

JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

Vayishlach

After Jacob stole Esau's blessing from their father, Isaac, he was forced to run away from home to escape his brother's wrath. For twenty-two years he lived with his uncle, Laban. During that time he got married (four times!), had twelve children, and had amassed great wealth. After those twenty-two years, G-d told him that it was time to return home. On his way home, Jacob prepared for his reunion with his brother, who was still out to kill him. He prayed to G-d, sent an appeasement gift to Esau, and prepared for war. As part of his war preparation, Jacob hid his daughter, Dinah, in a box, so that Esau would not see her and desire to take her as a wife. (Midrash Rabba 76:9) The Midrash explains that G-d was unhappy with this step, as perhaps marrying Dinah would have helped Esau change his ways. In fact, the Midrash goes so far as to state that Dinah's later abduction was Jacob's punishment for holding back Dinah from Esau.

This Midrash is very puzzling. Did G-d really desire that Jacob hand over his daughter to the wicked Esau on the off-chance that she would be able to influence him in a good way? How could Jacob be sure that Dinah would not be negatively influenced by Esau? Should we all marry our daughters to the nastiest, and lowliest Jews we can find, so they can bring them back to a Torah lifestyle? No good and caring father would ever dream of doing such a thing, and rightfully so!

When the Torah first introduces us to Leah, she is described as having tender eyes. The Talmud (Bava Basra 123a) explains that Leah's eyes were tender from crying. She had heard people saying that since Laban had twin daughters, Leah and Rachel, and Rebecca, his sister had twin sons, Esau and Jacob, it would be fitting that they marry each other. The older should marry the older and the younger would marry the younger. When Leah went to find out about her proposed mate, she discovered that his ways were far from righteous, and this was the cause for her many tears.

The Maskil L'Dovid, Rabbi Dovid Pardo, (1719-1792) explains that the reason Leah cried was not because she was afraid of being forced into a marriage with her sinful cousin. Her father had no plans of pushing his daughter unwillingly into marrying Esau. Rather, she cried because she knew if Esau desired to marry her she would do so willingly because that was her fate in life. She understood that she had the ability to help him become a better person. Despite knowing that this was the right thing to do, it was a heavy burden to bear. She cried and prayed to G-d that this should not be here fate, and ultimately her prayers were answered.

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When Jacob arrived in the city of Shechem, Dinah went out into the street to “hang out” with the girls of the city. Rashi explains that this resulted from her tendency toward being an extrovert. She inherited this attribute from her mother, Leah, who is also described as a yotzanes (extrovert). Leah, however, used this attribute in a positive way, to step out of her tent in order to connect to her husband (see Genesis 30, 16). Dinah used it negatively by “hanging out” with the wrong crowd, and was consequently abducted by Shechem, the prince of the land.

With the understanding of Dinah's personality, G-d's objection to hiding Dinah is more easily understood. Leah, and by extension, Jacob, knew that Leah had this personality, and therefore, if presented with the opportunity, it would be her responsibility to marry, and thus transform Esau. It therefore stands to reason, that if Dinah possessed similar qualities to her mother, she would have that same ability. Despite this, Jacob chose to hide his daughter and that is what angered G-d. G-d said to Jacob, since you did not allow your daughter to go out and affect your brother, your flesh and blood, in a positive way, I will allow her to be abducted by a gentile, in an obviously negative way.

What a powerful lesson, and what a powerful obligation! G-d, in his infinite kindness, graces us with many gifts, talents and abilities. However, the more skills a person has, the more responsibility that is placed on his or her shoulder. If one does not use his or her G-d-given gifts for the good, there is no guarantee that they will always be at his or her disposal.

Shabbat Shalom!

