



WEEKLY PARASHA

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Change. Yes We Can?

What is the interplay between character, fate, and free will? How much does the character that one is born with determine whether he or she will be good or evil? Is it ever possible to change who we are, our essential character, and if not, can we at least find a way to rise above our natural shortcomings?

We have already seen that there are times when one can truly change their character through challenging life experiences and strength of will, as when Yaakov became Yisrael. Even in a case like this, one wonders if it is possible to leave the old self behind fully. After all, for the rest of Breishit Yaakov is referred to by both names, perhaps as a function of which personality comes most to the fore in any given situation. But it is clear that such complete transformations are extremely rare; it is close to impossible to fully or even partially change our character.

As Rav Yisrael Salanter said, "It is easier to go through all of Shas than to change just one character trait." Most of the time drastic changes are beyond our reach. We know that there are certain parts of our character and personality that we would like to change, but we feel unable to do so. Some of these may be character traits that we were born with, some may come from our environment and early life experiences, but now they are a part of us, and we are stuck with them. The key is not to try to disown a part of ourselves, but to consider how we can best channel and direct such traits to a good purpose:

R. Hanina b. Papa expounded: He [the angel who is in charge of conception] takes up the drop of semen and places it in the presence of the Holy One, blessed be He, saying, "Sovereign of the Universe, what shall be the fate of this drop? Shall it produce a strong man or a weak man, a wise man or a fool, a rich man or a poor man?" Whereas "wicked man" or "righteous one" he does not say, as R. Hanina states. For R. Hanina stated: Everything is in the hands of Heaven except the fear of God (Niddah 16b).

Our genes and our environment may determine our physical

strength, our intellectual abilities, even our character traits, but they do not determine what type of a person we will become. That is in our hands:

"He who is born under Mars will be a shedder of blood." R. Ashi observed: Either a surgeon, a highway bandit, a ritual slaughterer, or a *mohel*. Rabbah said: I was born under Mars (and am none of these)! Abaye retorted: You too inflict [judicial] punishment and have people executed (Shabbat 157a).

The Rabbis referred to the stars; we refer to our genes, but the point is the same: some part of who we are is determined before we are born, but we choose who we will become.

Nowhere does this play out more clearly than in the lives of Shimon and Levi and their descendants. Shimon and Levi were violent men, and fueled by their righteous indignation over the rape of their sister, they wiped out the city of Shechem. At the time, Yaakov was appalled by their actions, but he only criticized them insofar as they endangered the family: "And Jacob said to Simeon and Levi, you have brought trouble on me to make me odious among the inhabitants of the land, among the Canaanites and the Perizzites; and I being few in number, they shall gather together against me, and slay me; and I shall be destroyed, I and my house" (Breishit, 34:31). It was only on his deathbed that Yaakov found the strength to criticize them for the immorality of the violence itself:

Simeon and Levi are brothers; instruments of cruelty are their swords. O my soul, do not come into their council; to their assembly, let my honor not be united; for in their anger they slew a man, and in their wanton will they lamed an ox. Cursed be their anger, for it was fierce; and their wrath, for it was cruel; I will divide them in Jacob, and scatter them in Israel (Breishit, 49:5).

This curse, like the blessings to the other brothers, sees their character as fixed and determinative for their descendants. Hence the punishment that will be visited on their descendants is also predetermined: "I will divide them in Jacob, and scatter them in Israel." The portion of the tribe of Shimon in the land of Israel was scattered

throughout the territory of Yehudah. The tribe of Levi received no portion *per se*, only the cities of refuge, and they were destined, as Rashi puts it, to “go roundabout to the threshing floors collecting their *trumot* and *ma’asrot*.”

It may be that their violent nature was a fixed part of their character – consider the Rabbis’ statement that it was Shimon and Levi who hatched the plot against Yosef, and that Shimon was put in jail by Yosef to prevent him and Levi from destroying Mitzrayim – but it was not their destiny. They could still choose, in the words of R. Ashi, whether to be a surgeon or a bandit, whether a *mohel* or a murderer. While Shimon chose the path of destruction, Levi directed the trait of violence toward the service of God. When Zimri, a prince of the tribe of Shimon, defied the authority of God and Moshe by flagrantly fornicating with a Midianite woman in front of the *Mishkan*, shattering any boundaries of decency, it was Pinchas, a *kohen* of the tribe of Levi, who rose up and, in his religious zeal, executed Zimri and brought an end to the plague. Pinchas was able to use the trait of violence in the service of God.

Now, violence in the service of God is a dangerous concept, especially with the very real threat of fundamentalist violence and terrorism in the world today. In the case of Pinchas, it is important to note that it is doubtful whether he acted, as the Rabbis would have it, on his own zeal, or whether he was following the command of Moshe to the judges to execute those who had transgressed as a matter of law (Bamidbar, 25:5). Even according to the Rabbis, such violent zealousness was to be discouraged and severely limited. Similarly, the revolt of the Maccabees began with an act of violent religious zeal against a Jew who offered a sacrifice to the Greek gods, for which Matityahu is explicitly compared to Pinchas (see Maccabees II, 2:26). While this act sparked the revolt that ended with the miracle of Chanukah, it is interestingly absent from the Rabbinic literature. Violence in fighting against the occupying Seleucid Greeks was praised; violence against those who transgressed was bracketed. Violence is a dangerous trait, especially when fueled by religious zeal, but sometimes it does prove necessary.

This trait, then, is a dangerous one, but for the most part the Levites learned how to use it correctly and in the service of God. They followed Moshe’s call to defend God’s honor at Har Sinai after Israel sinned with the golden calf, this time acting on a direct order and in a judicial context, and in the Temple they became involved in the daily spilling of blood in the service of God through the tamed and sublimated form of animal sacrifices. Thus we find that in the blessing of Moshe, the blessing of the tribes at the end of Devarim, Levi is blessed while Shimon is passed over in silence. The tribe of Levi had redirected its character, and its curse was

transformed into a blessing:

And of Levi he said, Let your Tummim and your Urim be with your pious one, whom you did test at Massah, and with whom you fought at the waters of Meribah; Who said to his father and to his mother, I have not seen him; nor did he acknowledge his brothers, nor knew his own children; for they have observed your word, and kept your covenant. They shall teach Jacob your judgments, and Israel your Torah; they shall put incense before you, and whole burnt sacrifice upon your altar (Devarim, 33:8-10).

Thus, even Yaakov’s curse that they be scattered in Israel turned into a blessing, “And the Lord spoke to Aaron, You shall have no inheritance in their land, neither shall you have any part among them; I am your part and your inheritance among the people of Israel. And, behold, I have given the sons of Levi all the tenth in Israel for an inheritance, for their service which they serve, the service of the Tent of Meeting” (Bamidbar, 18:20-21). They have no inheritance in the land because they have God as their inheritance.

Our future – its specifics, its meaning, and its significance – is not fated or predetermined. It is what we make of it. It can be a curse, or it can be a blessing. Similarly, our traits do not determine who we are in our core essence: they are not our soul; they are not our identity. “‘Cursed is their wrath’ – Even when he criticized them, he only cursed their wrath [and not them]” (Rashi, Breishit, 49:7). People may have bad traits, but only the traits and how they are directed can be labeled as “bad.” As Jews, as parents, and as people working on our own self-improvement, we need to believe that all people – ourselves, our children, those we care about -can choose to be good. Their traits may be bad; their actions may be bad, but as long as we retain our belief in the potential goodness of every person, as long as we criticize the traits and not the person, we can hope for and work towards change. And if we find that we cannot change our traits, at least we can find ways to direct them to the service of God and to live up to the model of Levi, the tribe chosen by God to serve God in God’s Temple.

Shabbat Shalom!

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