

BERESHIT

FAMILY DYNAMICS

The parsha tells the story of Cain and Abel and man's first violent act: a lashing out of brother against brother based on family tension, jealousy and perceived favoritism. What can we do in our families to reduce tensions, manage jealousies, and create positive family dynamics? Recognize the special qualities of each family member. Our relationships with our family should be ever-lasting.

BREAKING RULES

One of the first things God tells Adam is not to eat from the tree of knowledge. Yet the first story about Adam and Eve together is a story about their breaking this rule. Rule breaking seems to be simply part of who we are, part of what it means to be human. Each time we break a rule, we are presented an opportunity; we can transform a broken rule into an opportunity for taking responsibility. What can we learn about self-control to help us resist the temptation to break rules?

TIKKUN OLAM

God placed Adam in a beautiful garden which grew delicious fruit, but in order for a garden to remain beautiful and fruitful, there has to be a gardener to work and maintain it. Adam was placed in the garden not just to enjoy the delicious fruit, but also to care for the garden. We are all gardeners in this world. We have the privilege of enjoying the gifts that God provides for us, but we also have the responsibility of keeping God's world beautiful. We must do our part!

NOACH

THE LIGHT IN A DARK ROOM

While it rained and poured for forty days and nights, Noah's ark protected his family. Just as Noah and his family were protected from the flood by their ark, we also have our own arks that guard us from the dark and stormy world. Our families are our arks. We turn to our family when we need protection. Maintaining peace and security in our own families helps us keep the stormy world at bay.

THE DIFFICULTY IN DISCIPLINE

The flood destroyed everything and almost everyone. When your computer or smartphone misbehaves, often it just needs a reboot to get going again. At times that may be an extreme step, losing all unsaved work. In life, we need to make the call between extreme measures and more cautious ones. For our personal development, we need discipline, because without it, there would be chaos and disorder.

CHANGE

Noah experienced radical change when he was forced to begin his life all over again. Just like this story, our lives are constantly changing. The challenge of change is getting through it with an open mind and positive attitude. We should not let change disrupt our normal ways of life. Undergoing change is good! Although easier said than done, embrace the change with a smile on your face.

LECH LECHA

CHOOSING HARMONY

Instead of allowing matters to deteriorate, Abraham chooses to put distance between himself and his nephew, Lot. His goal is to preserve the harmony between them. Separation may be an extreme solution to a problem that could be handled by a willingness to understand others. Useless fighting can be avoided by creative thinking, understanding, humility, and acceptance.

FAITH AND COURAGE

Abraham is told to leave his home and go to a place that God will tell him. He had the faith and courage to just go, not knowing where he is going. Having this blind faith is extremely difficult. Rather than focusing on the frightening and unknown, we should try to imagine the opportunities in a new situation. The power of our imagination can give us the courage we need. While what's new can be frightening, it can also be invigorating.

STANDING UP FOR WHAT IS RIGHT

Abraham lived in a land where everyone served idols. This didn't sit right with him, so he set off searching for a creator who indeed possessed the ability to create. At first, the rest of the world simply laughed at his ridiculous ideas. However, he refused to be discouraged, and he strengthened his efforts to teach the rest of the world his message. Not going along with something just because it's what everyone else is doing may not be easy, but the courage it takes is certainly rewarding. When is a time that you felt you had to stand up against the tide?

VAYERA

HURTFUL WORDS

Sarah's words could have been hurtful to Abraham. However, God changed these words so he would not hear them. We often carelessly speak in a hurtful way when we are upset. But this parsha teaches us that Communication is key when we are upset.

BEING TOO HONEST

God amended Sarah's comment when repeating it to Abraham. We believe that God left out the hurtful words in order to promote "shalom bayit", peace in the household. Lying is wrong; however, there is a more complicated version of the truth. Lying is sometimes necessary to spare someone's feelings in order to maintain peace.

WELCOMING GUESTS

Abraham shows us what an essential value hospitality is. Helping someone feel at home can go a long way in forming and deepening friendships. How can we make people feel welcome?

CHAYEI SARAH

RECONCILIATION

Although Isaac and Ishmael had their differences, the parsha emphasizes that when the time came to bury and mourn for their father Abraham, they did so together. Even Isaac and Ishmael were able to set aside their differences to focus on what united them. While we must be realistic about acknowledging our differences, we need to focus on what unites us, such as family, community, and interests. Can we set aside our differences for the common good?

HONORING PARENTS

Eliezer approached Rebecca's father, asking for permission to bring her back as a wife for Abraham's son, Isaac. Laban, Rebecca's brother, in utter disrespect for his father, jumped up and responded before his father could. Whether we agree or disagree, we must do so with deference and respect for our parents. Why do you think honoring your parents is a form of gratitude?

DOING CHORES

Rebecca, a young woman, carries a jug on her shoulder on her way to the well to draw water for her family. This must have been a hard chore due to the weight of the clay jug filled with water. Rebecca must have known how important this chore of life-sustaining water was to her family. Children also have commitments to the well-being of their family. As they grow older, their responsibilities expand so that they are able to play a larger role in taking care of their family.

TOLDOT

BEING A MENSCH

Esav proves to be the opposite of a mensch. After a long day of work, he barges into the house and demands food from his brother. The concept of manners did not occur to Esav at a time like this. We can learn from this that no matter what our day has been like, or what mood we are in, we must act like a mensch and speak in a refined and respectful manner.

INSTANT GRATIFICATION

Esav was the first born and therefore entitled to certain benefits, such as receiving a larger inheritance, the merit of the priesthood, and most importantly, the special blessings for a life full of goodness. However, Esav only cared about what he wanted now and did not consider his future. He gave up his birthright just for a bowl of soup. We constantly face an inner struggle between having immediate gratification and thinking about tomorrow. If we sacrifice short-term pleasure, and invest in our future, we will attain true eternal pleasure and joy in this world.

PRAYER

Isaac and Rebecca were childless for many years. They prayed, they begged, they beseeched God, until He answered their request, after twenty long years. This shows us what it means to pray, and to never give up on our prayers. When we want something badly enough, we will do whatever we can to attain it. Sometimes, God needs to see how much we really want what we are asking for, how serious we are in what we are praying for. And sometimes He wants us to see how much we mean it and feel for it. How can you pray if you cannot read Hebrew?

VAYETZE

COMMITMENT

Jacob committed to working for his uncle Laban as a shepherd, with the expectation that it included standard conditions. However, after just a few days, he realized he was mistaken; the working conditions were terrible. However, he knew he committed to the job and saw it through until the end. Sometimes we may get more than we expected, and sometimes less. The point of the matter is: a commitment is a commitment. When we give our word to do something, we need to stand by it.

CHEATERS NEVER PROSPER

Jacob ensured that his sheep never grazed in fields that did not belong to him and that he never took any of Laban's sheep to be his own. No matter how hard Laban tried to cheat Jacob, Jacob was successful in all he did, while Laban's fortune suffered tremendously. All that we have is from God. He decides who will be wealthy and successful, and who will have to struggle to earn a living. God wants to bless us and give us plenty; but when we warp justice, He will not lavish His blessings on us. How can you resist the urge to cheat?

SENSITIVITY

Laban secretly commanded Leah to be the one to marry Jacob, and not Rachel. Rachel did what she knew she had to do in order to save her sister from shame, ensuring that Jacob wouldn't realize the swap until the next morning. This kind of sensitivity is courageous. It can inspire us to think more about our friends' needs and feelings, thus strengthening our bond with them.

VAYISHLACH

FINDING GOD

Jacob faced many troubles and difficulties. God continuously hid from him, but Jacob never gave up. For this reason, he alone was blessed with twelve righteous sons. There were times in Jewish history that God revealed Himself, however, most of the time, the Almighty hides Himself, and it's up to us to find him. When situations are particularly painful, He's really hiding in a tough-to-find place. The lesson: don't give up and keep looking. He wants us to find Him, to reveal Him in every situation we arrive at.

DOING OUR PART

Jacob didn't rely on miracles when it came to meeting up with his brother Esau, who wanted to kill him. He sent gifts ahead to Esau to appease him, and split his family into different camps to ensure their safety. He then prayed to God to help him, and believed that G-d would not let him down. Once Jacob did his part, God made miracles. We believe that God can make the impossible possible; however, we must also believe in ourselves. We must do what we can do. How can you do your part?

MATERIALISM

Jacob said "I have everything." His monetary possessions did not even come close to Esau's, but nevertheless he sincerely felt that he had everything. Money and success is great, but Jacob had so much more than that. He had the priceless possessions a person can acquire in life. He had a wonderful family, which gave him the ultimate joy and nachas one can receive. Are the people who have the most "things" the happiest? Who are the happiest people?

VAYESHEV

STAYING POSITIVE

Joseph did not have an easy life, and he could have done what any average human being would do. He had every right to be a bitter man, yet we see that even in prison he was appointed guard over the prisoners. Joseph was a Tzaddik and the way he acted seems impossible for us to imitate. However, we can learn from him and take this message to heart and to action. So give it a try, keep up your spirits, even when all the reasons in the world are telling you to frown. Picture yourself having a bad day. What are you going to do differently to try handling the situation as Joseph did?

TIMING

Reuven, the oldest of Jacob's sons, performed a special mitzvah, but at the wrong time. Where was Reuven when the sale of his brother had taken place? He was repenting for a sin he had committed: bad timing! He was doing something great—asking God for forgiveness; but it was simply not a good time. It was the time for action and salvation. We always need to double check that we have the right timing. Helping out friends is great and important, but not when we are supposed to be listening in class. Do good, but at the right time! Do good intentions count?

BUSINESS ETHICS

This parsha discusses Joseph being sold by his brothers. We can learn from this parsha that there are ethics behind selling. The business world can be a scary place. We must be sensitive and treat people the way we want to be treated. We should try to remain above suspicion and even go beyond the letter of the law. By doing so, we are sanctifying God's name in the world by making Jews an exemplar of ethical behavior.

MIKETZ

SHABBAT

Every Friday night, Joseph closed his palace office and ushered in the Shabbat. The busiest man in Egypt managed to concentrate on Shabbat and his family, when there was a whole country to run. He knew that all of the blessings in his life come from God. Once a week, we bring everything to a full stop to remind ourselves who's really in charge. Joseph was the sole Shabbat observer in the entire country, yet he did it anyway. How can you make Shabbat enjoyable?

TAKING INITIATIVE

Joseph saw that his advice was well needed, so he offered what he could to the king, without being asked. Let's not wait to be asked to do good; let's just do it! When has someone done something good for you without your request for it and how did it feel? What are some examples of how this idea can be applied to our relationship with God?

SINCERE REMORSE

Reuven explained to his younger brothers that it's good that they feel bad for what they've done to Joseph, but their remorse needs to come from feeling sorry for the sin itself. The realization that they did something wrong should bring them to remorse, and not the trouble and hardship that their mistake caused. Real remorse is feeling sorry for what we've done, period! No matter what the repercussion may be, we should feel bad for the actual action. When have you done true repentance?

VAYIGASH

UNITY

When Jacob went down to Egypt with his family, the text reads, “Seventy soul went down to Egypt”, instead of “Seventy souls.” The reason for this is to show us that Jacob’s family was unified to the extent that it was as if they were but one soul. They shared the same beliefs and goals. They were one. In contrast, when Esav’s family traveled, the text reads “souls.” When we see others who seem so different from us, we may have a hard time identifying with them, or even recognizing that we are like brothers and sisters. But by focusing on the fact that we share the same beliefs and traditions, we can remember that we are one. We are united until the end of time, because we believe in one and the same God.

PEACEFUL JOURNIES

Jacob and his family decided to move down to Egypt. Jacob decided that there was no way he could arrive at Egypt without an important pit stop first. He stopped at a place called Be’er Sheba, and prayed to God. He prayed for success in Egypt, he prayed that his family would remain strong in the new and foreign land, and he fueled himself and his family for the big journey ahead. When we take journeys, even small ones like taking on a new mitzvah, we need to take a moment to reflect on our journey that lies ahead, and make a prayer to G-d, asking Him for His blessings and guidance in every part of our journey. What have you done, or plan on doing, that requires some fueling?

THE REAL YOU

This parsha, Joseph reveals himself to his brothers. He showed them that this Egyptian king was really their little brother. This teaches us that people act differently in different situations. Our personalities can become different, our emotions can become different and our words can become different. Who is the real you? How do you act differently when you are around different people?



VAYECHI

IT’S ALL GOD

Joseph knew that although his brothers were horrible to him, there was a reason God wanted it that way, and he accepted it and waited to see what those reasons could possibly be. It’s all from God. All of it. Everything that happens in this world is from Him; the good, the bad, the miracles and the disasters. Our job is to see the good in all that happens, and to remember that no matter what, it’s what God wanted, and He has a reason for it too.

USING OUR STRENGTHS

When Jacob was dying, he blessed his sons, assigning to each their roles as a tribe. Each was content with their mission, but yearned for the benefits of the other’s job. They took what they were blessed with, and used it to its fullest. Each of us are given specific talents and blessings, and it is our job to take them and soar. How can you use what God has given you in ways that He would want you to use them?

TAKING ACTION

This parsha discusses Jacob’s last days. Everyone has a vision for their lives. However, many people live their lives without this vision in mind. Don’t sit back and just hope for the best. Take action. Be the change you want to see. What is your vision for your future? How will you try to reach your potential?