


Vayeshev

No Win Situations, Abuse, and Violence

 One of the principle ways that Judaism differs from ancient pagan philosophies is that it offers hope to mankind. Paganism essentially offers man no hope. To paganism, man's life is an endless tragedy. Man cannot hope to live a happy life. Man, by trying to placate one god, inevitably stirs up the wrath of another god. Man is caught in a no-win situation. Life is a perpetual "catch-22." There is no wrong or right in life. What might be right to one god is wrong to another god. Man's only hope is to flee into a make believe world of his own making, hoping somehow to avoid the inevitable wrath of one or another of the gods which is going to descent upon him.

This type of belief fills people with anger for, no matter what they try to do, they will always be clobbered. No matter how pure or good their motives, they cannot win. People usually caught in this situation take out their anger in violence. Their anger is so great that it constantly spills over. When people are caught in a no-win situation, they feel many times that the only way they can temporarily dissipate their anger is through acts of violence. They have been hurt, and they feel that the only way they can get rid of their own hurt is to hurt others. This probably explains the terrible acts of torture that members of one Indian tribe in America used to inflict on members of another Indian tribe if they were unfortunate enough to be captured. This also probably explains the Roman games in which human beings were routinely required to fight to the death, etc.

Unfortunately, in our day this same problem persists. Adults who have been abused when they were children, instead of learning from their own abusive experiences to be compassionate and loving to their own children, become even more abusive as parents than their own parents were to them. Their anger and hurt makes them want to hurt other helpless youngsters, especially their own children. They were hurt as children and, therefore, they want to hurt other children, even if it means physically hurting their own children. People cannot stand to be put in a situation in which there is no hope, in which no matter what they do, they are going to be insulted, humiliated, abused, and even physically maltreated. We all have had teachers who, no matter what the answer we will give to their questions, would

always put us down and humiliate us. Unfortunately, there are even teachers in Jewish schools who do this same thing. They will berate a student for coming late to *davening* and then, when the student comes on time to *davening*, they will say in a sarcastic way, "Oh, look at that *Tzadek* who does not even want to miss a minute of *davening*." This is similar to the story they tell about a mother who gave her son two ties. In order to please his mother, the young man wore one of the ties. When his mother saw him, she said, "What's the matter? You didn't like the other tie?" It is a no-win situation.

We all know that when a person feels that no matter what he does, he is going to get clobbered, his first line of defence is to become passive and do nothing. If that does not work, then his second line of defence is to stay as far away as possible from the person who is causing him all this pain. His third line of defense, if he is forced to stay in this person's presence, like a child must with a parent, is to try to blame the innocent parent for his troubles. He will try to curry favor with the abusive parent by pretending to the abusive parent that it is the other parent who is causing his troubles. The fourth line of defence is to run away. That's why so many children run away from home. And, finally, his fifth line of defence is to take out his hurt in violent behavior against an innocent sibling or an innocent bystander. Sometimes, if he is big enough and strong enough, he will even violently attack the abusive parent or the individual who is tormenting him.

Children, in order to be taught right from wrong, must be rewarded when they have done something right. They cannot be punished, no matter what they do. I once had a parent tell me that he punished his children once a week, no matter if he caught them doing something wrong or not because he was sure that during the week they had done something wrong he just had not noticed. I looked that parent in the eye and told him that I did not want to have anything to do with him anymore. He was a monster, and he was creating a monster. Children should be given hope that, if they follow the rules, they will be rewarded. Children want to please their parents, but if their parents are never pleased, no matter what they do, then their love is going to turn to hate and, since they still need the love of their parents, that hate will be misdirected, and their hatred will be turned on

other children who are weaker than they. They will become the abusive bullies that ride every school bus.

One of the minor themes of the holiday of *Chanukah* is that a loving, devoted family can save Judaism, as was shown by the Maccabees. Matisyahu was able to inspire within his five sons a love for himself and for each other and the traditions of our people, which inspired them to do great things, to defy all odds to try to save Judaism. It was because of the love that one family had for each other and for G-d and the Jewish people that the Jewish people were saved from succumbing to paganism. Judaism depends upon functional families. Dysfunctional families, on the other hand, destroy Judaism.

In the ancient world, parents literally sacrificed their children to the gods. Child abuse was institutionalized and thought necessary for the world to survive. In fact, one of the major differences between Christianity and Judaism to this very day is this whole concept of a father sacrificing his son for the betterment of mankind. Abraham may have thought that he was called upon to sacrifice his son, but G-d would not permit it. We are not supposed to sacrifice our children. Christianity, on the other hand, is based upon the belief that G-d, Himself, sacrificed His son so we could all be saved. This concept is entirely unthinkable to anyone steeped in Judaism. In ancient Roman law, a father could do anything he wanted with his children, and nobody could stop him.

In the *Torah* portion *Vayeshev* we learn how Yaacov, too, perhaps unwittingly almost caused his family to become dysfunctional. We learn about this in the story of Joseph and his brothers. For some reason, the brothers thought they were in a no-win situation. They felt that they could not go to their father and complain about Joseph's behavior. They felt that they could not communicate with their father. They felt that if they would tell their father, things would only get worse. Joseph, on the other hand, was completely oblivious to this whole situation. He did not see his brothers' pain, and he continued his tattletaling on them, accusing them of things which the rabbis comment were not true. He misread certain situations. Somehow, also, Yaacov did not see what was going on, and he did not correct the problem immediately. After Joseph had told his brother about his two dreams, the *Torah* says Yaacov rebuked him, but not because Joseph had

told his dreams to his brothers, but because Joseph had told his dreams to his father, Yaacov. The brothers felt cornered. They felt that, no matter what they did, they would lose so, at the first opportunity, they plotted to kill Joseph. It was only because of the intervention of Reuven, and then Yehuda, that Joseph was saved and only sold into slavery, not killed. Reuven knew that their father could be reached because, after Reuven's incident with Bilah, his father still maintained a relationship with him, but the other brothers, somehow, could not communicate with their father. Parents make a mistake when they do not explain to their children what tattletaling really means. Tattletaling does not mean that when someone hits you, that you should not tell your parents or tell the teacher. You have to tell your parents or the teacher; otherwise, you are left with only two choices: to let yourself be beaten up or to beat up the other guy, neither appropriate courses of action in school or in a home. Telling your parents or a teacher when someone is attacking you is not tattletaling. Tattletaling is when you tell your parents what one of your siblings is doing to another of your siblings or, in school, telling the teacher what one student is doing to another student. This you should not do unless, of course, a life or serious injury is threatened. The person who is being harmed has to take the initiative. If that person asked you to go with him to the teacher or to a parent, you should go. Joseph's sin of tattletaling was that he told his father about things that supposedly one brother was doing against another brother or about a brother's unseemly conduct, which did not hurt anybody, only himself. Reports of these incidents should come to the attention of a parent in another way. The offended party should report it or the individual, himself, should report it or others outside the family should report it. Because Yaacov showed such great love for Joseph, the brothers thought they could not make their case. Double standards in treating children is also a form of abuse. We all know this from the story of Cinderella.

Paganism's great failure in Jewish eyes is not so much that it worshipped many gods. Its great failure was that, because it worshipped many gods, it put man in a catch-22 situation. What is right to one god is wrong to another. Violence and immorality are then many times the only recourse. Judaism postulates that G-d is a compassionate, loving G-d Who is not toying or playing with us, but Who has given us a way of life which will

allow us to live inner lives of happiness and joy and which will give us the strength to overcome our problems. We do not have to be perpetually angry. We do not have to feel that we are going to be slapped down and humiliated, no matter what we do. Judaism gives us hope that we can maintain our dignity and integrity and be loved by G-d for our best efforts. G-d does not demand that we always have to do the right thing. He only demands that we try our best to do the right thing. Even if we fail, we can always do *Teshuva*.

The Maccabees won because the Jewish people knew and still know that we can never substitute for the G-d of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob an abusive pagan god. No matter how many Jews were and are attracted to pagan culture and ideas, when the chips were and are down, the Jewish people always rally in their greater numbers to the G-d of Israel, because the G-d of Israel allows us to produce functional families and to feel that there is hope in the world. He also allows us to know that each of us is worthwhile and that we are not being toyed with. Let us all this *Chanukah* determine to overcome any tendencies that we may have to be abusive, either toward our spouses or toward our children or toward the people around us. Let our hearts be so filled with hope that, truly, we will be able to feel always life's joy and happiness.