

Episode 8 Vayishlach

When I was in high school, and finishing my junior year, I wanted to be placed into the advanced “AP” English class for my senior year. You remember this system from school, right? For each subject, there are different levels based on the student’s ability. Usually, there is a normal class, an advanced or honors class, and then, you know, a “lower class” for all the dumb kids [laugh track]. I was finishing up my junior year in which we read works like Mark Twain’s *Huck Finn*, Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms*, and Arthur Miller’s *A Death of a Salesman*. Now, if you’ve spent any time listening to *The Schrift*, I hope it’s been obvious that, at the very least, I don’t exactly suck at analyzing literature. I may even go so far as to say it’s something I am relatively above-average, maybe even “good,” at. So when I was in this junior-year honors English class, I took stock of the other students. I looked around a bit at the competition. And quite frankly, I wasn’t very impressed. I heard what they had to say about the books we read in class. Some of my fellow students were quite insightful. But for the most part, when I heard what they had to say about a text like *Huck Finn*, for example, I would think to myself: “That is total BS”; “Did they even *read* the book?” “They’re just falling back on clichés they’ve seen from Disney movies, saying things like ‘love is the answer,’ ‘or ‘believe in yourself,’ and so forth.”

Our teacher for that year got to decide which students would ascend to this AP-English class for their senior year. This AP-English class was a kind of super-honors class. Well, one day, the list was posted which students had made it into this elite class. And I saw that my name wasn’t on the list. Now, in high school, you get a lot of homework and quizzes which are really more of “busy work”—work to keep you busy—than anything else. Occasionally I missed these minor assignments or didn’t do well on them, so I ended up getting a B or a B+. Other students, who maybe weren’t very good literary critics, would get an A for doing all of this busy work perfectly. I don’t think our teacher took the time to evaluate us as individuals, but rather just sent all the kids with an “A” to this elite course and all the kids with a “B” to the honors course. I found myself, unfortunately, in this second group. And when I saw all of the literary hacks, students who I knew didn’t give a \$&@* about literature, getting into this elite course, I couldn’t stand by idly. I decided to speak to the teacher about it directly. Let’s call her Mrs. S. So I went up to Mrs. S. one day after class and asked her why she hadn’t placed me into the AP English class. She said, “you got a B in my class. The other students got A’s. That’s why.” So I said: “Yes, I understand that. But the reason I got a B was just because I didn’t always do well on the nightly homework assignments you gave us. I always did very well on major assignments like essays and projects.” I then paused. “Moreover,” I said, “I think my comments in class showed that I understood the texts on a much deeper level than many of the other students who are getting into the AP-English class.” I remember that she then smiled, probably amused at what she saw as my hubris to assert myself in such a way. Then Mrs. S. said something I will never forget. She said: “Quite frankly, I didn’t think your comments in class were anything special. They were rather average.”

Needless to say, I was not very happy when she said this. I was angry, not just at her, but at the entire unjustness of the system. And this wasn’t just about my ego. I really wanted to be in the more challenging and sophisticated literature course. To this day, I still feel like my development as a writer and literary critic was stunted by not being able to study in this AP course. Mrs. S.’s comment stayed with me for many years afterward, indeed, even up to the present, as evidenced by the fact that I am discussing it with you in this podcast. After high

school, I went to college where I majored in English. I have since gotten my master's in literature and now am doing a PhD in German literature. I've also written some pretty interesting things over the years. Put another way, I *should have been* put into the AP-English class. But I wasn't.

I wanted to prove Mrs. S. wrong, to show her that she had been a fool to not put me into this higher class. It's not as though every time I got an A on a college essay, I sent a copy to Mrs. S. or exulted in a feeling of victory. But I noticed that occasionally a small voice would surface which said to Mrs. S., "I told you so." In fact, even when I began my PhD studies in 2017, in German literature, over a decade or so after Mrs. S. had made this comment, I am sure that at some point I thought to myself, "If only Mrs. S. could see me now."

Well, a couple of years ago, out of the blue, I decided to google Mrs. S., to see what she had been up to. As tends to happen when you google someone who is already old after more than ten years of seeing them, what did I immediately discover? Mrs. S. was dead.

Not only was Mrs. S. dead but she had died years before she could have even learned that I got into a PhD program in literature. Yet, a strange thing happened. My desire to prove Mrs. S. wrong did not go away. Even though it would now be impossible for Mrs. S. to learn of my achievements in literature, I still felt like I wanted to show them to her. The voice telling Mrs. S. "I told you so. You should have put me in AP English," did not disappear, even though now there was no one to hear these words. Indeed, to this day, I still want to prove her wrong.

Shabbat Shalom. [Play close-out music]. Just kidding. [Record scratch].

Here is where many a D'var Torah would conclude by saying that you should forget past wrongs that have been done to you, turn the other cheek, forgive and forget, wish your enemies well. No, no. We don't do that on the Schrift. I actually just had to fire someone for daring to try.

Thank you for your patience in letting me unload a story which has been on my mind for the past decade plus which I have never told anyone before. Unfortunately, now I have to tell you another story which is also a bit long. But fortunately, this story is rather juicy indeed.

In the last episode, I mentioned that Lea had six sons and one daughter. Who was this one daughter? This was Dinah. In this week's parsha, Vayishlach, we read that Jacob and his family return to settle in Canaan. In their new city, Dinah decides to go out one day and walk around. The king of the city is named Hamor, and his son is named Shechem. Well, Shechem sees Dinah walking around. It is not clear exactly what transpires between Shechem and Dinah. They definitely have sex. But the Torah also suggests that Shechem took Dinah forcibly, that is, that he raped her and had sex with her in let's just say an unconventional way. Now, there are various theories which suggest that Dinah was not raped but rather that the sex was conventional. It's a bit beyond the scope of this episode to try to discern whether Dinah wanted to sleep with Shechem or not. But the events which follow suggest that Dinah may herself have had a fondness for Shechem.

In the very next sentence after we learn that Shechem "raped" Dinah, we read that he fell deeply in love with her, and that he spoke to her sincerely. In the verse after this one, Genesis 34:4, we read that Shechem immediately goes to his father Hamor and says to him: "Father, please, get me Dinah as a wife." Jacob learns about what happened between Shechem and Dinah, but he keeps quiet about it so that his twelve sons do not find out. Shechem's father Hamor then comes to speak to Jacob to see if Dinah will be allowed to marry Shechem. At this point, Jacob's sons hear the news, and they are outraged. Interestingly, the Torah tells us that they are outraged because "having sex with the daughter of Jacob is something not to be done." In other words,

their reasoning for why what Shechem did was so terrible is rather undeveloped. To them, it is a kind of categorical law: no man is allowed to touch our sister.

Nevertheless, the marriage negotiations begin. Hamor and Shechem, father and son, tell Jacob and his sons that they will pay whatever price and do whatever is necessary so that Prince Shechem can marry Dinah. The sons say: “It is a disgrace if Dinah marries a man who is uncircumcised. You and all of the men of your city must be circumcised. If you do that, you Shechem can marry Dinah, and our two tribes can live together in peace.”

Hamor and Shechem agree to the deal. Obviously, Shechem really wants to marry Dinah. So Hamor and Shechem are circumcised. And all of the men of the city are circumcised as well. This story seems to be on the verge of a happy ending, in which Dinah and Shechem live happily ever after, and the two tribes coexist in peace and harmony.

Yet, it is not to be. Three days after the circumcision, Shechem, and Hamor, and all of the men of the town are lying in pain. Simon and Levi, two of Dinah’s brothers, enter the city with their swords. The men have all been circumcised, so there is no one to protect the city. In episode two, I mentioned how the activities of a terrorist group like ISIS would have been more or less “normal” in the ancient world. Simon and Levi’s behavior here is evidence of that. They kill every man in the town with their swords, including Shechem and Hamor. They then plunder the town, destroying homes, stealing animals, raping the women and taking their children as slaves. Dinah herself is dragged out of Shechem’s house and brought back to the Israelite camp.

Jacob, of course, is furious with his sons Simon and Levi. He screams at them: how could you do this? Now the other tribes of the area will unite together and attack us. (Interestingly, Jacob expresses no sympathy for the victims of the slaughter or for his daughter Dinah.) Simon and Levi’s reply to their father, is most telling, and it is what I would like to focus on for the remainder of this episode. They say to their father Jacob: “Should our sister be treated like a whore?”

“Should our sister be treated like a whore?” What is so significant about this line? I would imagine that this thought—our sister is being treated like a whore—was the brothers’ exact thought when they first heard about Shechem lying with Dinah. After all that transpired afterwards—Shechem’s declaration of love for Dinah, Jacob’s smoking the peace pipe with Hamor, and the circumcision of all of Hamor’s men—none of it mattered. This thought—our sister is being treated like a whore—remained firmly etched in the minds of the brothers Simon and Levi. They could not get past this judgment. And the Torah seems to want to indicate this to us. When Simon and Levi say to Jacob, should our sister be treated like a whore, it is as though they have been *sleeping through* all that occurred in the interim. Dinah could have said to them, guys, I love Shechem, he didn’t rape me, it was consensual sex, I want to be married to him, but it would not have mattered. The thought and judgment had become Simon and Levi’s reality.

The same phenomenon seems to have occurred in my experience with my high school English teacher Mrs. S. After our conversation that fateful day after class, I was left with the thought, “I will show her.” That thought, we might say, took on a life of its own, and left reality far behind. Mrs. S. probably forgot about the conversation a few minutes after it happened, yet I still wanted to prove her wrong. Years later, she probably even forgot who I was, yet I still wanted to show her. And even after she died, the thought lived on. Imagine this conversation: “Steve, Mrs. S. has been dead for years.” “Yes, I know. And I need to show her that she should have put me in the AP English class.” If I responded this way, I would sound as equally deranged as Simon and Levi, maybe even more so. Yet, while I would not have vocally expressed this answer, I still, very troublingly, would have thought it.

Here is an important question which we do not ask often enough: *why* do we hold on to thoughts? Moreover, why do we hold on to thoughts which are negative and which cause us pain? Wouldn't it have been easier for me to just *forget* what Mrs. S. said? Why couldn't Levi and Simon have said, well, Shechem is making our sister into an "honest woman" as it were, let's just put this thing behind us and move on? Well, sometimes, we *do* allow painful memories to be forgotten. But many times, they hang around. Why?

This was a question which bothered Freud as well. He observed that, following the First World War, in which many soldiers were terribly traumatized, these veteran soldiers would continue replaying the traumatic incidents from the war in their minds, long after the war had been over. The soldiers would have been *better off* if they simply forgot the war and dwelt on happy and pleasurable thoughts. Yet, instead, they seemed to *want* to suffer and to re-experience these traumatic moments. Freud dealt with this question in his book, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Freud's answer is a bit beyond the scope of this episode, but he basically said that humans have a drive not just toward pleasure but also a drive toward pain and toward death. Let's leave that question aside for a moment, perhaps to be taken up in a future episode or in a possible season two of the Schrift.

My answer is a bit more straightforward. We hold on to painful memories because our brains want to protect us. Our brains have good intentions in holding on to these memories. Yet, sometimes our brains "love" us too much, as it were. Our brains want to make sure we never starve, so they tell us to eat far more food than we really "need," causing us to gain weight and become unhealthy. In this sense, our brains are a bit like overprotective grandmothers who force food down our throats even when the food is now beginning to hurt us rather than nourish us.

Several years ago, I was in my apartment in Israel. There was an electricity outlet on the wall with some wire ends exposed. For some strange reason, I decided to touch the wires. I got a terrible electric shock. I remember that it was so scary and painful, that for the rest of the year, I couldn't even look at that section of the wall in my apartment. And to this day, I am extremely hesitant about touching anything with electricity running through it, as a result of that experience. My brain doesn't want me to let go of this memory because it wants to protect me. It wants to make sure I never experience this level of pain again. If my brain didn't take the electric shock seriously, I might touch the wire again, and die. And species who do not develop the ability to remember past dangers do not stick around on the planet very long. This is why, I believe, we hold on to these past unpleasant experiences. Our brains have evolved to protect us from danger and by holding on to these thoughts, our brains think they are helping us, even if, in the aggregate, they would probably serve us better if they would drop these thoughts.

But when Mrs. S. told me I was just an average student, and when Levi and Simon heard about their sister Dinah, there was no threat to our bodies and to our lives. The threat was, rather, to our egos and to our sense of justice. Our brains do not just want to protect our bodies from threats. They also want to protect our egos and our sense of self from attacks. In fact, the mind will go to all kinds of lengths to ensure the safety of the ego. Freud would, of course, call these *defense mechanisms*. My ego was apparently pretty wounded when Mrs. S. made this comment to me, and my defense mechanism was to seek a kind of revenge on Mrs. S. My ego wanted to have the last word and to triumph over Mrs. S. Simon and Levi dealt with their lust for revenge more barbarically. Their egos were also badly wounded. To assuage their egos, they decided to murder the person who originally hurt their egos—Shechem. Then, to make their egos feel even better, they pillaged Shechem's town.

The desire for revenge, then, has its roots in the ego. Have you ever seen a dog plot revenge? No, because dogs do not have egos. Now, in the case of Simon and Levi, the manifestation of their revenge was extremely straightforward—*physically* punish the person who wounded the ego. In my case, you might think, Steve, that's great. You turned the wound to your ego into something positive, you let it propel you to success in the field of literature. This was, by the way, how Michael Jordan motivated himself to succeed in basketball. He found some other player who had maybe dunked on him, or had won the MVP that year, or who had talked trash to him, and Michael Jordan made it his mission to prove that person wrong, to show that he was better than the other player. This is what allowed Michael Jordan to win all of those championships. His pathological lust for revenge. But is this really *winning*? Who *really* won the battle between me and Mrs. S.? Sure, maybe I “showed” her that she should have put me in the advanced English class. But I was the one who held on to the conversation for all those years and let it bother me. So did I really *win*? Did my “revenge,” even if it was a kind of enlightened and productive revenge, really bring me compensation? Or did it, instead, just bring a further prolongation of the original wound to the ego?

The brain is very sneaky, and has grown only sneakier with time. When our egos are wounded, our brains try to figure out a way to get revenge. But usually, that desire for revenge is so buried by defense mechanisms, and social norms, and crude notions of morality, that it is scarcely recognizable. No one would have seen me getting my master's in literature and think, he is on a crusade for revenge. We seek revenge in the most subtle of ways. It could be making a passive-aggressive comment. It could be just *thinking* negative thoughts about the person who wounded your ego. It could be writing a moralizing comment on Twitter. It could be writing a podcast episode in which you disparage your dead high school English teacher. The mind will go to extraordinary lengths to soothe the ego, even if it is self-destructive.

How should we react, then, when someone wounds our ego, and we feel the desire for revenge bubble up inside of us? The answer is quite simple. We should just turn the other cheek and learn to love our enemies [Laugh track]. In episode four, I mentioned how those Puritan Christians from hundreds of years ago are still lurking deep within Western morality. Does this sound familiar? When someone hurts you, just forgive them, even if it's hard. When someone wounds you, don't wound them back, just be the “better” person and keep your anger to yourself. Nietzsche observed that this attitude toward revenge is, ironically, just a more twisted and repressed form of revenge. When you turn the other cheek, you are still seeking revenge. You are saying, I am so much better than you, that I don't even need to bring myself down to your level and retaliate. I am holier than you, I am more moral than you, I am more enlightened than you. These thoughts you experience when you force yourself to turn the other cheek are your egos very sneaky and socially acceptable way of finding comfort and some perverted notion of compensation. When love comes out of hate, when forgiveness comes out of self-righteousness, it doesn't really count.

In his 1887 book, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche lays out for us how we can find a healthy and vigorous way to handle wounds to our ego. The answer is that we must learn to forget. But this is not forgetting in the way Puritan-Christian morality teaches us. This is not forgive and forget while gnashing your teeth together at how pissed you are. This is not forgetting as when someone insensitively says, “just forget about it,” or “just move on” or “get over it.” This is to *truly* forget, that is, to no longer *remember* the wound. How do we *forget*? Not through telling ourselves over and over again: forget. Rather, it is to arrange our lives such that we are so filled with feelings of abundance, power, and joy, that we really do forget. In

Genealogy of Morals, Nietzsche gives us a French economist named Mirabeau as the *par excellence* example of what it means to *really* forget. Mirabeau, according to Nietzsche, was so infused with feelings of strength, creativity, and flexibility, that he had literally no memory of the insults that people directed at him. Nietzsche says that Mirabeau could never *forgive* anyone because he forgot the insult almost immediately. To quote Nietzsche: “Such a person with a single shrug simply throws off himself the many worms which eat into other people.” Nietzsche then writes, in a dig at Christian morality, “Only here is *real* love for one’s enemy possible, provided that it is at all possible on earth.”

There is another story in this week’s parsha which I haven’t yet mentioned. This is the story of the reuniting of Jacob and Esau after nearly twenty years apart. You will remember that Jacob tricked Esau, and that their father, Isaac, gave his blessing to Jacob and not to Esau. Jacob had to leave town, as it were, because Esau vowed revenge on him and promised to kill him. Twenty years later, Jacob returns, fearing that Esau still has this desire to get his revenge. But when the two brothers meet with their families behind them in the field, Esau does not try to kill Jacob. Instead, to quote the Torah, he “runs to greet Jacob, he embraces him, he falls on his neck and kisses him, and they wept together.” Now, Esau obviously didn’t “forget” what happened—that would just be weird and a sign of dementia. But he certainly *forgave* Jacob. In the past, I thought that Esau forgave Jacob because twenty years had passed, and he realized that Jacob was his brother and that he should love him. I am sure that has something to do with it. But there is more going on in this scene. When Esau and Jacob reunite, they have both become strong, powerful, wealthy men living in abundance. The Torah emphasizes how, when Esau and Jacob meet, they have vast families and cattle behind them. Esau is accompanied by four-hundred men. Jacob sends hundreds of goats and camels to Esau as a gift. In short, both brothers are *flourishing* in life. When they meet again, both are coming from a place of power and self-assurance. This is what allows them to forgive, to forget, and to love.

For all of Nietzsche’s brilliance, however, one flaw in his philosophy is that he was rather dismissive and contemptuous of Eastern philosophies like Buddhism. He saw meditation and Buddhism as a withdrawal from life and as a form of nihilism. I think Nietzsche’s philosophy would have dramatically benefitted had he been more open to meditation and Buddhist teachings. As much as Nietzsche’s advice is excellent that we should be more like Mirabeau, this isn’t always so feasible. I can’t exactly snap my fingers and expect two hundred goats to appear at my side so that I’m ready to forgive everyone who has wronged me. It can take some time in life to flourish. Here is where meditation can help us. When we meditate and become mindful of our thoughts, we are able to observe patterns in our thinking. And I have attached a link to a helpful meditation here in the show notes.

Through mindfulness of thoughts meditation, we can see that sometimes our minds send us the same judgments over and over again, even when that judgment has little basis in reality. This was the case with me and Mrs. S. What if Simon and Levi had meditated instead of letting their thoughts poison them. They would have sat in the field, meditated, and noticed their minds sending them the thought “our sister is being treated like a whore” every five seconds. They might have observed, wow, my mind just doesn’t want to let go of this judgment. But is it true? Is it based in reality? After a few meditation sessions, they might have distanced themselves from the thought and begun to see how misguided it was. This method of mindfulness of thoughts meditation could eventually have allowed them to *forget* the injury to their ego with the same skill of forgetting displayed by Mirabeau.

There is an aphorism in English that, “the best revenge is living well.” But, in fact, if you are living well—and you are meditating—you won’t need to think about revenge at all.