have enough, my brother; let what you have remain yours.” ¹⁰But Jacob said, “No, I pray you; if you would do me this favor, accept from me this gift; for to see your face is like seeing the face of God, and you have received me favorably. ¹¹Please accept my present which has been brought to you, for God has favored me and I have plenty.” And when he urged him, he accepted.

¹²And [Esau] said, “Let us start on our journey, and I will proceed at your pace.” ¹³But he said to him, “My lord

knows that the children are frail and that the flocks and herds, which are nursing, are a care to me; if they are driven hard a single day, all the flocks will die. ¹⁴Let my lord go on ahead of his servant, while I travel slowly, at the pace of the cattle before me and at the pace of the children, until I come to my lord in Seir.”

¹⁵Then Esau said, “Let me assign to you some of the men who are with me.” But he said, “Oh no, my lord is too kind to me!” ¹⁶So Esau started back that day on his way to Seir. ¹⁷But Jacob journeyed on to Succoth, and built a house for himself and made stalls for his cattle; that is why the place was called Succoth.

ל"ג וַיֵּשֶׂא יַעֲקֹב עֵינָיו וַיֵּרָא וַיֵּרָא וַהֲנֵה עֹשׂוֹ בָּא וְעִמּוֹ אַרְבַּע מֵאוֹת אִישׁ וַיַּחַץ אֶת־הַיְלָדִים עַל־ לֵאָה וְעַל־רָחֵל וְעַל־שְׁתֵּי הַשְּׁפֹחוֹת: ² וַיֵּשֶׂם אֶת־ הַשְּׁפֹחוֹת וְאֶת־יְלִדֵיהֶן רִאשׁוֹנָה וְאֶת־לֵאָה וְיְלִדֶיהָ אַחֲרָנִים וְאֶת־רָחֵל וְאֶת־יוֹסֵף אַחֲרָנִים: ³ וְהוּא עָבַר לִפְנֵיהֶם וַיִּשְׁתַּחוּ אֶרְצָה שִׁבְעַת פְּעָמִים עַד־ גִּשְׁתּוֹ עַד־אַחֲיוֹ: ⁴ וַיָּרַץ עֹשׂוֹ לִקְרַאתוֹ וַיַּחֲבֹקְהוּ וַיִּפֹּל עַל־צוּאָרוֹ וַיִּשְׁקָהוּ וַיִּבְכּוּ: ⁵ וַיֵּשֶׂא אֶת־

עֵינָיו וַיֵּרָא אֶת־הַנְּשִׂאִים וְאֶת־הַיְלָדִים וַיֹּאמֶר מִי־ אֵלֶּה לְךָ וַיֹּאמֶר הַיְלָדִים אֲשֶׁר־חָנַן אֱלֹהִים אֶת־ עַבְדְּךָ: רַב־עֵי: ⁶ וַתִּגְשָׁן הַשְּׁפֹחוֹת הַנֶּה וַיִּלְדִּיָּהוּ וַתִּשְׁתַּחוּן: ⁷ וַתִּגַּשׁ גַּם־לֵאָה וַיִּלְדִּיָּהּ וַיִּשְׁתַּחוּ וְאַחֲרֵי נָגַשׁ יוֹסֵף וְרָחֵל וַיִּשְׁתַּחוּ: ⁸ וַיֹּאמֶר מִי־ לְךָ כָּל־הַמַּחֲנֶה הַזֶּה אֲשֶׁר פָּגַשְׁתִּי וַיֹּאמֶר לְמַצְאֵתִי כְּעֵינֵי אֲדָנָי: ⁹ וַיֹּאמֶר עֹשׂוֹ יִשְׁלִי רַב אַחֲוִי יְהִי לְךָ אֲשֶׁר־לְךָ: ¹⁰ וַיֹּאמֶר יַעֲקֹב אֶל־נָא אִם־נָא מִצְאֵתִי חֵן כְּעֵינֶיךָ וְלִקְחַת מִנְחָתִי מִיָּדִי כִּי עַל־ כֵּן רָאִיתִי פְּנֵיךָ כְּרָאִיתִי פְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים וַתִּרְצַנֵּנִי: ¹¹ קַח־נָא אֶת־בְּרִכְתִּי אֲשֶׁר הִבָּאת לְךָ כִּי־חֲנַנִּי אֱלֹהִים וְכִי יִשְׁלִי־לְךָ וַיִּפְצַר־בּוֹ וַיִּקַּח: ¹² וַיֹּאמֶר נִסְעָה וְנִלְכָה וְאִלְכָה לְנַגְדְּךָ: ¹³ וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו

אֲדָנָי יִדְעֵ כִּי־הַיְלָדִים רַפִּים וְהַצֹּאן וְהַבְּקָר עֲלוֹת עָלַי וְדִפְקוּם יוֹם אֶחָד וּמָתוּ כָּל־הַצֹּאן: ¹⁴ יַעֲבֹר־ נָא אֲדָנָי לִפְנֵי עַבְדְּךָ וְנָאִי אֶתְנַהֲלָה לְאַשִּׁי לְרִגְלִי הַמְּלֹאכָה אֲשֶׁר־לִפְנֵי וְלִרְגַל הַיְלָדִים עַד אֲשֶׁר־ אָבִא אֶל־אֲדָנָי שְׁעִירָה: ¹⁵ וַיֹּאמֶר עֹשׂוֹ אֲצִיגֶהָ נָא עִמָּךְ מִן־הַעַם אֲשֶׁר אֲתִי וַיֹּאמֶר לְמָה זֶה אֲמַצְאֵתִי כְּעֵינֵי אֲדָנָי: ¹⁶ וַיָּשָׁב בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא עֹשׂוֹ לְדֶרֶב שְׁעִירָה: ¹⁷ וַיַּעֲקֹב נָסַע סְפֹתָהּ וַיִּבֶן לָוּ בֵּית וַיִּמְקְנֶהוּ עֲשָׂה סֹפֶת עַל־בֵּן קָרָא שֵׁם־ הַמְּקוֹם סְפֹת:

KEY KOSHI: What really happens BETWEEN Jacob and Esau? What role does conversation play in a meaningful encounter between individuals?

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה, יי אלקינו, מלך העולם, אשר קדשנו במצותיו וענינו לעסוק בדברי תורה.
Baruch atah, Adonai Eloheinu, Melech haolam, asher kid'shanu b'mitzvotav v'tzivanu laasok b'divrei Torah.
Blessed are you, Adonai our God, Sovereign of the universe, who hallows us with mitzvot, commanding us to engage with words of Torah.

REMEZ...focusing on verse 4...

Esau ran to greet him. He embraced him, and falling on his neck, he kissed him; and they wept.

RASHI - ויחבקהו AND EMBRACED HIM — His pity was aroused when he saw him prostrating himself so many times (Genesis Rabbah 78).

וישקהו AND HE KISSED HIM —The Hebrew text has dots over each letter of the expression. One tradition says that this means that Esau's kiss was not genuine, while another holds that it was because in the meeting Esau's latent love broke through.

NAHUM SARNA – Esau's kiss, undoubtedly sincere, appropriately signals the final resolution of the chain of tragic events precipitated by that other kiss, Jacob's deceitful kiss, that played a crucial role in the original blessing scene (27:26)...Jacob wept too. His tears are a release from the emotional tensions, even though his anxieties are not wholly relieved.

R' SAMSON R. HIRSCH: The allusion to weeping is a sure sign that what we have here is a revelation of genuine humanity. A kiss can be superficial but an outburst of tears is a strong presumption in favor of sincerity. Esau betrays his Abrahamic origins and shows himself as not merely a cruel hunter. Otherwise he could never have reached such a leading position in the development of humankind. The sword alone, brute force cannot accomplish this. Even Esau gradually relinquishes his sword and begins to feel the chords of human love. It is Jacob who usually provides him with the opportunity for showing his innate humanity. When the strong respects the strong, this is discretion. But when the strong, i.e. Esau falls on the neck of the weak, of Jacob, and casts his sword away, then we know that humanity and justice have prevailed.

HA'EMEK DAVAR: Both wept, implying that Jacob's love too was aroused towards Esau. And so it is in all ages. Whenever the seed of Esau is prompted by sincere motives to acknowledge and respect the seed of Israel, then we too, are moved to acknowledge Esau: for he is our brother.

PIRKE D'RABBI ELIEZER – When Jacob came to the land of Canaan, Esau came to meet him from Mount Seir full of fury, bent on killing him as it is written: "The wicked man schemes against the righteous, and gnashes at him with his teeth" (Ps. 37:12). Said Esau: I shall not slay Jacob with bow and arrows but I shall rather slay him with my mouth and suck his blood, as it is said: "And Esau ran to meet him and embraced him and fell on his neck and kissed him and they wept." Read not "and *kissed* him" but "he *bit* him!" Whereupon Jacob's neck turned to marble...as soon as Esau perceived that he had not accomplished his desire, he became furious and gnashed his teeth, as it is stated: "The wicked shall see and be vexed; he shall gnash with his teeth and melt away" (Ps. 112:10).

NEHAMA LEIBOWITZ in the name of BENNO JACOB: This description of Esau's running, embracing, falling, kissing and weeping is suspect. Indeed the patriarch himself does not believe its sincerity and immediately afterwards declines Esau's offer to escort him. Jacob went his own way, alone.

DRASH from ALAN MORINIS in WITH HEART IN MIND [ch. 16]

Silence and solitude are precious, but so is speech; our challenge is to find the point of balance between the two. The answer is to speak succinctly, with clear and measured words, and no more. Rabbinic insight and even legal ruling often emerge from a single word or phrase and a nuance of how it is used. It is obvious that one must train oneself to be sensitive to how one's words can hurt and destroy, or build and heal. But even aside from the impact, being attuned to every word and shade of meaning you birth into the word honors the Creator and the created, as well as the gift of speech you have been given.

We are not guided to cut out the small talk entirely, because then we would lose the value of casual conversation. The call is to *limit* the chatter we emit, because a little is all that is needed. Even valuable talk needs to be limited. Rambam says that one should minimize speech even in matters of Torah and wisdom and expand one's thoughts.

It is worthy reflecting on your own willingness to shoot the breeze. Why do you do it? Is there some reward you are after? Does nattering deliver a real benefit? Can you identify where small talk is useful in your life, and where you might well cut back on the chatter?

The point of this while lesson is to underline that speech is a precious faculty, and it is up to us to use it in a disciplined and restrained way. That's how we can ensure that its scope and power are applied only for the good, within you and in the world.

PRACTICE:

- Set aside 10 minutes for silence each day this week. Sit there. Focus on your breath. What do you hear? Notice? Feel?
- Find two opportunities this week to minimize your speech in group settings – try to speak as little as possible, while focusing your ears and heart on listening...What do you hear? Notice? Feel?

originally published in Die Kreatur III, (3), 1929
and later republished, then translated by
Ronald Gregor Smith in Between Man and Man,
London: Kegan Paul, 1947 and New York:
Macmillan, 1948.

A Conversion

In my earlier years the "religious" was for me the exception. There were hours that were taken out of the course of things. From somewhere or other the firm crust of everyday was pierced. Then the reliable permanence of appearances broke down; the attack which took place burst its law asunder. "Religious experience" was the experience of an otherness which did not fit into the context of life. It could begin with something customary, with consideration of some familiar object, but which then became unexpectedly mysterious and uncanny, finally lighting a way into the lightning-pierced darkness of the mystery itself. But also, without any intermediate stage, time could be torn apart—first the firm world's structure then the still firmer self-assurance flew apart and you were delivered to fulness. The "religious" lifted you out. Over there now lay the accustomed existence with its affairs, but here illumination and ecstasy and rapture held, without time or sequence. Thus your own being encompassed a life here and a life beyond, and there was no bond but the actual moment of the transition.

The illegitimacy of such a division of the temporal life, which is streaming to death and eternity and which only in fulfilling its temporality can be fulfilled in face of these, was brought home to me by an everyday event, an event of judgment, judging with that sentence from closed lips and an unremoved glance such as the ongoing course of things loves to pronounce.

What happened was no more than that one forenoon, after a morning of "religious" enthusiasm, I had a visit from an unknown young man, without being there in spirit. I certainly did not fail to let the meeting be friendly, I did not treat him any more remissly than all his contemporaries who were in

the habit of seeking me out about this time of day as an oracle that is ready to listen to reason. I conversed attentively and openly with him—only I omitted to guess the questions which he did not put. Later, not long after, I learned from one of his friends—he himself was no longer alive—the essential content of these questions; I learned that he had come to me not casually, but borne by destiny, not for a chat but for a decision. He had come to me, he had come in this hour. What do we expect when we are in despair and yet go to a man? Surely a presence by means of which we are told that nevertheless there is meaning.

Since then I have given up the "religious" which is nothing but the exception, extraction, exaltation, ecstasy; or it has given me up. I possess nothing but the everyday out of which I am never taken. The mystery is no longer disclosed, it has escaped or it has made its dwelling here where everything happens as it happens. I know no fulness but each mortal hour's fulness of claim and responsibility. Though far from being equal to it, yet I know that in the claim I am claimed and may respond in responsibility, and know who speaks and demands a response.

I do not know much more. If that is religion then it is just *everything*, simply all that is lived in its possibility of dialogue. Here is space also for religion's highest forms. As when you pray you do not thereby remove yourself from this life of yours but in your praying refer your thought to it, even though it may be in order to yield it; so too in the unprecedented and surprising, when you are called upon from above, required, chosen, empowered, sent, you with this your mortal bit of life are referred to; this moment is not extracted from it, it rests on what has been and beckons to the remainder which has still to be lived, you are not swallowed up in a fulness without obligation, you are willed for the life of communion.