



Consequential Conversation

When Yaakov Avinu arrives in Charan looking for the home of his uncle Lavan, we become privy to a conversation that seems, at first glance, quite mundane. Yaakov Avinu attempts to engage a group of shepherds in conversation while they are waiting for more shepherds to arrive so they can take a large rock off of the well to water the sheep.

Yaakov asks the shepherds where they are from. They reply, "Charan." He then asks them whether they are familiar with Lavan, and they reply in the affirmative, "*yadanu* — we know [him]." He further speaks to them, inquiring as to Lavan's wellbeing, and they respond, "[Things are going] well, and behold, his daughter Rachel is coming with the sheep." (*Bereisheet* 29:2-5) At this point, Yaakov reprimands them, telling them the

day is yet long, they ought to water the sheep and take them back out to pasture. Why does the Torah relate such a prosaic conversation? What are we to learn from this exchange?

Although simple, we can learn several important lessons from these verses, most significantly, the art of rebuke. The Malbim notes that Yaakov Avinu begins by asking the shepherds where they are from. He attempts to judge them favorably, assuming that they must be from a distant place and unaware of the local mores. Further, Rav Kahaneman *zt"l* notes that Yaakov Avinu addresses them as "*achai* — my brothers." To successfully reproach another, one must first convey a sense of true caring and interest. By calling them his "brothers," Yaakov Avinu tries to establish friendship and connection, dispelling any feelings of defensiveness or negativity.

Rav Nissan Alpert *zt"l* in *Limudei Nissan* observes a growing momentum as one reads the verses, and he perceives that there is an astute approach directing us how to admonish another. Yaakov Avinu's first three questions are preceded by the words, "*vayomer lahem* — and he spoke to them." Yaakov Avinu endeavors to engage them in pleasant conversation; one must establish a rapport and affinity in order to share words of admonishment.



Mazel Tov to Grandparents



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and to Sara & David Bedein of Efrat
on the birth of Neri Yosef
in Kibbutz Mefalsim.**

**Named in memory of the IDF
Officer who led the counter attack
on the Kibbutz on October 7,
and who was killed in that attack.**

Yet, we find that the shepherds respond to Yaakov Avinu with a curt, one- or two-word answers. With each question though, Yaakov Avinu tries to draw them out and create a deeper sense of camaraderie. Finally, they not only respond, but they share additional information as well, telling him that Rachel is coming with the sheep. Yaakov Avinu now sees that they are beginning to recognize and accept his overtures of friendship. It is only at this point that he shares his rebuke with them. However, here too, he conveys his message with subtlety, doing his utmost to preserve their dignity. When Yaakov Avinu tells them, “The day is yet long...water the sheep go, pasture,” (*Bereisheet* 29:7). The verse relates, “*Vayomer* — and he said,” as opposed to, “*vayomer lahem* — and he said to them,” as relayed previously. This may imply that Yaakov Avinu was commenting out loud to himself, noting that the day is yet young, there is plenty of time for the sheep to continue grazing. It is only when the shepherds don’t seem to comprehend, that Yaakov Avinu is more direct, effectively saying, “Why not water the sheep now and return to pasture?” Yaakov Avinu communicates his censure by degrees, treating the shepherds with courtesy and respect.

The sensitivity of our Avot is legendary, modeling for us valuable lessons in our social milieu. We learn the importance of relating to others as kinsman and allies and giving people the benefit of the doubt. Further, when sharing reproof, we learn that it is essential to speak in a way that one’s message is understood by implication to preserve the other’s dignity.

How amazing it is to find a world of *derech erez* in artless conversation and simple fellowship. ■

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