

Parashat Vayechi 5778, 2017:

“Am I Instead of G-d?”

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Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, Shayna Yehudit bat Avraham Manes and Rivka, the *refuah shlaimah* of Devorah bat Chana, Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, Shoshana Elka bat Etel Dina and Chaya Mindel bat Leah Basha, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

*Sefer Bereishit* contains the only instances in *Tanach* of the phrase, “Am I instead of G-d?” One of these appears in our *parasha* (50:19), and the other in Parashat Vayatzte (30:2). The context for this expression in our *parasha* is the dialogue that ensued between Joseph and his brothers following the burial of Jacob in *Eretz Yisrael* (The Land of Israel):

So, shall you [i.e. the brother’s messengers] say to Joseph, “Please, forgive now your brothers’ transgression and their sin, for they did evil to you. Now please forgive the transgression of the servants of the G-d of your father.” Joseph wept when they spoke to him. His brothers also went and fell before him, and they said, “Behold, we are your slaves.” But Joseph said to them, “Don’t be afraid, for am I instead of G-d?” (50:17-19, this and all Bible translations, with my emendations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

The *Midrash Sechel Tov* (Buber) on our verse notes that Joseph’s question is, in reality, a rhetorical device, and not a question at all:

Joseph spoke to his brothers in a declarative manner (literally, “expression of certainty”). For in this case, “for am I instead of G-d,” is an expression [of the truth]. It is as if Joseph said: “I have within me one of the ethical characteristics that is similar in kind to that of the Holy One Blessed be He, namely, just as the Holy One Blessed be He is willing to overlook sin, so, too, I am willing to overlook sin.” (Translation my own)

In sum, according to this interpretation, Joseph is emulating Hashem and his statement of, “for am I instead of G-d,” emerges as the ultimate reassurance to his brothers that he will not retaliate against them for their grievous sin of having sold him into Egyptian slavery. This approach is strongly supported by the succeeding two verses:

Indeed, you intended evil against me, [but] G-d designed it for good, in order to bring about what is at present to keep a great populace alive. So now, do not fear. I will sustain you and your small children. And he comforted them and spoke to their hearts. (50:20-21)

Parashat Vayatzte's use of our phrase, "Am I instead of G-d?" is very different than the way it is employed in our *parasha*. Therein, *Rachel Emeinu* (our Mother Rachel) undergoes intense psychological pain resulting from her infertility: "And Rachel saw that she had not borne [any children] to Jacob, and Rachel envied her sister, and she said to Jacob, 'Give me children, and if not, I am dead.'" (*Sefer Bereishit* 30:1) Although the Torah informs us that Jacob "loved Rachel more than Leah," he answered her in an exceedingly harsh manner: "And Jacob became angry with Rachel, and he said, 'Am I instead of G-d, Who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb?'" (30:2) It should be noted that Rashi explains Jacob's words as connoting, "Am I in His place?"

The previous Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivat Chafetz Chaim, Rabbi Alter Chanoch Henoch Leibowitz *zatzal* (1918-2008), was deeply disturbed by Jacob's marked insensitivity to his beloved wife and asked: "Why did Jacob not speak to her in a gentle [and consoling manner]?" (This, and the following quotes are from, *Chidushei Halev, Sefer Bereishit*, pages 189-191, translation and brackets my own.) In his answer, Rav Leibowitz sheds light on the psychological factors that cause one to sin:

In the case of *Ya'akov Avinu* (our Father, Jacob) there were no personal reasons or powerful desires to sin [that would lead to his mistreating Rachel]. Therefore, he should have practiced the direct opposite behavior, especially since his very nature was to act mercifully toward his beloved wife. [Had he done so,] he would have been able to understand her depressed and downtrodden spirit, instead of admonishing her for her feelings!

Why, then, did Jacob rebuke Rachel in such a deliberately hurtful manner? Rav Leibowitz suggests the following interpretation of his behavior, and in so doing asks another question in his quest to clarify Jacob's actions:

The reason as to why Jacob so callously chided her was because he consciously suppressed his feelings of mercy, for he thought in so doing he was serving Hashem (*l'shame shamayim*). As the Seforno (1475-1550) states in his commentary on our verse: “Jacob was angry in his zealousness for the honor of his Creator, as such, he [intentionally] did not look toward the love he had for her [Rachel] concerning this matter.” All of this remains quite difficult, however, for how is it possible that Jacob came to the point of actually performing a sin instead of reproof [his beloved wife] in a gentle [and supportive] manner – after all, were not his actions dedicated solely to serving the Almighty?

Rav Leibowitz answers his question by noting that Jacob did not grasp the extent of Hashem’s kindness and mercy, and willingness to forgo His own divine honor rather than cause pain and suffering to the psychologically downtrodden. As King David so powerfully declared in Psalm 34:18, “The L-rd is near to the broken-hearted, and He saves those of crushed spirit” - even when their abject misery leads them to cry out in seemingly disrespectful ways. In contrast, Jacob, who was zealous for Hashem’s glory, believed that Rachel’s statement, “Give me children [**Jacob**], and if not, I am dead,” impugned the stature of the Almighty in an unforgiveable manner. According to Rav Leibowitz, Jacob’s fundamentally incorrect assumptions regarding the true extent of Hashem’s kindness and mercy led him to sin by responding harshly, rather than supporting Rachel in her hour of need.

One of Rav Leibowitz’s hallmarks was the application of his *chidushei Torah* to real-life scenarios in order to help his students refine their *middot* (ethical characteristics) and behavior. He uses our story of *Ya’akov Avinu* (our father, Jacob) and *Rachel Emeinu* as just such a teaching moment:

It is entirely possible that we may undertake a particular action wherein our thoughts and intentions are completely *l'shame shamayim*. Moreover, we may push ourselves to the ultimate limits (*b'mesirut nefesh*) in order to fulfill the will of Hashem. Yet, in truth, we will be considered as sinners and be punished for this action. This is the case, since we have erred in our understanding of the overarching principles of the Torah (*b'hashkafat haTorah*).

In his inimitable fashion, Rav Leibowitz notes that we are most likely to err in this way in situations wherein we criticize our fellow Jews:

We are particularly predisposed to sin when we think that there is a reason to admonish and distance ourselves from our fellow Jews. We do not recognize that if *Ya'akov Avinu* was able to err because he failed to understand the extent of the Holy One Blessed be He's love [for the Jewish people], all the more so is it the case that we are likely to sin [in such matters] – since we, too, very likely will be unable to perceive the extent of Hashem's kindness and mercy. Therefore, we must be conscientious in the examination of our actions – even when our intentions are purely *l'shame shamayim* – since we, too, are so easily able to come into the grips of sin.

I believe that Rav Leibowitz has taught us a profound lesson as to how we should treat our fellow Jews. Not too surprisingly, it dovetails with one of Rabbi Akiva's most famous declarations, as found in *Pirkei Avot* III:14: "Beloved are Israel, for they are called children of G-d; it is a sign of even greater love that it has been made known to them that they are called children of G-d, as it is stated, 'You are children of the L-rd your G-d.'" (*Sefer Devarim* 14:1) With Hashem's help and our heartfelt desire, may Rabbi Akiva's words become etched upon our hearts and guide our actions today, tomorrow and in the future. *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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They may also be found on <http://www.yutorah.org/> using the search criteria of Etengoff and the parasha's name.

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

\*\*\* My audio *shiurim* for Women on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpvd>

\*\*\* I have posted 164 of [Rabbi Soloveitchik's](#) English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.