

Parashat Vayishlakh 5781

Shabbat Shalom. Our ancestors always looked to the Torah for guidance on how to live our lives. It was not meant to be a document to be put off to the side for most of the week and then looked at once a week at best. The study of Torah has been understood for millennia to be a daily endeavor and one meant to inform our daily lives. As it says in Pirkei Avot: *Aseh Toratkha Keva* (make your study of Torah a fixture in your life). It goes on further to state: “Don’t say that when I have the leisure I will study, you may never have the leisure.”

None of the “heroes” of the Jewish people have been those who had some sort of spiritual vision and lived cloistered from the world. Just the opposite: they were fully engaged in the world. As Hillel said: *Al Tifrosh min hatzibor* (Do not separate yourself from the community). Even if we feel like our spiritual life would be better if we were alone, we are still obligated to be with the community and not live primarily for ourselves. As Hillel said: *Ukh’she’ani l’atzmi, mah ani?* (If I am only for myself, what am I?).

So part of our study of Torah (and here I’m using the word Torah in a broad sense to include all of our spiritual literature and not just the Five Books of Moses (*Chumash*), is to cultivate our values. What are our values? And what if the values of our Tradition don’t conform to the values of the society in which we live?

One central value is humility as opposed to arrogance. I know I’ve said this before, but when reflecting upon whom our tradition considers its greatest leader and what is the quality that the Torah ascribes to that leader as the most characteristic of his personality? The answer, of course, is Moses – and the quality is humility. Moses is called in the Torah *Ish Anav* – the humble man. The Torah even says that he was the most humble person. He didn’t want to be the leader. Often we find that in our history – over and over the prophets don’t feel like they’re up to the task of being a prophet – circumstances force them and they’re “chosen” in a sense.

We see a change in Jacob’s personality in this Shabbat’s Torah portion. In 32:11 Jacob says that he is not worthy to have received all of the kindnesses and bounty that he has been blessed with.

He refers to himself as G!d’s servant and when he is going to re-encounter his brother Esav (Esau), he also refers to himself as Esav’s servant. Partially he is afraid, but there is a different tone here set by this earlier verse regarding his being unworthy of all he has gained.

Another major quality that our Tradition esteems is wisdom, (*khokhma*) much more than material power or gain. A commentary that I believe we read a couple of weeks ago when studying the Torah portion on Shabbat morning said that in reference to Abraham that was the first time that the Torah referred to a person as *zaken* meaning “old” implying that he had acquired wisdom with his years. All those who preceded Avraham and lived much longer than him were not referred to as *zaken*. Avraham had acquired wisdom with his years. We watch over the course of successive Torah portions people evolving to some degree. The Torah doesn’t assume that wealth or power is synonymous with wisdom or implies wisdom. Sometimes it’s ill-gotten. Wisdom is not fleeting. It should inform all of our days and help us live more meaningful lives, richer lives, lives lived in accordance with our values. Without values that come with wisdom, our days will be much shallower.

One last value I want to mention because it also comes into play in this Shabbat’s Torah portion, is the value of peace, shalom. Again in Pirkei Avot we are told to be like the students, the disciples, of Aharon (Aaron, Moses’ brother) of whom it says *ohev shalom v’rodef shalom*, (he loved peace and pursued peace). Sometimes war is inevitable. The Jewish tradition is not a pacifist tradition. But it is generally a peace-loving tradition – and if peace is an option, it should be pursued.

The question of peace always seems to be an issue in the world in which we live, especially in the Middle East. I have an online subscription to an Israeli newspaper called Haaretz which keeps me abreast of what’s going on in Israel and in the Middle East. As I’m sure you all know, the threat of Iran and its proxies surrounding Israel is constantly a concern in Israel and always in the news.

In keeping with what I said earlier that Torah should inform one’s daily life and not be relegated to some small corner of our lives – I would say that there’s no question that when negotiations are a possibility, we should not risk people’s lives with war. But, sadly, as I wrote above, war is sometimes inevitable. I hope that is not going to be the case again for Israel who has been plagued by threats to its existence since the establishment of the state in 1948.

I want to return to Pirkei Avot for a relevant quote. Pirkei Avot asks rhetorically: *Ayzehu gibor* (which could be translated both as “who is the powerful one” or “who is the hero?”). The answer given is *hakovesh et yitzro* the one who conquers their impulses or themselves. The powerful person does not have to prove their power. Someone who’s truly powerful doesn’t have

to prove anything. Their true power comes from conquering themselves and not the need to prove how powerful they are. Following from this is the Israeli ideal (not always realized, but nevertheless believed in) of “*tohar haneshek*” (purity of arms) i.e. trying to defend oneself in a way that is measured, effective, but never excessive, trying to prevent collateral damage, and trying to maintain one’s humanity amidst the terrible reality of armed conflict.

How far from the ideals of the Torah is the world we witness around us?!

Nevertheless we cannot give up on trying to inch this world closer to the ideals and values we treasure, however discouraging the evidence around us may seem. As Rebbe Nachman said: *al titya’esh* - never give up, never despair.

Shabbat Shalom.