

TORAH SHMOOZE VAYISHLACH

Scriptural Context

- Jacob had left the household of his father-in-law, Laban, taking his wives and cattle.
- He sent (וישלח) messengers to his brother Esau to tell him that he (Jacob) had sojourned with Laban, and that he had much cattle; he sent to Esau “. . . to tell my lord, that I may find favor in your sight.” (32:5-6) The messengers return to tell Jacob that Esau was coming with 400 men, which frightened Jacob. (32:8)
- Jacob then sent ahead to Esau a gift of more than 500 animals. (32:15-16)
- Jacob prayed to God, acknowledging his unworthiness and God’s promise to make his offspring “. . . as the sand of the sea, which cannot be numbered for multitude.” (32:10-13)
- That night Jacob wrestled with a “man” until dawn. (32:25-30)
- The next day Jacob saw Esau approaching with his 400 men. He bowed to the ground seven times before his brother. (33:3) Esau ran to greet and hug and kiss Jacob, both of them weeping.

Commentary

- When Jacob sent messengers to Esau, he was saying in effect, I haven’t become a big makher, I’m still on the road, moving around from place to place (ג), so there’s no reason for you to hate me. (Rashi 32:4-5) The basic purpose of Jacob’s message to Esau was to say, “I am friendly with you and seek your love.” (Rashi 32:6)
- Yet, by telling Esau that he had sojourned with Laban, he may have been communicating to Esau that he knew how to handle hostile behavior. (Or Hachayim)
- According to Rashi, the “messengers” Jacob sent to Esau were actually angels. Why did Jacob send what we might think of as “special messengers”? He may have had a tactical reason, that is, to ensure that Esau would not simply do away with the messengers and then attack him by surprise. Why did he send messengers at all? He may have wanted to ensure that Esau did not first hear of his approach from another source, but rather that he would have the opportunity to put the news of his arrival in the best possible light. (Or Hachayim)
- Sending messengers to Esau “. . . provided him [Jacob] with useful information about how to approach Esau when he would meet him.” (Akeidat Yitzchak)
- Jacob’s prayer, acknowledging that if he were not saved, “all God’s promises to Abraham and Isaac would come to nothing” (Akeidat Yitzchak), reveals his recognition of how great the stakes were in the situation.
- Midrash Rabbah teaches that the “man” with whom Jacob wrestled was Esau’s “guardian angel,” who could not prevail against Jacob. (32:26)

Questions

- How did Jacob prepare himself for the confrontation and potential conflict that he anticipated with his brother?
- What might have softened Esau's heart?
- What are the main emotions we feel when we imagine ourselves to be injured in a conflict with another person—and how can we control them?
- What can we do to soften our own heart and that of the other party with whom we are in conflict?

Leader's Notes

- Jacob prepared himself in myriad ways:
 1. He offered his friendship and asked for Esau's love, notwithstanding his brother's past murderous intentions toward him and his own fear;
 2. He let Esau know that he, Jacob, knew how to handle difficult people, that he was no longer the quiet, studious Yeshiva bukker he had once been;
 3. He sent as messengers those in his company who were of the highest spiritual standing, both as self-protection and to influence Esau for the good;
 4. He made sure that he would be the one to break the news of his arrival and thus define his intentions, rather than a third party;
 5. He made it his business to learn ahead of time his brother's state of mind;
 6. He prayed, contemplating what was at stake in the situation, taking time alone to reflect and seek the will of God, and thus clarifying and aligning his purposes with God's will;
 7. He struggled (in his dream) with his own unresolved thoughts and feelings about his brother, thus lightening the psychological and emotional baggage that might obstruct their reconciliation; and
 8. He humbled himself before his brother, making it clear that he had nothing worse to offer than friendship, kindness, and gifts.
- Esau's heart may have been softened both by Jacob's strategic acumen and his offer of friendship and kindness. Jacob seemingly understood two important principles:
 1. "He who acts like a kid, the wolves devour him"—the Sages.
 2. "As water reflects a face back to a face, so one's heart is reflected back to him by another"—Proverbs 27:19.
- When we've been injured, the main emotions we experience are anger and hurt (rejection), so how can we control those feelings?
 1. We can change our attitude about someone with whom we're in conflict by taking the initiative to learn more about the person—and when our attitude changes, our emotions follow.
 2. We can take time to consider the true stakes in the potential outcomes of the situation, thus discouraging ourselves from hasty or ill-considered behavior.
 3. We can choose not to respond to our emotions (as we often do when the stakes are great and we are relatively powerless).
 4. We can pray to know how to live in the image of God and to find the strength within ourselves to do so.