

PARASHAS VAYISHLACH

Heart to Heart

Hatred has a very long memory. More than twenty years had passed since Jacob had taken the blessings Esau thought were coming to him, and Jacob had fled into the night, a fugitive from his own home. And now, Jacob was coming home, no longer a lonely fugitive but a wealthy man with a large family, and it was inevitable that Esau's smoldering hatred would burst into flames. And indeed, as Jacob drew closer to home, the electrifying news arrived. Esau was fast approaching with four hundred men armed to the teeth. Deeply concerned that he was unworthy of divine protection, Jacob prepared for the worst.

And then came the turnaround. It could not have been more dramatic. As we read in this week's Torah portion, Jacob "bowed down to the ground seven times until he approached, until his brother Esau. And Esau ran towards his younger brother, and embraced him and hugged him and kissed him, and they wept." The danger had passed, and everyone could breathe a sigh of relief.

What had brought about this stunning turnaround? Had Jacob completely misread Esau's intentions? Were the four hundred armed men simply an honor guard? Not very likely. Esau's hatred had smoldered for over twenty years, and he had undoubtedly come with violent intentions. Could a simple bow have extinguished this fire of resentment?

Before we attempt to resolve this baffling mystery, let us first take a closer look at a famous Talmudic vignette of the celebrated sage Hillel.

A gentile once approached the great sage.

"I want to convert to Judaism," he said. "However, I have one condition. I want you to teach me the Torah."

"Very well," said the sage.

"I understand that the Torah is vast," continued the gentile, "and I have no patience to spend so much time studying. I want you to teach me the entire Torah in the amount of time I am able to stand on one leg."

"No problem," said the great sage. "I will do exactly as you say. Do not do to others those things that are hateful to you. This is the essence of the Torah. All the rest is explanation."

This wonderful story is often repeated to underscore the importance of *bein adam lechaveiro*, the Jewish emphasis on interpersonal relationships encapsulated in the commandment of *ve'ahavata l'reiacha kamocha*, "love others as you love yourself." But what exactly did Hillel mean? The Torah is infinitely complex, full of concepts and laws and observances. Is loving others the overriding central theme of the Torah, everything else being just explanation and elaboration? Was Hillel giving the prospective convert a facetious answer? Or is there a real connection between interpersonal relationships and all the rest of the Torah?

The commentators explain that the greatest obstacle to having perfect love for other people is the ego. People are so absorbed in their own needs that they cannot be as sensitive to other people as they are to themselves. Indeed, it is practically impossible for an ordinary person to truly love others as he does himself. But this obstruction is rooted in the material aspect of humanity. The pure essence of a person, the spiritual soul, is free of complexes, egotism and ulterior motives. It is utterly selfless. And therefore, as a person becomes more spiritual, as his soul assumes an increasingly prominent role in his life, he becomes ever more capable of loving others as he loves himself.

This is what the Torah is all about. It is the means by which a person rises above his material restrictions and grows spiritually. It is not a simple process. It requires study and work and observance, but it is the only way to reach that level of pure spirituality at which a person can truly love others with pure and absolute selflessness.

When Jacob prepared to face Esau, he sought to awaken in his own heart the dormant sentiments of brotherly love. He "bowed down," symbolically subjugating his ego, and he let his mind dwell on his brother's positive traits until a feeling of true brotherly love awakened in his heart. "Like a face reflected in water," the Torah tells us, "so is the heart of one person to another." People are instinctively attuned to how they are viewed by others; they feel the "vibes." Esau felt the love in Jacob's heart, and his own heart immediately melted in response.

In our own lives, there is no question we would be happier and more fulfilled if we were more sensitive to others and enjoyed better relations with family and friends. But it is so difficult to step away from our own needs and focus completely on the needs of others. The answer lies in becoming more spiritual, in letting our souls rather than our bodies rule our lives. Only if we imbue our lives with Torah, if we nourish the divine spark of spirituality with ourselves, can we begin to approach to the level at which we can love others as we love ourselves.