

CENTER FOR MODERN TORAH LEADERSHIP



IS IT ALWAYS BETTER WHEN WE TALK?

By Rabbi Aryeh Klapper

Yosef's brothers could not "speak to peace with him". Rashi, citing Chazal, praises the brothers for avoiding hypocrisy. Does that imply that they were silent? Or rather that they explicitly rebuked him? In halakhic terms, they refused to violate *Do not hate your brother in your heart*, but did they fulfill *You must surely rebuke your fellow, and not bear sin because of him*?

Even if they rebuked him – does the Torah mean to say that **all** interactions with a sinner must involve rebuke? Is it hypocrisy to carry on normal social intercourse and rebuke only when the issue comes up? That seems overly harsh. Seforno accordingly offers a less positive evaluation of the brothers' behavior:

Even though they had to speak with him regarding household management and shepherding, seeing as he was the one in charge by his father's command, they were unable to speak with him to peace and companionship in the manner of brothers.

In contrast to Rashi, Seforno evaluates the brothers' inability to engage in normal social conversation with Yosef as a weakness and failure.

Presumably the brothers held like Rashi. The story as it develops suggests that we should not see them as role models on this issue.

But one should not evaluate behavior in a relationship from the perspective of only one side. While the Torah does not tell us explicitly whether Yosef was aware of, or reciprocated, his brothers' hatred and incivility. Midrash Tanchuma holds strongly that he did not:

He (Yosef) would come ask-about-their-shalom, but they would not respond to him.

Why? Because that was his practice, to ask-about-their-shalom.

You have people who, before they enter into authority, ask-about-the-shalom of people,

but once they enter into authority, they become arrogant and aren't concerned to ask-about-the-shalom of the populace,

but Yosef was not like that – even after he entered into authority, his practice was to ask-about-the-shalom of his brothers,

as the Torah says: *He asked-them-about-their-shalom.*
(Bereishis 43:27)

The Holy Blessed One said to him: Yosef, you would initiate asking-about-the-shalom of your brothers in This World, while they hated you,

but ultimately – I will reconcile you and remove the hatred from amongst you and settle you in tranquility and make peace among you,

as David Hamelekh said: *Behold how good and how pleasant brothers dwelling in togetherness.* (Tehillim 133:1)

I'm not convinced. Yosef asks about his brothers' shalom only when they come to Egypt the second time, bringing Binyamin. The first time, he speaks harshly to them, and the Torah records no speech on either side when he is kidnapped.

I'm also not convinced that the Tanchuma's evaluation is morally or practically correct. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch and Netziv both suggest that Yosef **predictably** made things worse by trying to speak shalom to them. Malbim adds a vital psychological nuance:

Ordinary hatred cools when the enemy speaks words of peace and reconciliation . . .

but hatred arising out of jealousy, and all the more so if one sees the enemy as lying in ambush against your life and dignity, and that he deserves death – increases when the enemy speaks about peace . . .

Why is jealousy different? Deborah suggested that the brothers' anger was displaced onto Yosef from Yaakov. We can develop this by saying that they needed to hate Yosef in order to avoid hating their father. Any sense that Yosef was a decent person was therefore profoundly threatening to them emotionally. Therefore they could not tolerate civility.

If Malbim is correct, we can use reactions to civility as a way of diagnosing the causes of hatred, and therefore determine whether seeking civil dialogue is a viable counter-hate strategy.

My life was enriched this week by learning the phrase "adversarial civility" from a Facebook comment. A Google search confirmed that this apparent oxymoron captures a beau ideal of American legal practice. I immediately considered how it differingly paralleled the quintessential Rabbinic description of chavruta study on Kiddushin 30b:

Said Rav Chiyya bar Aba: Even a father and his son, even a rav and his disciple, when they engage in Torah in the same gate - they become mutual אויבים/*oyvim*/enemies of each other, but they don't depart from there until they become mutual אוהבים/*ohavim*.

Rav Chiyya bar Abba apparently cobbled this statement together by reinterpreting two otherwise disjoint Biblical units. He derives that Torah interlocutors become *oyvim* from the end of Psalms 127: *Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are the children of one's youth* (Rashi: the Torah students one stands up in one's youth); *they will not be shamed when they speak with enemies in the gate*. He derives that they become *ohavim* in the end from Bamidbar 21:14: *Therefore it is said in the Book of the Wars of Hashem: וְהָבָה בְּסוּפָה / et vahav b'sufah*, reading the last phrase something like *etahav b'sofah* to mean that love comes at the end.

This is an awkward structure. I am very attracted to the persistent textual variant that inserts "Said Rava" at the fulcrum. In that version, Rav Chiyya bar Aba states only that Torah interlocutors become *oyvim*, on the basis of Psalms 127. Rava is disturbed by this and provides the happy ending via Bamidbar 21:14.

But emending on the basis of attraction is a slippery slope. Wouldn't it be even neater if Rava were a student of the author of the original statement? He isn't a student of Rav Chiyya bar ABA, but the Talmud in four places cites him saying "I and the lion of the group" in reference to Rav Chiyya bar ABIN, and at least one ms. of Kiddushin 30b has AB' rather than ABA. Or if Rava were the son of the original author? Several rishonim bring allegedly Talmudic quotes that cite Rava the son of Rav Chiyya bar Aba, although he is absent from the Vilna edition, and may be a scribal phantom.

Let's therefore accept that no one in Rabbinic tradition was ever comfortable with the idea that impassioned Torah conversation could lead to permanent estrangement. Rather, every Torah *oyev* becomes a Torah *ohav*.

Ahavah is love or friendship. Civility is not the same thing as love, or even friendship, and not all adversaries are enemies. Civility is a tactic, not a relationship. The Rabbinic version seems much more emotionally charged than the American.

The American phrase rests on the notion that to be a civil adversary is no contradiction; the challenge arises only when one seeks to be civil and adversarial. Does the rabbinic phrase contend that one can be *oyev* and *ohav* sequentially but not simultaneously? Or is the transition in the end only from enemy to frenemy?

Note also that while the American phrase makes no mention of any prior relationship among the disputants, we could read the Rabbinic phrase like this: "Even people who

love each other become enemies in the course of Torah argument. But people who love each other before the argument begins, such as parents and children – will not leave until they love each other again". That would leave open the possibility that some Torah arguments become personal in ways that do not resolve. The converse is of course also true – love and friendship can bloom in the course of Torah argument.

In the all-male yeshivot where I studied, many of us assumed that Rav Chiyya bar Abba's statement exempted us from adversarial civility. On the contrary – the Torah road to love and deep friendship necessarily passed through a sort of enmity. One had to raise the emotional temperature for anything to cook.

Deborah (and others) tell me that women's batei midrash are not the same. My experience is that coed programs, and for that matter of programs that stretch beyond Orthodoxy, are also not the same. Deborah sees this as progress; actually, she uses terms of moral opprobrium in regard to some of my best chavruta experiences; but I'm never certain whether *yatza sekhamam behefseidam*, that is to say: making civility a norm of discourse can make the ruptures caused by incivility much harder to heal. On the other hand, the Talmud has many stories, headlined by the terrible end of Resh Lakish and Rabbi Yochanan's relationship, which make clear that incivility always risks causing unhealable ruptures, and pretending that there aren't red lines doesn't make it so. (This is aside from the questions of how an openly competitive atmosphere affects educational achievement and character development, and about the extent to which educational environment strategies must respond to the expectations that students bring with them.)

Our discussion resembles the ongoing American discussion about how colleges can maintain or restore their position as incubators of passionate debate. Do we need to (mostly) reinstitute well-defined norms of civility (recognizing that such norms can only become really effective when they are assumed rather than defined), or (mostly) develop thicker skins? (This is aside from questions about the extent to which the market of ideas should be regulated, by whom, and by what means.)

In the context of the Torah's narrative of Yosef and his brothers, the crucial question may therefore be whether the brothers' anger was already murderous, so that they could not speak with him, or rather became murderous because they would not speak with him. Perhaps issues of civility are red herrings, and the real question is how to exclude substantive positions that are inherently threatening, evil, and discourse-poisoning, without excluding (too) many positions that aren't.